

"Where Am I Weaking" by Kelsey

think of when I wore them last and if I have washed them since. I never expected them to come under such scrutiny.

The pink men take my underwear and leave the room. Apparently, there are some types of underwear examination tools that are housed elsewhere in the factory.

The factory owner, Asad, sits across from me behind a wide desk. He's holding his three-year-old son, who plays quietly with a small length of thread on his lap. We talk about the power outage, and he tells me they cost him \$700 per month in diesel to power his generators.

For the most part, I can't understand what Asad says. He speaks fast, and my attempts to read his lips are thwarted by his lazy eye that drifts to the right. I can't stop staring at it.

I think he asks me if I want to see the factory. When he stands and walks toward the door, I follow. Salehin holds the door open, and I step onto the factory floor.

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The garment industry accounts for 76 percent of the country's annual exports, or about \$8 billion. Yet the Bangladeshi industry thought they were doomed in 2005, after the Multi Fibre Agreement (MFA)—a policy that set limits on how much apparel developing countries could export—was lifted. As one of the poorest countries in the world, Bangladesh had been allowed to export with limited restrictions and duties under the MFA. This meant that they could compete on the global stage with a country like China, whose exporting was much more heavily restricted by the agreement. But without the MFA, China was free to export as much as they wanted to the developed world—causing the industry in Bangladesh to hold its breath. How could they compete with China? China has infrastructure. China doesn't have to import raw materials. They have nearly everything in that big old country of theirs, including enough poor people to work cheaply.

However, Bangladesh underestimated the value and savings they could provide. They have some of the cheapest labor in the world, even cheaper than China. The garment industry in Bangladesh not only survived; it is expected to double in size over the next eight years.

The industry's newest concern is the Decent Working Conditions and Fair Competition Act (2007), also known as the anti-sweatshop bill, introduced in the US Senate. Though the bill may mark the first

time the US Congress has introduced such legislation, it's certainly not the first time United States citizens took action against working conditions in Bangladesh.

In 1992, the television show *Dateline NBC* aired footage from inside a garment factory in Bangladesh that featured a Walmart production line where kids as young as seven were operating machines and trimming garments. Walmart argued that the individuals who appeared to be seven-year-old kids were actually malnourished adults whose growth has been stunted.

The American consumers weren't buying it. **MADE IN BANGLADESH** became synonymous with **MADE BY CHILDREN**. Out of concern for the child laborers of Bangladesh, we took action the only way we knew how—by boycotting clothing made in Bangladesh. But the children didn't want our help. In fact, *they* protested the American boycott—along with Bangladeshi children's rights NGOs and other garment workers. The children didn't want to lose their jobs. They had to help support their families.

In 1994, the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), under pressure of the boycott and the damaged image of the **MADE IN BANGLADESH** label, required the factories under their power to fire all children under the age of 14 without compensation. The local NGOs and labor unions protested this decision as out-of-work children flooded the streets of Dhaka.

In response to the crisis, the United States and Bangladeshi governments, along with international organizations such as the International Labor Organization (ILO) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), funded schools for the displaced child workers to attend until they were of working age.

And that's how the widespread use of child labor in the Bangladeshi apparel industry ended. Now you can buy clothes made in Bangladesh and know that they may have been stitched together by uneducated 15-year-old kids, but at least they (probably) weren't stitched together by uneducated 14-year-old kids. However, this is of little consolation—because heart-wrenching levels of child labor continue. According to the 2002/2003 National Child Labor Survey conducted by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 93 percent of working children work in the informal sector. And while there are a small number of kids making our clothes in Bangladesh, there are 4.9 million children between the ages of 5 and 14 holding down other jobs (Figure 7.1).

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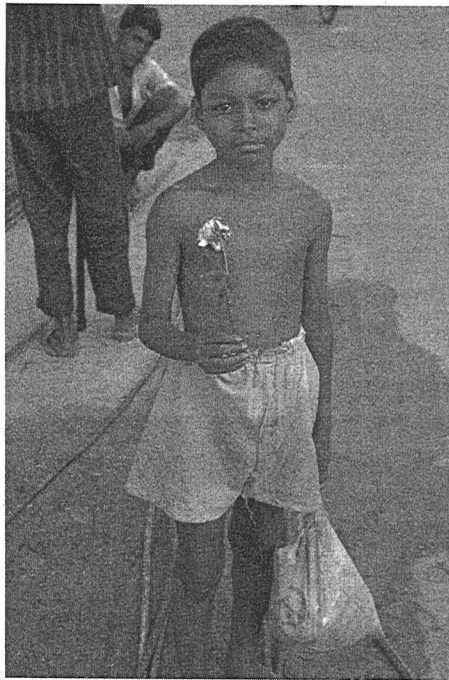


Figure 7.1 A boy selling a flower on the streets of Dhaka.

