

The Royal Flush

“Your chicken. It’s locally sourced?”

The server seemed to consider Lindsey’s question before leaning in. “It’s a Chantecler.”

“They did an article about heritage breeds in *The Western Producer* last winter,” Lindsey’s father said.

“We help by eating them. Appetite creates demand, in this case.”

5 “Indeed, Chef is very supportive of the local farmers who raise them,” the server said.

“Tough to make an honest living at, though – ”

“Chantecler sounds fine.” Lindsey interrupted her father before he started going on about the decline of the independent farm. “But just the breast, please, and sauce on the side.”

10 “Each dish is offered for its unique combination of flavours and texture. Chef does not deviate from what she’s constructed,” the server said before walking away with the small chalkboard revealing the day’s menu.

“I thought you were a vegetarian,” Lindsey’s dad observed once they were alone. “You wouldn’t touch the turkey last Christmas. Eating meat was irresponsible and immoral, you said.”

“I am vegetarian, Dad. I just eat meat from time to time.”

15 “You’re a part-time vegetarian?”

“I’m a flexitarian,” Lindsey said, as though explaining something to a child. “There’s nothing wrong with eating a little animal protein now and then, as long as the chicken was free to peck and play or the cow was properly pastured.”

“I guess it won’t be troublesome sticking to your new regimen, then.”

20 “How’s your class going?” Lindsey had signed up her father for “More to Meals than Meat” after she’d seen it advertised in the post office the last time she’d been home. She was worried he’d get scurvy, though he’d managed to survive on his own for almost two years now, even feeding her on the rare occasions she made it back to the farm.

“Fine, just fine.” He picked up his wineglass.

25 “By the stem, Dad,” Lindsey said, demonstrating.

Her father adjusted his weathered hand before clearing his throat. “I’m proud of you. Your mother would have been proud, too.”

Lindsey looked down at the mention of her mother.

“We always wanted you to see the world, and now here you are, off to Tanzania – ”

30 “Bangladesh, actually. I didn’t get my first choice of placement.”

“To your adventure in Bangladesh, then,” he said as their glasses clinked.

Two days of flying found Lindsey in Dhaka, a city roiling with children begging and men hawking everything from fake Nike t-shirts to fresh-cut mangos to pirated DVDs. She’d been assigned to a sustainability project on the subcontinent, fieldwork a requirement for her concentration in development and globalization. And once Dr. Hassan had underlined the connections between hygiene and justice, Lindsey overcame her
35 disappointment at not being selected for the women’s project in Tanzania, happy, in any case, to be helping those less fortunate than herself. And now that she was actually in Bangladesh and had taken a few days to recover from jet lag, her excitement had only increased.

“Lindsey? Glad you made it in one piece. The rickshaw’s waiting.”

40 Lindsey looked up to see J.P., a grad student who’d been a teaching assistant in a couple of her courses. She didn’t really know him, preferring to discuss assignments with actual profs, but he seemed different

now, more assured. More tanned, at any rate. “Rickshaw? I’m not comfortable with... with another human being pulling me like an animal – ”

45 “It’s too far to walk. Plus, it’s environmentally friendly.” He pushed open the door of their university-sponsored dorm, the searing heat defeating the building’s anemic air conditioning in a solitary wave of damp stickiness. She had no choice but to follow J.P. into the rickshaw. Once they were on the road, overflowing buses and swerving scooters passed in a blur as Lindsey sat trying to sort out her environmental and humanitarian politics. They stopped with a jolt.

“*Dhonnobad*¹, Bishnu. *Pore dakhaa hobe*².” J.P. hopped out.

50 “Thank you,” Lindsey said slowly and clearly, examining Bishnu’s dark brown face for signs of suffering. He spat a long straight stream of paan juice into the dusty road, smiling and bending his head slightly to the side. Lindsey tried not to stare at his uneven teeth, stained red.

“You’ll want to meet everyone, see where the supplies are, and get started,” J.P. said.

55 Their work was in The Royal Commemorative Estates, commemorating what J.P. said he didn’t know. The squat building, its sandy courtyard ridged by walkways, was a hive of activity, but the inhabitants went about their business with a blatant disregard for the foreigners in their midst. They paid no heed to Lindsey’s arrival.

J.P. led her to a storage room filled with rows of rakes, stacked plastic buckets, and boxes on which the words *Eco-Compostable NE20* flowered like bruises across the softened cardboard. Lindsey turned to J.P.
60 “I’m not sure I’m at the right place. I’m supposed to facilitate sustainable initiatives with a focus on water conservation – ”

“We like to call it *waste management*.”

