

Even though it was monsoon, I watered my rooftop plants before leaving Dhaka during Eid. While travelling in the night coach, I kept worrying about my plant babies. What would happen to them in the absence of water in this sweltering heat and high humidity? Will they survive my seven-day vacation? My fears were confirmed—when I returned, I found that the smaller plants had almost died, while the leaves of the mature ones had turned yellowish.

In the capital, many green lovers must confront this unpleasant scenario when they go out of town. The question on our minds is: is there a way out of this situation?

The solution is only a phone call away! An ambulance—yes, you heard it right, an ambulance for *trees*—can come to the rescue. To look after each tree, you need to spend only Tk 1 from your pocket every day.

THE TREE DOCTORS

MD MIZANUR RAHMAN HIMADRI

This novel idea was introduced by Green Savers, which formally started its journey in 2011. Ahsan Roni, the founder of Green Savers and a recent graduate of the University of Dhaka, recalls how it all began:

“When I was a third year honours student of DU, I started tutoring a third grade student of Mastermind School. On the first day, when I asked him what his hobbies were, he replied, ‘Watching horror movie and playing computer games’. I asked him—why not gardening? His reply was: ‘It’s the job of a gardener.’ The following day, I gifted him two strawberry plants as he loved strawberries and taught him how to look after it.”

His student wrote about his discovery of the love of plants for his creative writing class. Impressed, the teachers invited him to give a presentation on how to look after plants on roofs and lawns. “Soon, I started receiving phone calls from students and their parents asking for tips on how to save their plants. That’s when I got the idea of Green Savers.”

The organisation has not looked back since. Now, at least 19 “tree doctors” on bicycles run from one corner to another of the capital to treat plants. “A person dealing with human disease is called a doctor but a person dealing with plant diseases is addressed as a *mali* (gardener). We choose to use the title of “doctor” to give due credit to the profession and to encourage more people to join,” says Ahsan. Of the 19 “doctors”, nine are diploma agriculturists. Depending on where you live and the nature of the work, you can avail the services of the tree doctors by spending between Tk 100 to Tk 500. You can access



The solution is only a phone call away! An ambulance—yes, you heard it right, an ambulance for *trees*—can come to the rescue. To look after each tree, you need to spend only Tk 1 from your pocket every day.

their services online through the mobile app “Plants Doctor”.

In 2013, the Department of Environment (DoE) in Dhaka’s Agargaon provided an office space to Green Savers, which they have named “Tree Hospital”.

In 2013, the organisation received the National Award for the protection of the environment. Of 11 projects under the organisation, seven are non-profit. From the profitable projects, the staffs’ salaries and other expenses are met. Additionally, they have opened “Oxygen Banks” at 28 schools in Dhaka and 380 schools outside Dhaka, in which students donate money to plant and care for trees on their school premises.

They also give awards to educational institutions to encourage them to plant more trees. Their aim is to make rooftop gardens in 100 schools in the capital by 2020. Meanwhile, 3,600 roofs in Dhaka have already been covered with greenery by the grace of Green Savers.

“Please don’t think your job is over after planting a tree,” says Ahsan. “Rather, your work just starts from there. So look after it with love. I want to cover all roofs with trees in Dhaka city and appoint 50,000 educated youth as doctors of trees.”

Md Mizanur Rahman Himadri is a journalist of The Daily Star. He can be reached at h2rehman@gmail.com

There was nothing extraordinary about that day, except that a sudden impulse to walk had gripped me! A nyctophile, I have always cherished the pleasure of walking in the city after dark, but living in Dhaka now, this desire had to remain unfulfilled. Dhakaiites are morning walkers and for good reason too. Parks are closed by evening and streets are not safe after dark, more so for women. On top of that, there was this roasting heat.

The power above must have taken mercy on me, for the day suddenly started to look gloomier, the wind got cooler and soothing. It couldn’t have been any better, I thought.

And there I was, with my most comfortable walking shoes on, which I had stored away ever since I got back to Dhaka. With my phone in my pocket, music blasting, I was all set to take on night-time Dhaka. It was around 10:30 pm—not a regular walking time for ladies by any Dhaka standard.

My mother was watching TV with unwavering attention when I asked her to close the door. She hurried me out, no questions asked as she had to get back to a climactic scene in the drama that I was holding her from, or so I imagined. The elevator came up, and an uncle from next door with his hands full of packets and a day’s exhaustion on his face, emerged. “Perfect weather for a walk, huh?” he said without any apprehension, and in a rather matter of fact way as he bid me farewell with a smile before I disappeared into the elevator.