Asad leads us past a high table with neat stacks of cloth. A few of the workers are holding what appear to be giant electric bread cutters with blades two feet long. One woman marks the cloth using a pattern and then sets to slicing. She cuts the outline of a T-shirt. Plumes of cotton dust fill the air. Another woman is armed with a pair of oversized scissors—somewhere between the size of regular scissors and those used for ribbon-cutting ceremonies. She trims a piece of cloth and adds the scrap to a large pile beside her.

The factory is clean, exits are marked, and fans maintain a nice breeze. The conditions seem fine. In fact, I'm relieved to see that they're much better than I had expected.

Today, they are making T-shirts; but, I'm assured, they can produce almost anything, including underwear.

There are eight production lines, each consisting of 40 people—none of whom seem to be children or “malnourished Bangladeshis whose growth has been stunted”—and 15 sewing machines. We walk down one of the lines, and I notice cotton cobwebs frosting the dark

hair of the workers. There is no chatter, just thumping needles and quick hands. I wonder if their hands move that fast when their boss and some foreigner aren't looking over their shoulders.

As with Asad's lazy eye, I try to pretend the workers aren't there. I'm a garment buyer. I'm not interested in workers. I'm interested in the products they produce.

“With this type of shirt,” Asad says, picking up a completed shirt at the end of the line, “in one day we can produce 12,000 pieces.”

I nod my approval and take the shirt from him. Keeping the pink men in mind, I pretend to examine the seams around the neck and sleeves and whatever else I think should be examined on a T-shirt. I stretch it, hold it to the light, and then add it to the pile.

We go back to Asad's office. I tell him about my company, and we start crunching numbers.

“I guess my order would be around 5,000 T-shirts and 3,000 boxers. How large is a typical order?”

“Normally, 20,000 pieces,” Asad says. “But we are willing to make exceptions for first-time customers.”

The pink men return with my boxers. They hand them to me and give Asad a sheet of paper. He punches numbers into a calculator.

“Three thousand pieces will cost \$2.60 per piece,” he says, and then punches in a few more numbers. “Add \$0.50 per piece for shipping. That comes to \$3.10 per piece.”

For \$9,300, I could be in the underwear business. If I sold them for \$15 per pair, my profit would be \$35,700—minus whatever the shipping costs would be to get them from the port in the United States to my warehouse, which I suppose would be my parents' garage. Add that to my imaginary T-shirt profits, and I could easily make over \$70,000 per year. All I had to do was get an export license and have my people send their people the cash.

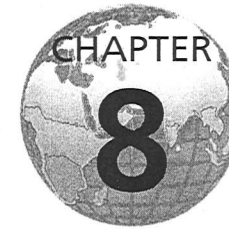
I thank Asad for his time. Salehin talks to him in Bengali. I'm guessing it has something to do with the \$3.10 price tag per pair of underwear, which is probably more than a little high. I'm the sucker, and together they are working to reel me in.

I've concluded it would be impossible to locate the actual garment factory that made my underwear. There are over 3,000 factories in Bangladesh, and twice that many middlemen. The factories are privately owned and work with multiple brands. Today, they may be making underwear, but tomorrow maybe they'll switch to jeans, and the day after, T-shirts. To top it off—as I'm sure the pink men will attest—my underwear are old. The factory in which they were made

has likely been sold, closed, burnt, or perhaps converted solely to the production of sea-foam green granny panties.

We exit back through the factory floor. I don't look at the workers, but I can feel them looking at me.

I wonder what they eat, where they sleep, what they laugh about. I wonder what they think about me.



Child Labor in Action

I was a child laborer at 11.

The factory I worked in was hot. Plumes of sawdust rose into the air off screaming saw blades and settled onto my skin. I got splinters, cuts, and scars. Once I had to get stitches. I cut wood. I swept floors. I worked around machinery that could crush and dismember. I earned \$4 an hour.

My contract with the company was written in blood.