65 The truth dawned on Lindsey. “You brought me here to install toilets?” she said, forgetting she’d volunteered. How would she build capacity through communication and information sharing? How would she use the knowledge of women’s oppression gained through reading Taslima Nasrin’s³ *Shame*, a book banned – banned! – in Bangladesh, if reduced to plumbing?

70 “*Composting* toilets. Sewerage coverage is vital, and these require neither water nor electricity to get the job done. Think about how unsanitary and inconvenient it is, women rising at four, men at five, to go off and find somewhere to shit. It’s an amazing opportunity to support sustainable development. This will revolutionize their lives!”

Lindsey was not convinced by J.P.’s evangelical fervour. “I know all about eco-toilets, of course, but I thought – ”

“ – the project would be a little less hands-on? Look, this is some of the best work you can do. It cuts through all the bureaucratic bullshit and – ”

75 *Allahu Akbar*⁴. *Allahu Akbar*.

The call to prayer emanated from a loudspeaker mounted on a pole Lindsey had first taken to be a streetlight.

Allahu Akbar. Allahu Akbar.

80 Men unrolled prayer mats and bent down. Lindsey’s heart beat a little faster at finally seeing something authentic.

*Ash-had al-la ilaha illa Allah*⁵.

“Unless you’ve converted,” J.P. said, “you might want to get to work.”

¹ Thank you (Bengali)

² *Pore dashaa hobe*: See you later (Bengali)

³ *Taslima Nasrin*: (b. 1962) a Bangladeshi writer

⁴ *Allahu akbar*: Allah is the greatest; an Islamic prayer

⁵ *Ash-had al-la ilaha illa Allah*: I bear witness that there is no god but Allah; an Islamic prayer

It wasn't hard to install a composting toilet. After getting over her initial displeasure at the assignment's complete underuse of her skills, displeasure that saw a flurry of emails to Dr. Hassan back at school, she took her advisor's suggestion to pitch in and be adaptable to heart. [...]

She was also starting to communicate with the various inhabitants of the Royal. The boys were first to venture forth, throwing pebbles at the ground beside her and running away when she looked up. They inched closer until one day they were near enough that Lindsey, ignoring their smell, offered them candy. Having won them over, she set her sights on the women who cast furtive glances her way while pegging pants and shirts and dresses alongside maroon, blue, and yellow saris drying in the breeze. Lindsey attempted eye contact even though they hid their faces while giggling behind their hands. She enticed them with gifts from home – organic teas, impossibly small bottles of maple syrup, and shiny barrettes, offerings she had no way of knowing would be quickly hawked at the night bazaar – until the women, too, approached, tentative and jumpy like spring sparrows on the farm.

The project proceeded admirably, especially once Lindsey learned to pace herself in the tyrannical heat after the embarrassment of fainting on the second day. She vented pipes, pinned up insect netting, and helped heave toilets into place while J.P. gave lessons on the manual mixing of humus despite what seemed to be a waning enthusiasm for the whole project. Lindsey was finally finished, except for the party.

She charged ahead with her plans despite J.P.'s lack of interest. She scattered signs around the building, pestering him to translate them into Bengali. It wasn't a farewell party for her, even though she was leaving the next day to start a summer seminar with Dr. Hassan, but a get-together to celebrate the bestowing of toilets on this vulnerable population. There was even going to be a ribbon-cutting ceremony with the building's owner.

Lindsey packed and then spent most of the day shopping at Banga Bazaar, turning up at the Royal laden with toys, sweets, and bags of oddly flavoured chips. Bishnu followed, staggering under the weight of three crates of warm Pepsi.

She commandeered a table in the dusty courtyard, gesturing for Bishnu to place the pop beneath. She waved him off, but he simply melted into the background, perhaps sensing the festive mood. Lindsey didn't mind, there'd be more than enough to eat. She smoothed the hand-embroidered tablecloth she'd bought, so cheap she didn't bother to bargain, and arranged the chips in handcrafted bowls she planned to give to Anjali and Priya, two of the women she'd befriended. Already she'd glimpsed them moving through the courtyard, chattering behind one of Anjali's daughters lugging a sack of rice into Priya's. [...]

The familiar odour of onions and garlic and ginger frying in ghee wafted out of Priya's open door followed closely by cumin, coriander, and cardamom. She closed her eyes, breathing deeply. The smell of garlic never failed to conjure her mother, and it had taken more than a few days to stifle the grief the pungent air provoked in her. She got through it only by offering to help the women and their daughters prepare the food, laughing and crying over the chopping of onions and boiling of rice despite the language barrier. Priya and Anjali showed her how to roast spices and fussed over whether she was eating enough, pinching and measuring her with their hands as they pressed Lindsey to their thin bodies each night before she returned to the coolness of the dorm to sleep. Maybe she'd teach her father to cook a curry once her summer schedule allowed a trip back to the farm.

