

THE GULSHAN REGATTA

Hameed jumped out of bed with the alarm's first buzz. He washed quickly and dressed in cut-off jeans and a T-shirt that advertised his college back in Tennessee. He ran an electric razor over his morning stubble and brushed

his thick, unruly hair into sufficient order for a Saturday morning. Old sneakers without socks, a few bites of a toaster-heated chapatti, and he was ready. He looked in the mirror — brown skin, dark brown eyes, black hair, not unhandsome — a Bengali man who also looked American.

Stan, the co-worker who had talked him into participating in this international community regatta, showed up in a similar outfit, although his T-shirt advertised the U.S. Marine Corps Security Detachment. "All set? Loretta and Jerry are going to meet us there."

"Loretta? Women do this, too?"

"Yeah, especially smart, self-confident women like her. She designed the costumes. We're going to dress as bananas."

"Oh, nice. I hope no one in my family sees me. Do the locals watch this?"

"Of course. They line the shores and laugh at us. It's good for them. You know, Loretta was asking me about you the other day. I wonder if she has a crush

on you."

"On me?"

Stan rolled his eyes. "Mrs. Right could be under your nose while you go the old-fashioned route. But, hey, what do I know?"

Hameed smiled. His American friends were intrigued by his pursuit of an arranged marriage, and peppered him with questions and opinions. He tried to explain the system and why it worked at least as well as the American way, but they didn't seem convinced.

"So who are we racing?"

"Several of the embassies and aid missions. Also, the World Bank, CARE, the U.N., the International School, and the rest I can't remember. Sixteen in all, I think."

"And it's fair game to capsize the other boats?"

"Absolutely, if it helps us win. But remember, these boats aren't very stable. They're more like canoes than rowboats." Stan smiled, as if relishing victory, or some secret joke he wasn't sharing.

It was less than a mile to the lake, tucked in between the two posh enclaves where most of the international community lived, Gulshan and Baridhara. Hameed's office and apartment were in Gulshan. His family lived in an older neighborhood across town called Dhanmandi,



Donald Mulligan

A YOUNG MAN FINDS THAT
FATE PLAYS A ROLE — EVEN IN AN
ARRANGED MARRIAGE.

BY MARY CAMERON KILGOUR

F O C U S

a different world now, although years ago there had been foreigners in that neighborhood, too.

He thought of the conversation with his family the previous night, the focus on finding him a marriage partner, the unstated plan to do it before his father died. His father, 78 and with a bad heart, had been a widower for three years. He continued to live in the family home with Hameed's oldest brother and his wife and children, as was the Bangladeshi custom. Next door another brother lived in a smaller house. They all gathered for dinner most nights, and the house rang with the singsong games of children and the bustle of the women in the kitchen.

After dinner, Hameed sat with his father and brothers chewing paan. The cheek-sucking dryness of the betel nut gave him a sense of ease, although he chewed it only here. In 17 years in the States, he had lost many of his home-country ways, even his accent, and become a U.S. citizen. He was tenured at his small college in Tennessee and would be returning there after this 18-month sabbatical with an international aid organization. Surely he would find a wife before then and start his own family. It would mean a lot to be able to present his first child to his father for his blessing.

He hadn't looked very hard for a wife in the States. First he was busy with school, then with work. A couple of long relationships had petered out. Over the years he realized that he wanted to marry someone who shared the same childhood experiences and customs, religion and family values, so the Dhaka job had come at the right time.

Why was he thinking about this now? He yanked himself back to the present as Stan pulled onto a bumpy lane bordering the lake. Better to relax and enjoy this interlude.

They unloaded the banana leaves from the back of Stan's car and carried them to a boat that Jerry and Loretta had already claimed.

"Here's your costume, Hameed." Loretta handed him a gown-like thing made of yellow cloth.

He wondered if Stan could be right about Loretta. Wouldn't it be ironic if she turned out to be the one he fell for? He would have come all the way back to his native country, after years in the States, to marry an American.