In the United States, there is no minimum age limit if your parents own the business for which you work. Lucky me. While my friends spent their summers sleeping in and going to the pool, I worked for my parents' wood truss manufacturing company, cutting boards to be made into trusses for chicken, hog, and turkey barns. Some of my friends suffered similar plights. Adam probably had it the worst. Pity the son of a dairy farmer.

I would rise at 5:42 AM and sleepwalk my way across the gravel drive to the long white barn. Some of the boards were too heavy for me to lift. I could handle all lengths of 2 × 4's, and most of the 2 × 6's, but anything bigger than that and it was time to sweep the floor. When I wasn't carrying wood or sweeping, I daydreamed or caused trouble. If you packed certain tubes on the large component saw with sawdust and waited for just the right moment to blow it with the air hose, you could really get somebody. I also enjoyed playing with grease. If you left your hammer or tape around me very long, you could bet that I was going to apply a nice layer of grease onto it so that when you picked it up your hand was a mess.

Unfortunately, I got more than I gave. Everybody liked messing with the boss's son. If you've never had sawdust down your pants, I wouldn't recommend it.

I wasn't the best truss builder, but I would have been an even worse garment worker. A good garment worker is docile and out of options. Like many kids my age, I had big aspirations and was raised on a steady diet of "you can do anything you put your mind to." I spent half my time figuring how many hours I had to work before I could afford that Trans Am I wanted. Sixteen was only five years away. The rest of the time, I tried to decide which NBA team I preferred to draft me in the 2001 draft, following my hugely successful collegiate career in the Big Ten.

I had confidence (too much), dreams (big ones), and was outgoing. I also had six years of education. These are all things that make for one crummy garment worker. Since the Industrial Revolution, our clothes have always been made by those who are less privileged—primarily, young, uneducated women who are desperate for work.

In nineteenth-century England, the industry favored women and children for their abundance, the cheap wages paid to them, and their obedient temperament. Since child labor was frowned upon when the industry jumped the pond to New England, it relied primarily on young, single women from rural areas. When it moved to the South, guess who worked at the garment factories? Young, docile, women from rural areas—just as when it moved to Japan, Honduras, China, and Bangladesh.

In fact, the more docile, the better.

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Dalton took me to a few sweatshops in the city of Narsingdi, northeast of Dhaka. And by sweatshop, I don't mean the socially loaded term that refers to employees being paid below the federally mandated minimum or treated poorly—although they may have been that, too. I mean the factories were friggin' hot.

Of course, the garment factories aren't the first step in my underwear's production. Cotton is grown, picked, made into giant spools of thread that are turned into long sheets of cloth, then colored, and only then shipped to the garment factories—which are the last step of the process, and the textile factories are just one step before that.

Dalton's uncle has a small textile factory on his property. A broken-down pickup truck sat outside the tin shack in a bed of weeds. Inside

the building, two shirtless men wearing loose skirts wrapped up tight like a pair of shorts worked away. The process was completely manual. One of them turned a big wooden wheel fed by a hundred or so spools of thread. The other sat beneath the rainbow of thread and guided them into the wood contraption. The men worked in the silence of monotony, ignoring us. I imagined cloth had been produced like this for centuries.

The next factory was more modern, and the neatly dressed boss man gave us free rein. We could walk where we wanted, talk to whomever we wanted, and take pictures of what we saw. Dalton told the truth this time: that I was a writer from the United States. Still, the owner had no problems. He was happy to show a foreigner around.

We walked in the door and saw two teenage boys working on a small machine. The best I could tell, their job was to prep the rolls of thread for the bigger machines by unrolling them and rolling them back again.

The one boy picked through the thread with a tool that appeared to be a small version of a hot dog holder (Figure 8.1). His upper lip looked as though a pathetic woolly worm had crawled up on it and died. He couldn't have been more than 15. Dalton asked him to slow down so I could see what he was doing, but his hands still moved too fast.

