



Fahmida and the white dupatta

PART I

When Fahmida left her home that morning, she was not feeling that well. She was not only a little feverish, her migraine had also returned. With a throbbing head she lay in her bed the night before, rewinding events of the last two years. Fahmida's face broke into a smile from time to time as she visualised her journey to the present. Her biggest dream was finally taking shape -- she would attend her first class at the Law Department of Dhaka University in just less than two months.

But that morning, she wished she could stay home, and spend the day arranging the clothes in her wardrobe, washing the dirty laundry, and tidying up her reading table, which had not been dusted in a week. In dusty Dhaka, where furnishings needed to be wiped daily, a week without dusting meant an accumulation of the grey, powdery city dirt on everything -- from beds, chairs and tables to candles, plants, and picture frames.

However, Fahmida could in no way afford the luxury of being at home that day. She worked as an assistant teacher at Little Angels, a kindergarten with about 100 students. They normally did not hire teachers with just a high school degree, but they hired Fahmida because the headmistress thought she was intelligent, patient, loving, and well spoken -- all the good qualities that are needed in a pre-school teacher.

Besides, Fahmida had an added qualification -- she had taught at a free school for two years after completing her SSC exam.

"You are what your name means -- wise and intelligent," the 60-year-old head of the school often told her.

Thinking about the old and loving supervisor of hers, Fahmida picked a blue shalwar suit, a gift from her mother on her twentieth birthday; and her twentieth birthday was only two weeks ago.

The shalwar suit was as new as it could be, for she wore it for just a couple of hours

on the evening of her birthday. The kameez had beadwork in the front and along the hem of the sleeves. The dupatta was white with blue floral prints. It also had white beads sewn into the hem of its shorter ends.

Fahmida held the dupatta against her cheek; it smelled of Calvin Klein's Eternity, a gift from her maternal uncle who lived in America. He sent it with a friend of his after he heard that his doting niece had earned a Golden A+ on her HSC exam. That bottle of fragrance was one of Fahmida's favourite possessions, and she sprayed it sparingly on the back of her ears and wrists on special occasions.

That morning, Fahmida had a 9am meeting with the owner, principal and two of the senior teachers at Little Angels. There would be an interview, which would decide if she could be promoted to a 'full' teacher. She was confident; she believed she would qualify for a full teacher's position with flying colours.

PART II

When the three men stopped her rickshaw that morning, she thought they were neighbourhood goons, who were after her money and gold jewellery. Then she recognised one of the men, their landlord's eldest son. But she did not dare scream. She knew nobody would hear her even if she did, for there was not a single person in sight that morning. "Unlucky me," she panicked!

"Well, nobody would have come to my rescue anyway. People are increasingly becoming deaf, blind and callous," she thought.

She often feared travelling through that lane, but that was the only route available to her -- the only lane that she could take to reach her workplace. Her mother could not accompany her all the time. On top of everything, her family had only two members -- she herself and her mother. Her father died four years ago.

Fahmida's fingers were already on her right ear, unclasping the tiny gold earring, when one of the young men began to drag her down. In pain, she uttered, "Oh!" The earring, which she had loosened by then fell somewhere on the dirty alley.

Fahmida pleaded to the rickshaw-puller, "Bhai, please do something! Please!" The thin rickshaw puller, who was in his early 20s, was shaking in fear. When one of the men pulled out a switchblade knife from his back pocket and swung it in front of him, he began to run, leaving behind his helpless passenger, his rickshaw, and his earnings, which he kept in a small bag under the passenger seat.

Every second, Fahmida wished she could die. She earnestly prayed to God for her own death. The pain that seared through the softest parts of her body made her want to curl and scream, but she could not -- one of the men covered her mouth with his filthy hand. Then there came a time when she could not feel any pain.

She just lay on the dirty alley. Her legs went numb and her eyes stopped shedding tears. She could not feel her own hands, which were tied together with copper wire. The wire cut deep into the soft skin of her wrists, wrists that smelled of Calvin Klein's

Eternity even three hours ago. Her head, which she once thought would explode in pain, felt light. Her migraine was gone.

She lost track of time long ago.

At first, she begged for mercy. When she realised that those worse-than-beast men were not men but demons in disguise, she stopped begging. They still covered her mouth so she could not cry in pain, so she would die in silence.

Fahmida did not hear her own voice before her death; no loving face sat beside her and held her hand before she died. No one gave her a drop of water when she asked for some. When Fahmida left this merciless world, she was thirsty, very thirsty. Before she died, she remembered the face of her mother on her last birthday. She was telling her, "My child, today you look like an angel floating on a mass of cloud!"

THREE YEARS LATER

Fatima was standing on the balcony of her sister's apartment, gazing at Dhaka's concrete jungle. She held in her hands a white dupatta with large blue flowers. It was torn and dirty with most of its beads missing. It had patches of dry blood everywhere. This was the piece of cloth with which the three satans suffocated her child. Upon retrieving it from police custody, she carried it with her all the time. At night, she wrapped her head with it and lay in the bed with eyes wide open. She carried it in her purse when she left home.

The three satans were never put on trial. Although two of them had been arrested, they were set free after three weeks. Fatima never found out how and why. All she knew was, her 20-year-old daughter would never return to her, she would never attend her first class at Dhaka University, she would never become a lawyer, and she would never again stand before her looking like an angel in a white-blue salwar suit.

By Wara Karim
Photo: Collected