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What would his brother, busy finding suitable Bangladeshi candidates, make of that?

He put on the costume. It was sleeveless and came to his knees. Then Loretta gave him a yellow hat shaped like the end of a banana made from painted cardboard. He put it on and stepped into the green leaf boat with his teammates.

The Bangladeshi fisherman-owner sat barefoot on his haunches watching them with a bemused expression on his face. His lungi was pulled up and wrapped to resemble shorts. His undershirt was clean but pocked with small wear holes. He puffed a local cigarette, a bidi, whose acrid smoke brought memories floating toward Hameed — memories of his grandfather and uncles smoking on the flat roof of their house before sleeping on hot summer nights, memories of last night's conversation, which had started with a compliment to his sister-in-law.

"Your cooking is delicious, as always, Rifat," he had said, smiling at his sister-in-law when she joined them in the sitting room. "Will you be sure to teach my future wife this particular dish?"

"With pleasure, brother. When might I start?"

"Yes, Hameed, when? We are running out of girls."

Hameed gave his oldest brother, who was a banker and Rotarian, a mock scowl. "Farouk Bhai, I don't think I'm being unreasonable to ask that she already have experience living in the States. You know I'll be going back there to live and I want her to be able to adjust, to be happy."

"No, that's not unreasonable. But does she also have to be beautiful, intelligent, well-educated, charming and athletic? Where am I going to find such a girl? What was wrong with the last two, I'd like to know?"

"Well, Salma's years in Russia really didn't qualify her. And Nila was too young, only 19 and not yet finished with her education. Besides, I need to feel a spark."

"A spark?"

Hameed stood up and stretched, tired from a busy work-week and the tensions of this wife search. "Yes, my brother. Use your networking skills to find me a spark."

His father had been silent, but the look on his face, which made it clear that Farouk was speaking for both of them, changed to a smile. "The spark will come, my son, if we choose carefully."

Hameed nodded and smiled as he bent to kiss his father's cheek. "Well, Father, I'll take my leave. I have to be up early tomorrow."

"Okay, I'll add spark to the list." Farouk shook his head. "Don't forget tomorrow afternoon. We have to be at the

F O C U S

Rahmans' house at 5. Their daughter's name is Suraya. She's an excellent prospect, here visiting from the States, I'm told, and supposedly very brainy."

"I won't forget."

"And next weekend is the foreign minister's niece. Her name is Huda."

When Hameed drove back to his apartment through streets crowded with buses, trucks, motor rickshaws, bicycles, cows and pedestrians, his prospects floated through his mind like smoke. He knew he was more than ready to marry. But brains at 5, the foreign minister's niece a week later? Would her family be willing to let her leave the country permanently? Was this system really better? A heavy diesel gloom obscured the night sky. The smell filled the car, forcing him to roll up the window.

"Let's get moving." Stan's call startled him. "Are you with us, Hameed?"

He nodded as they started paddling through the turbid water to the starting line at the bridge. Other boats joined them. One crew was dressed like Vikings, probably from

one of the Scandinavian embassies. There were people in grass skirts, with a grass-draped boat. Another boat was wrapped in silver foil and its crew wore wet suits and masks.

"Look at that one with the gongs and leather shields," Jerry laughed. "They must be samurais from the Japanese mission."

"There's the International School crowd." Loretta pointed to a crew in caps and gowns. "I have friends on that team."

"So do I," said Jerry. "But don't give them any leeway. We won't live it down if they win."

By the time all of the boats were ready it was after 8 o'clock. A crowd dotted the shores of the lake. People sat on blankets or beach chairs on the sloped banks. Clumps of onlookers stood on the road; others lined the bridge. This early it was pleasantly cool, but an ice cream vendor had already set up his cart.

"That guy's not going to get much business from this crowd," said Hameed.

"Don't be sure," responded Jerry. "People willing to

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F O C U S

swim in Gulshan Lake will eat anything. And it's going to get hotter."