Electric looms pounded out a rhythm that could be heard anywhere in town. Shirtless men tended machines once again, but these were unlike the first wheel crank we saw. Flywheels spun belts. The looms pumped up and down. One of the men motioned me closer, but I chose to keep my distance from all the moving parts. A safe uniform is no uniform, and

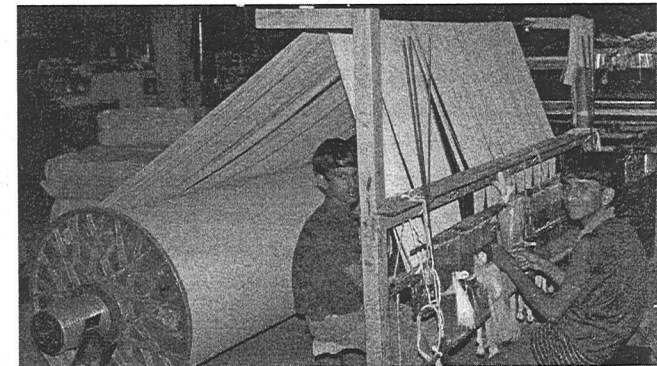


Figure 8.1 Boys working in a textile factory.

I was wearing a baggy shirt. The room had row after row of similar stations attended by similar skinny half-naked guys. I'm not sure if I could stand it. So hot. So loud. In the United States, there would be guards and stickers all over the place, and hearing protection. Here there's nothing.

We were shown into the boss man's office and given grapes, oranges, and soft drinks. We learned about how his father started the business in 1965, and he was proud to have taken it to the next level with this new factory. He sells the fabric to garment industries in Bangladesh and internationally, mostly to Japan and some to the Carolinas.

Employees shuffled in with poster boards of photos of the boss man receiving awards for his work in the community. They, including Dalton, kept referring to him as a "social worker." He donated a lot of money to the hospital down the road. He was a nice man, broad through the shoulders with a slightly receding hairline and a strong face. I was most welcome in his factory, even if my purpose was to take photos of his underage workers. He owned five other factories.

"They work around the clock," said one of the locals that accompanied us on our tour. "One man—12 hours at a time. The machines never stop."

I asked him if there are many injuries.

"Not too bad, but . . ." he motioned a slice across his finger and then his forearm to show me that fingers and arms were lost.

The coloring factory was the sweatiest of all the shops. Huge, worm-like furnaces with glowing red mouths sucked in long sheets of cloth. The heat helps affix the dye to the cloth. It was stifling. We watched the teenage boys work through a mist of rising steam, using wood sticks to help feed the cloth into the furnaces.

"Ask them their age," I told Dalton.

"No need to ask," Dalton said, firmly denying my request to translate a question that might get us into trouble.

The stores lining the streets of Narsingdi were closing for the night, but the rolls and mounds of cloth were still being shuffled this way and that by any means of locomotion possible. An overfilled truck coming from a narrow alley toward the main road stopped before the power lines. It was heaped full with bags of cloth and too tall to pass beneath. On top, two men reached forward with a bamboo pole and lifted up the lines—death no farther away than the width of the pole. The truck lurched back and forth as the driver tried to make it up the rough incline. The workers on top balanced the line on the pole. A rickshaw hauling a load of long skinny rolls of fabric rang its bell, signaling

me to step aside as it passed. No one else seemed to think anything of the workers cheating death on the truck. The textile industry stops for nothing here in Narsingdi.

I was feeling pretty crummy by the time we left for Dhaka. I had come all the way to Bangladesh to see workers working, and I didn't like what I had seen. Kids who should have been in school were instead working. Dalton assured me that if these kids didn't work there, they would beg in the middle of the road, or work at a welding shop in Old Dhaka, or at a brick factory where they would crush bricks into stone. Or, they might do hundreds of worse things on the streets, some harder, more dangerous, and for less pay than working at a textile or garment factory.

It's really easy to be against child labor. In the United States, there are few things we value more than a child's innocence. Children should be skipping through sprinklers, chasing lightning bugs, drinking Kool-Aid or Tang, believing in Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny, making forts out of blankets and furniture, watching cartoons, and, in general, not worrying about anything other than going to school and having fun. If they work, it's not for income to pay for food or shelter; it's to learn responsibility, build character, or to save for what promises to be a bright future. American children are protected from the realities of the world.

The children of Bangladesh are not. I've never known anyone in the United States who died from diarrhea or malaria. I've never met a leper. It would be great if all the kids in Bangladesh who spend their days trying to earn money for their family's next meal could go to school instead of work. But it's not reality. Not yet.

One can make the argument that factories that employ children are doing good, and the westerners who call for an end to child labor are actually doing harm. I read about one factory owner who would offer underage children jobs when they were down and out and needed money. He thinks he's actually helping the children. Maybe he is.