Finally, I stepped out into the night street, and breathed in the cool breeze as much as I could. Instantly, I got transported to a happy place—my happy place, in my city. And all this without the wave of any magic wand. It was all too good to be true, but I was ready to seize the moment.

With music in my ears, I started walking on the pavement along my apartment building. I walked past shops, some closed and some half-closed with people wrapping up their day’s work. The street was still vibrant with people going on about their business without the slightest care or attention to the lone woman walker, like they do during the day. Some idlers were smoking away, some were just standing around the corner of the neighbourhood mosque. I walked past them too. And guess what? I felt no stares on me!

I was baffled by how people around me behaved strangely. They were the same people I would meet in the streets during daytime, but for some mysterious reason, they were more accommodating, less intrusive—they just let me be! “It has to be darkness, and its transformative power!” I reasoned.

It was as if I was invisible! It took me a while to realise that no one was noticing me—a woman all by herself walking in the streets at this hour. I kept walking until I reached the road leading to a secluded residential area. I stopped for a while and thought if it would be wise to go any further. It looked dangerously deserted. The streetlights were not too bright either. What if there were muggers or assaulters hiding there.



HAD IT BEEN SO . . .



ILLUSTRATION: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

It was as if someone had just set me free from an invisible load, I, like other women, have been carrying all our lives out in the streets. I was free to partake in the city, on *my* terms.

What if my being there invited some? Should I risk it?

The road ahead lined with big trees, was cooler, making it all the more inviting. I decided to walk on. Crossing the traffic signal, I approached the empty street. I stopped for a while, taking in the sights and sounds of the night. It was peaceful and de-stressing to say the least.

Suddenly a man sprung up from nowhere, it seemed! I must have been

too engrossed in my delightful surroundings, or how could I have not see him coming from the opposite direction? Instantly, I was on the alert. To my utter amazement, he didn’t even look at me, let alone be surprised by my presence, and passed me by just like he did the line of trees.

I felt lighter. For the first time in Dhaka streets, I was comfortable in my skin—didn’t *feel* my body or my gender.

It was as if someone had just set me free from an invisible load, I, like other women, have been carrying all our lives out in the streets. I was free to partake in the city, on *my* terms.

I came across a *chawala* at the turn of the road near a nursery that had closed for the day. He was the center of a small crowd and surprisingly they were not all men! The women must be invisible, like me, I thought! They were giggling away with small teacups in their hands over something, I had no way of knowing what. It didn’t seem like they were in a hurry to reach anywhere, and were just idling around. Perplexed, I checked my phone—it was almost midnight and they couldn’t care any less! There was something magnetic about the scene, and I didn’t realise that I had got hooked and was, in fact, staring at them, until the *cha wala* caught me off guard, “Want some tea *apa*? It may still have a cup or two left,” he asked, pointing at the thermo flask, swaying it from side to side. Embarrassed and awkward, I turned down his offer and walked past the group in a hurry. Only then it dawned on me that I was not invisible after all, nor were the girls in the group!

I walked some more and turned around to get back home. Dripping with sweat by then, I had begun to feel very thirsty. Luckily, I came across a very small corner shop with its shutter half down, but I could see lights inside. I knocked at the metal shutter, while cursing myself for forgetting my water bottle in excitement. A man with a pillow in his hand peeped out. I asked if I could get a bottle of water. He seemed annoyed, for I sure had disrupted his bed time preparation, but he did give me what I wanted. I had just enough cash, which I put together fumbling in my pocket. While doing so, I had taken out my phone and iPod too. “How very stupid of me!” I chided myself. “What if this man robs me or does something horrible to me. Have I just invited disaster?” I thought as I stole a quick glance at the empty, dark street corner behind me with no soul in sight. I felt a shudder run through my back and a palpable discomfort engulfed me from all sides. Putting all my melodramatic imagination to an end, the man, without wasting a single second more on me, who had already delayed his bedtime, slammed the shutter down on my face to go back to sleep, it seemed.

I heaved a sigh of relief but also felt a bit embarrassed for thinking the worst of people. I gulped down half the water and walked on. It was then that I felt a vigorous shake, and my head bumped into something really hard. As I tried to figure out what it was, I could hardly open my eyes to the bright sun. It was broad day-light! I looked around—I was in my car, stuck in traffic, my head flung backward, resting on the back seat, half-awake, and reasonably annoyed. As I sat there for another fifteen minutes or so for the traffic to clear, I thought of the walk I never took and the night that never happened but could have and the traffic trail started to unfurl.

A Dhaka girl through and through, Tabassum Zaman teaches at the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB). She is a Dhaka enthusiast, who wants to tell the everyday city anew.