

Dear Dacca,

Is it okay if I still call you Dacca? I can't quite get used to "Dhaka" after you changed your first and last names.

Do you remember me? One of the American kids trailing behind parents working in East Pakistan before the war? I'll always remember you as Dacca, East Pakistan, but I understand why you wanted to shed names given to you by colonists once you won the civil war in 1971.

You hold an outsized place in my heart, considering that we landed in your embrace so briefly.

We settled in East Pakistan filled with such optimism. It was late 1970, and I, a 13-year-old girl on the cusp of the turbulent teens, couldn't wait to escape the repatriation blues in California. Living in West Pakistan and Peru had made me a citizen of the world, and I welcomed the opportunity to relocate overseas.

The moment Mom and Dad told me we were moving to Dacca, I started packing. They were giddy too: Mom, because she loved being overseas anywhere, and Dad, because he got a big promotion to Chief Engineer for an irrigation project.

I remember how everything looked emerald green, like an overly colorized film, when we flew into Dacca. I gazed at a soggy landscape of verdant rice paddies, tall jute fields, and dense mangroves lining the Bay of Bengal. First impressions on the ground: a damp blanket of humidity and comforting cacophony of honking horns, squawking chickens, jet engines winding up, and the din of traffic. Tension melted away, and my body relaxed once we were in the familiar surroundings of South Asia.

How I loved the Intercontinental Hotel, our temporary home. The imposing building rose above the pandemonium of the streets, where cars, rickshaws, and buses competed for space. For the first time, I got my own room instead of a rollaway bed in my parent's suite. Our stay stretched into weeks, thanks to construction delays on our house. In the airy lobby, I enjoyed the indistinct murmur of voices, the distant clink of cutlery, the high ceilings, and observing the obviously important people conducting what had to be business of great consequence. The lobby filled with diplomats, executives, and spies—I'd been reading too many thrillers—titillated my imagination.

Every afternoon, I perused the twirling kiosk in the gift shop, reading all the covers to pick my next book. Making the leap from kid books to adult books, forced by the small English-language selection, broadened my horizons and made me feel grown-up. Instead of the

Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew, Agatha Christie mysteries introduced me to a man with two unpronounceable names, Hercule Poirot, and weighty tomes by Leon Uris with historical plots about Nazis and World War II. Some dark stories didn't always end well. Little did I know, events in Dacca would mirror those storylines. Did you have any inkling?

Eventually, we moved into our new house, and I had to leave my make-believe world. I started making real friends and loved playing catch with the boys from the neighborhood, but something felt off. Even before the soldiers came, the air felt heavier, as if the city was holding its breath.

Mom hired a vivacious newlywed couple, Abdul and Rina, as our cook and maid. Beautiful Rina laughed often with my mother, and dashing Abdul cooked fish curry with aromatic spices. When they finished their work each day, Rina sat under the mango tree lovingly rubbing oil into Abdul's skin and hair.

Do you remember that park near our house? At first, I noticed men in uniform near the park with guns doing what looked like routine patrols. A few months after we moved in, trucks packed with soldiers holding rifles rumbled through the streets. I still went to that park with my friends, but less often because my heart raced and shoulders tensed when I saw them. One day, we arrived at the park to find it full of canvas tents. The Pakistani army had turned it into an army camp. I ran home and told Mom. From then on, Mom made me stay within the walls of our compound.

On March 25, 1971, the Pakistan Army launched Operation Searchlight to stamp out the nationalist movement. Do you remember all the gunfire? It was so scary that first night. We heard about the terrible massacre at the university, right across from the Hotel Intercontinental. I couldn't reconcile how the place I loved so much, that gave me so much pleasure, could now be at the center of such atrocity. Abdul disappeared—had he been murdered? My father gave a disconsolate Rina, who had recently given birth to their first baby, some money to return to her village. Did she have a village to return to?

On April 13, 1971, we were evacuated from Dacca in the middle of the night. I've never been back, but I still hold memories of that magical time when I lived at the Intercontinental Hotel, full of girlish dreams and optimism about the future. I worried about Abdul and Rina but never found out what happened to them.

Back in California, no one knew anything about the war, so I just buried it. We celebrated at home when we heard that you won independence and your name was changed to Dhaka, Bangladesh. You paid a heavy price for freedom.

News articles about Bangladesh always catch my eye. I feel a tremor of excitement, hoping for good news, but too often, it's more political turmoil. What do you think of it? Whenever I

read about protests or police action, my stomach churns like it did during that frightening time during the war. I wish I knew what happened to Abdul and Rina.

I wanted you to know that I think about you often—luscious green, humid, alive, full of promise. You go by another name now, but I'll always remember the real you. Joy Bangla!

*Still carrying you in my heart,*

Inga