Not having children make our clothes does not eliminate the reality that many children in Bangladesh must work, but it eliminates our guilt in the matter. It clears our conscience and helps us forget that we live in such a world.

Does a mother who sends her eight-year-old daughter off for a day of picking up plastic bottles, or begging, or working in a factory love her daughter any less than a mother in the United States who sends her daughter to school? Is she being immoral? My own

conclusion, after visiting Bangladesh, is that we should not be ashamed that our clothes are made by children so much as ashamed that we live in a world where child labor is often necessary for survival.

Child labor or not, the working conditions in Bangladesh's garment and textile industries are the living conditions of the country.

This is the culture of poverty.



Arifa, the Garment Worker

Two million people live and work as garment workers in Bangladesh. I've seen them walking on the streets in the early morning with their lunches; I've seen them working beneath fluorescent lights at their machines, and I read about their struggles and the industry's triumphs in the local papers each morning. A single morning's headlines from Dhaka's English language paper, the *New Age*: "25 Hurt as Garment Workers Clash," "Knitwear Factory Workers Stage Demo for Arrears," "Garment Worker Commits Suicide," "Exports Grow by 21 Percent to \$8 Billion in 8 Months."

Economist Jeffrey Sachs, Director of The Earth Institute and Special Advisor to the United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon, believes that the garment industry in Bangladesh and other developing countries is an opportunity to get a foothold on the first rung of the global economic ladder. In his book, *The End of Poverty* (New York: Penguin, 2005), he writes:

Not only is the garment sector fueling Bangladesh's economic growth of more than five percent per year in recent years, but it is also raising the consciousness and power of women in a society . . . this change and others give Bangladesh the opportunity in the next few years to put itself on a secure path of long-term economic growth.

Women who have jobs are likely to have fewer children. Missing work while pregnant, having a baby, or caring for a newborn is, in a sense, expensive. Therefore, working women have fewer children to feed, clothe, and keep healthy, and more money to do so. Sachs writes that the total fertility rate—the average number of children a woman has over her lifetime—in 1975 in Bangladesh was 6.6. Today, it's 3.1. Educating and employing women is one of the best ways to lift a society from poverty.

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Mr. Moon of the National Garment Worker's Federation is a squat, serious-looking man. His bare office, furnished with a single table and two unoccupied chairs, is dark—so dark that it takes me a moment to notice that the walls are papered with newspaper pages picturing dead and beaten garment workers. He has a lot of reasons to be serious.

He agrees to introduce me to some garment workers and takes me to an apartment building full of them. We talk with young and old workers about their lives, families, and futures. I meet a 45-year-old man who has worked in the garment factories for 20 years and makes \$45 per month. I talk with a pretty 18-year-old girl with a nice smile and a name that translates to "Singer" who makes \$24 per month. She tells me she wants to be a doctor, which is like me saying I want to fly the Space Shuttle.

But it is a woman by the name of Arifa who impresses me the most. I get the sense that she might be the type of woman Sachs is talking about in his book. When she talks, everyone listens. I arrange to spend a day with her from sunup to sundown to see whether Arifa is socially empowered—or dehumanized by her work making clothes for people like me.

I came to Bangladesh to meet the people who made my clothes just as I had when I went to Honduras. But I let myself down in Honduras. I didn't ask what I wanted to during the few minutes I had spent with Amilcar—questions I wasn't prepared to have answered. It was as if I had walked up to the edge of a cliff, looked over, said "No thanks," and walked away. Now, I have every intention of taking the plunge—learning about Arifa's work as a garment worker, her struggles living on less than \$1 a day, and her hopes as a single mother for her children.

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It's 5 AM. The streets of Dhaka are empty. It's creepy being the only moving thing in the most crowded city of the most crowded country in the world.

The hotel clerk warned me not to go.

"This [idea] is very dangerous. Maybe you can go after 10 AM, but at *that* time of day there are many hijackers," the clerk said.

"What if I go with nothing? No money. No camera. No passport."

"At a minimum," he said, "you'll get stabbed because they'll be angry that you don't have anything."

Yikes.

"Could your driver take me there and walk me up to the apartment? Kind of act as my security man?"

The driver is five inches shorter than I am, but he struts with his shoulders thrown back. His biggest muscle is his gut, and it hangs over his belt. All in all, he looks a bit like the bouncer of a bar that has nightly specials of 50¢ beer. Of course, he wouldn't be a bouncer at a bar here; Bangladesh is for the most part a dry country.