When they were all in line, the Swiss ambassador fired a starting gun. Birds flew off in all directions, flapping their wings and distracting the paddlers for a second or two.

"Damn. C'mon, let's go!" shouted Jerry. They began paddling wildly, out of rhythm with each other, splashing water everywhere.

"Synchronize!" Stan shouted. "One. Two. Stroke. Lift. Stroke. Lift."

They got into rhythm and soon reached the middle of the pack. The crowd was cheering. Horns were blaring. Street kids were jumping into the water to swim after the boats.

Suddenly their boat took a hard knock from the silver foil boat. What were they? Navy Seals? The banana boat started rocking, jostled by the pushes of silver foil paddles.

"Brutes!" Loretta shouted. "Get away!" She pushed with her own paddle and the nose of the silver boat changed direction. Stan gave it a shove from the rear and it headed into the Samurais.

The bananas took a few minutes to regain their rhythm, but soon found their boat heading right for the Vikings.

"Watch out!" Loretta shouted from the helm as the two boats collided. She toppled backward, out of reach of the hairy arms of a Viking hulk.

Hameed stood up to defend her, possibly his future wife. It started their boat rocking wildly.

"Sit down!" Stan shouted to him as they struck the Vikings again. "Paddle! Keep paddling!"

The Vikings pulled ahead.

"Catch them! Paddle!"

Hameed was sweating. The yellow costume stuck to him. Another boat was coming alongside. The International School scholars were almost abreast. They started splashing water into the bananas' boat. The bananas splashed back. Paddles were flying. Everyone was shouting. He laughed with the exhilaration of it, the incongruity of him, a studious economics professor temporarily turned aid worker, participating in such a nutty adventure. It made him feel very American.

The International School boat crashed into the bananas. He saw, under a mortarboard cap with a crimson tassel, the face of a beautiful girl. Her eyes were large and black, her cheeks wet and rosy. She was laughing. She was a Bangladeshi.

Hameed stopped splashing and stared at her.

"Take that!" she shouted, and threw a full paddle of water into his face. "Ha!" She thumped her paddle against his side of the boat. Her teammates did the same, rocking it dangerously close to the water line.

"Teachers, beware!" Stan thrust his paddle at the last man in the teachers' boat, forcing him off the other side. One of his mates grabbed the oar and pushed back at Stan. Rather than abandon the boat, Stan let it be pushed so hard that water rushed in.

"Lean forward!" Stan shouted as he tumbled backward and out of the boat.

Hameed, Jerry and Loretta leaned toward the teachers' boat. This brought Hameed within inches of the lovely Bangladeshi girl.

The dream girl pulled his hat off and threw it overboard. She looked startled by her own boldness. He reached for her arm, to pull her into his boat. She resisted, grabbing his hand instead.

Who is she? He looked at Loretta and Jerry. They were grinning. At that moment, the two boats started to tip toward each other, nudged by the frogmen, already in the water with their snorkels and fins.

Hands clasped, Hameed and the dream girl fell into the water together. Her mortarboard floated away.

Treading water, he shook the hair from his eyes and sputtered, "Who are you?"

She flipped onto her back and looked toward the sky. "I'm from Texas, but I'm teaching at the International School for a while." Her accent was faint, similar to his.

He followed her gaze. The pale blue sky was dusted with wispy clouds and black birds soaring on wind currents. Judging from the sounds of laughter, splashing water and distant cheers, the race went on without them.

She raised her head and turned to look at him while still floating on her back in the chocolate water. Her gown clung to her.

"My name's Suraya. And who are you?" Beads of water sparkled in her hair.

"I'm Hameed, from Tennessee."

She flipped upright to tread water and looked at him closely, taking his measure.

He blinked once, then again, and ran a hand through his hair. "Is your family name Rahman?"

She smiled and her eyes glowed. "Yes. I think we're having tea this afternoon."

He took her hand and felt the warmth. "Shall we swim to shore together?" ■