"*Ei-je⁶!*" roared a voice before a horde of boys tore through the courtyard, hot on the heels of a scrawny chicken making for the now empty storeroom. It realized its mistake seconds too late and showed its displeasure by cowering in the corner with a guttural groan. Sabir, one of Priya's sons, moved in on the bird, parading it back through the courtyard to the stump where the butcher waited with his knife.

⁶ a Bengali exclamation

*Bismillahi Allahu Akbar*⁷, he sang as he brought the blade down on the bird's neck.

Here was a culture that respected its meat, where the chicken was cherished, not to mention local. Lindsey's thoughts were interrupted by the boys, who'd lost interest in the dead bird and were shuffling in ever-shrinking circles around her table, eyes alternating between the chips atop and pop beneath. She smiled and forked over some of the toys to keep them occupied, watching the eviscerated chicken disappear into Priya's. She hoped they didn't eat too much. She wanted them to enjoy her food.

The sun tucked itself under the tops of nearby buildings. The Royal was abuzz with activity, the near constant drone of shrieking children even louder than usual. They must be excited about the party. Even the ever-present laundry had been collected off the lines, and Lindsey was pleased to see the Royal's inhabitants taking the festivities seriously.

"Ready to get back to civilization?" J.P.'s voice had an increasingly familiar edge to it.

"I'll miss it." Despite her difficulty with the project and her lack of digestive fortitude for the lunches, Lindsey liked the Royal. "It wasn't exactly what I thought it would be –"

"It never is."

"But I feel I've helped. In a small way," she hastened to add.

"Look behind you."

Lindsey turned to see the women of the Royal, Priya and Anjali at the forefront, children spilling out behind, placing an enormous steaming vat onto her table.

"For party," Sabir said.

Lindsey felt a lump forming in her throat. "*Dhonnobad*," she managed.

"*Dhonnobad*, thank you," a voice boomed out behind her. "MrAbijhitNarayan – youcancallmeAbi – nicetomeetyou." He stuck out his hand.

Lindsey took it, surprised at the softness of the skin.

"Welcometomyhumbleabode," he said, pumping her hand up and down.

The residents of the Royal scattered at the appearance of their fast-talking, well-fed landlord. The boys began to chase one another around Abi's car, too fast for the sinewy arms of the driver, their reflections streaking across the shiny black paint. But one by one they too disappeared at the insistent calls of their mothers.

The celebration came and went without much ado. Abi cut the ribbon she'd looped around 2F's toilet, the family gathered round, huge smiles stretching their faces. Lindsey hadn't met them, she could only assume they worked in the garment factories during the day. The landlord then helped himself to a heaping plate of Priya's chicken biryani, the grease mixing with the sweat already dotting his moonish face. His driver then ate, which Bishnu seemed to understand as a sign he too could partake, and so three plates of food were eaten. [...]

"I don't understand. Why didn't they come to my party? They seemed interested, excited even, but then no one showed up."

J.P. kept his eyes on the ground. "Tough to say, and you might not know the whole story. Different customs –"

"I know all about different customs, but I still don't get it. I cooked with these women every day, I thought I was making progress. Then they didn't even come to my party."

"You don't know their reasons."

J.P. was right, she didn't know. She decided to leave the toys and chips and pops for the kids as it wasn't their fault the party was a bust. She rolled up the tablecloth – she liked the pattern so much she planned to

⁷ *Bismillahi Allahu Akbar*: In the name of Allah, Allah is the greatest; an Islamic prayer

170 use it as a bedspread – and signalled to Bishnu she was ready to go. He put down his Pepsi, burping softly as he picked up her bag.

“I’ll see you out,” J.P. said.

175 They walked through darkness to the front of the building only to be met with rolls of bedding trussed alongside cardboard suitcases set out like dominoes. Lindsey glimpsed Priya as well as Anjali’s husband – Jagan, if she remembered right. Grandparents sat on boxes bearing the now almost-illegible stamp of *Eco-Compostable NE20*, wielding canes to keep wayward children in order. Sabir met her eyes until his grandmother drew him back with the corner of her sari.

They’d been packing. Just when she’d finished installing toilets, they were leaving. Maybe this was what Dr. Hassan meant when she’d cautioned development work was difficult, that one toiled when the effort might not appear, in the end, to be appreciated.

180 “Where will they go?” Lindsey asked after a minute.

“Somewhere cheaper,” J.P. said.

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