The driver is still blinking the sleep out of his eyes as he guides the hotel's car down the street. I almost hugged him when he agreed to accompany me the previous night. But we were too manly for such shenanigans. After all, we were going to brave the empty streets of Dhaka.

I'm on the lookout for hijackers, highwaymen, robbers, crooks, thugs, gangs, bandits—you name it. I spot some talking on the corner, and, to my horror, the driver pulls over to ask them directions. He lowers my window and leans across the armrest to talk with them. Two of the potential hijackers step back, and their leader rests one hand on our car's roof and his other on the door. His fingers dangle inside the car. The nails are long and yellow, especially the pinky's that appears sharp enough to slit throats of soft-skinned foreigners who dare to face the small, dark hours of the day. He consults his gang and then points around the corner.

We do this again and again—pull over and ask nearly every person we see on the street for directions. If there are any evildoers about, we give them ample opportunity to do their evil.

"This is it," I say, motioning the driver to stop.

The driver finds a place to pull the car out of the way in the narrow alley. We walk down a narrower alley. I recognize the smell—a mix of rotten cabbage and shit—and the way it burns in my nose and my chest. I lead the driver into the concrete building on the left to which Mr. Moon first brought me.

No attempt at all has been made to have this building appear aesthetically pleasing. From the outside, and especially the inside, it looks as if a fire has scarred the concrete and done away with any paint.

The steps are rounded from wear and crumbling, and look like they could go at any time. There used to be a railing, as evidenced by the occasional green support sticking out from the wall. We reach the sixth and top floor of the building. The driver is huffing and puffing, and I'm a bit winded myself.

"Arifa?" I whisper. The hallway is lit by the flame of a gas stove hugging the edges of a pot of rice.

The cook at the stove gives me a half smile and disappears into a room down the hall. I hand the driver a fist of Bangladeshi taka and thank him for his help. He looks at me, puzzled. His English isn't good enough for me to explain to him what I'm doing. To him, it must look like I'm up to no good: meeting a prostitute or buying drugs.

Even in the dim light, I recognize her face. She has a strong jaw, big eyes, and a sloping forehead. She's wearing a baggy purple shirt and blue pants, and a scarf with a rainbow of color tied around her neck. Both her face and outfit are still wrinkled from sleep.

She waves me into the room and has me sit on a bed crowded with her kids. Little Sadia, who's four, sleeps in the corner by the wall, flopping silently this way and that. Each time I look at her, she is in a different position. Abir, 11, sleeps much more soundly.

Arifa motions for me to lift up my legs. I do, and she pulls a bucket of rice out from under the bed and starts to scoop out cupfuls. I count them to myself . . . four . . . five . . . six. In the early morning silence, I can hear each grain tink against the pot.

The room is constructed out of anything and everything. Cardboard insulates the roof and the walls. The studs are bamboo, the floor concrete. Wood boards make up the interior ceiling and walls. The exterior wall is sheet metal dimpled with holes that are lit with the slightest hint of dawn. There are two cabinets, one directly in front that's long with sliding glass doors and upper and lower compartments. The upper has clothes, bed sheets, and towels, and the lower, dishes, silverware, and two stuffed animals.

The majority of space in the room is taken up by the two large beds, which slept four people last night. The fourth person, Didder Khan, is Arifa's sister's husband. He works for Gillette and speaks a little English. He brushes his teeth for a half hour. The first time he spits, he does so on the wall of the steps, adding to the white stains that look like runny bird poop. The next time is through a hole in the wall near his bed.

Arifa returns. The rice is on, and it's time to prepare the rest of breakfast. She pulls out a bowl of vegetables from beneath the other bed and sits on the floor. She places a curved blade face up on the floor and begins to expertly chop onions, potatoes, and other veggies by running them across the blade's edge. She's quick and doesn't have to be watching to do this. Sometimes she looks at me, and we try to communicate; sometimes she looks up at her children and smiles. The cut veggies pile up on the floor before she scoops them up and takes them into the kitchen.

I walk down the hallway, the gas from the stove burning my eyes, and step onto the roof. Dhaka is just waking; the first rickshaw bells cut the silence of the morning. Below, the beggars are getting an early start, and the market's first deals of the day are under way. Merchants transport their goods to their stores in large wicker baskets balanced on their heads. A man on a nearby roof stretches, and on another roof, a small boy is doing his morning chores, but stops long enough to wave at me.

I go back in and sit on the bed. Arifa offers me breakfast. I don't want to take the food. They have so little. After refusing three times, I finally take the tortillas, and the green goop made from the vegetables she mixed and mashed. It's a little spicy for my taste, but I eat it.

Across the hall in a small room, three guys watch me from their bed—a bamboo frame with slivers of board on top. All three are garment workers.

Arifa subleases the room to the workers. They pay her \$14.60 per month for room and board. Arifa cooks for no less than seven people at a time. The men scoop rice from large bowls with their hands, mix it with the green goop, and shovel it in. Light through the window behind me lights the edge of their bed. I can make out the bowl, but barely their faces. I just see hands shrinking the pile of rice.

Sadia wakes and the first thing she sees is me. She starts to cry. After I tickle her feet with my pen, she starts to giggle. It's not hard to win the friendship of a four-year-old. The giggling only lasts as long as the tickling, and then she cries again and doesn't show signs of stopping.

"What's wrong with Sadia?" I ask Didder.

He stumbles around with the sentence before finding the words, "Sadia is very hungry."

Arifa sits down on the bed and reaches underneath the mattress and pulls out a wad of taka, mainly red 10s and hands them to Abir. Abir returns with some tortillas and gives them to Sadia. After a few bites, she has more interest in playing with her food than eating it.

At first, it's hard to tell if Sadia is a girl or boy. She has short hair, and her clothing provides no clues. Her smile is mischievous and exposes her complete set of top teeth. Her skin is bumpy. I think she must have some problem with rickets, ringworm, or some other thing I've never had to worry about in my life. I ask Arifa about it.

"The water is no good," she says. "It comes from the roof."

Abir sits down on the bed and pulls out a plastic briefcase.

"I bought that for him when I was in Thailand with the Garment Federation," she says.

Abir works on math problems with long division and parentheses using Arifa's cell phone for its calculator function. He's lanky and wears a ball cap pulled down over his eyebrows. When he carries Sadia, he does so just like his mom—jutting out a hip. Sometimes he squats down so Sadia can ride on his back piggyback-style, which she clearly loves.

Arifa has another son, Arman. He is 18 and living and working in Saudi Arabia, which is common practice for young men in Bangladesh. He makes \$146 per month and sends half of it home to his mom.

"He has been gone for five months," she says, "and will be gone for at least another five years." I see the sadness in her eyes as they drift to Abir. If given the opportunity, he would have to go, too. "Their father was a crook, and the government doesn't take care of my children. It's not like the USA or the U.K. They don't have a choice. I would like them to go to school longer, but this isn't possible."

After breakfast, Abir heads for school and Didder for Gillete. Arifa, Sadia, and I go to the market.

Arifa works at the Standard Garment factory, but injured her leg somehow and is taking a month off to recover. When she is working she makes 10¢ an hour and works 60 hours a week, earning a total of \$6 per week.

Merchants have their foods laid out on plastic tarps. Flies buzz fish. A meat stand—think child's lemonade stand in size and structure—has slabs of unidentifiable meat hanging from hooks. People selling produce dip their hands in water and spritz their veggies.

Regardless of the crowd, Arifa walks up and takes care of business. I can tell she always gets the price she wants. The sellers know better than to try to negotiate with her. People stare at me, and Arifa smiles and laughs as she nods to me while continuing her conversation. It's typical staring, but there are more little kids than usual grabbing my arms and hands. With a word from Arifa, they scatter. I'm always looking for Sadia among the crowd, and Arifa looks at me and says, "No problem."

If it takes a village to raise a child, that's definitely the case here. Sadia is always with someone she is calling auntie or uncle.

Arifa begins preparing lunch for the workers. I sit on the corner of a bed and scribble down some notes. It begins to rain, and the rhythmic pitter-patter on the tin roof puts me to sleep. I wake and find a pillow beneath my head and a fan directed on me.

Sadia returns with one of her aunts. I draw a smiley face on the palm of my hand and show her. She laughs. I add a tongue, close my hand, and then reveal it. She laughs. I add ears . . . a body . . . an arrow through the head . . . We keep up the game until lunch.

I'm served rice. Not just any kind of rice, but some kind of smaller-grained, imported rice reserved for guests of honor. The honor is lost on me until someone points it out. To me, rice is rice.

The heat of the day is beating down on the tin roof. It's inescapable. To make matters worse, the electricity is out, and the fan sits motionless with its on-button pushed in. We sit on the beds and chat.

Sadia plops a dollop of Brylcreem onto her hair. She rubs it in with her tiny hands and giggles. She's a kid and likes to show off. Arifa ruffles her hair and gives her a hug. She's a mom.

Sadia's aunt tells me to sit by the window so I can take advantage of what little breeze there is outside. The thin, shredded curtains barely move. They are see-through and a pathetic, almost heartbreaking attempt to spruce up the place.

I look down on more tin roofs, rusted and holey, like the wall I lean against. It's a harsh, hard-to-imagine concept that on the sixth floor of a smelly, crumbling building, where 16 people share a single shower, I'm witnessing economic progress and the future of Bangladesh.

* * *

I've got \$20 in my pocket, and, economic progress or not, Arifa could use it more than me.

Arifa is leading me to her factory, Standard Garment, to meet some of the workers being let out for the day. The sun is low in the sky and turns the dust from the rush-hour hustle and bustle pink. Some guy, maybe her boyfriend, met us at her apartment and is walking with us. He's creepy in a Lurch sort of way. In her room, I tried to communicate with him using my repertoire of hand gestures and facial expressions, but he met them all with the same blank, unwavering, serial-killer stare. I would just hand her the money if it weren't

for him. He might question what she has done to earn it, and we don't need that.

We pass a steady stream of people all of whom Arifa identifies as garment workers. She stops and talks with them to explain who I am. She snags a peanut from a vendor and pays him with a little attention. People are glad to see her. She's confident and popular.

The streets become more crowded as we get closer to the factory. Trucks jerk from forward to reverse and back again as they maneuver around tight corners. Their headlights throw the shadows of the workers across the muddy street.

Arifa stops 300 feet short of the factory gate. If we go any further, my presence might cause a problem. It's unnatural for producer and consumer to meet. And while it's okay for me to inspect their work in the factory as a potential buyer, it's not okay for me to stand beside them on a muddy street as anything other than that.

The scene is similar to the one I witnessed at the factory in Honduras—an endless stream of workers, haggling vendors, people, and vehicles jockeying for position. To me, it's controlled chaos; to them, it's six o'clock. In Honduras, I knew nothing about any of workers' lives. Here, I know a little about Arifa's and enough to know that many of the hundreds of workers passing by have harder lives than I could ever imagine.

The sun has set on my day with Arifa. She flags a taxi. The first is too expensive, and she sends it packing. The next, she bargains down. Whether a pillow under the head, a fan directed on me, the honor of short-grained rice, or saving me a few cents to get back to my hotel, Arifa looked after me the entire day. I wish there was more I could do for her.

I finger the \$20 in my pocket. It's nearly an entire month's worth of Arifa's wages or, to me, about one pair of *Jingle These* boxers. Lurch is standing beside her. I pull my hand out empty and wave goodbye.

Arifa knows how much my underwear cost. Workers at her factory add the price tags onto the garments before they are shipped out. She knows the world that I come from is one of luxury. I know hers is one of hardship. We know, but we can't imagine.

She waves and then disappears—just another garment worker.

— Stop —



Hope

"Now is a good time," Bibi said. "The electricity is out." I have never interviewed a supermodel before or even talked to one, for that matter. I never expected that she would be there—up three flights of stairs off the chaotic streets of Dhaka sitting in the dark.

When she stood I almost said, "Boy, you sure are tall and skinny," but I didn't. I would say dumber things later.

"Do you smoke?" she asked in her elegant, full-bodied smoker's voice.

"No. . . ."

"Good," she said.

"But go ahead." As if she needed my permission to smoke in her own office.

Bibi Russell graduated from the London School of Fashion in 1975. At her teacher's suggestion, she modeled in her own fashion show. She was discovered and soon became a famous international model who appeared in *Vogue*, *Cosmo*, and *Harper's Bazaar*. And then she did a strange thing. In 1994, she moved back to her home country of Bangladesh (Figure 10.1).

"How could I forget all of this," Bibi said. "This is where I grew up.

She loves the people of Bangladesh; as she tells me, "Everything I do is for them. They made me Bibi. Everything I have, I owe them.

And Bibi is paying them back big time. Through her business Bibi Productions, she directs the work of local weavers in villages across Bangladesh and India. The weavers don't know what sells an