



The secret of the sandals!

I first spotted Roshni across the school playground, looking resplendent in shimmering green and gold saree, standing serenely alongside other mothers in faded jeans and worn-out T-shirts. If nothing else, she was a great advert for immigration.



I was still in the *find-a-Bangladeshi-eating-house* mode, after a falling in love with the cuisine when I had visited the Asian country a few years earlier. So, when I met Roshni's husband Don, who had been similarly smitten - by both Bangladesh and Roshni - during a spell there as a volunteer teacher, it was like finding a kindred spirit.

The album photos of Don in Dhaka portrayed a slimmer man with long blonde hair: a cool dude Americans might say. In contrast the man I came to know in Cheltenham UK, sported a distinct protrusion above the belt, his hair now prematurely white. But, as he told me, it was an advantage each Christmas when he pulled on a Santa suit. That was the dry English humour he had about him, which seemed to include the fact that come the heady days of summer, or miserable cold of English winter, he always wore sandals. Only once did I see him wearing shoes – as he left (flustered and late as usual) for a job interview as headmaster of a school for troublesome youngsters – and I never worked out whether it was a throwback to Bangladesh, or a problem with smelly feet. Like B.O., it was a tricky topic to drop into conversation. The closest I came was to ask: “You don't get frostbite?”



As two Bangla-tuned males, we bonded remarkably quickly. But it happened that our blossoming friendship was almost undone by Roshni, when one day I offered my car for her to practice driving skills, with me as instructor.

On the agreed day I turned up at their house, and Don waved us off with a smile (Or was it a foreboding grimace?). We took off with a couple of ‘bunny hops’ and disappeared down the street. But only five minutes into this inaugural lesson, we rounded a sharp bend and drove straight into a brick wall! I recall sitting speechless for a few seconds, looking across at Roshni who sat in a dazed stupor; hands glued to the steering wheel.

We returned to their driveway earlier than anticipated, the front end of the car a crumpled mess. Don came out scratching his white locks and simultaneously rubbing his protruding belly, like a teacher demonstrating an act of self-control to his enthralled class.



“Well, I did warn you,” he said cheerfully. “That’s why my Cavalier is still in pristine shape.”

A few years later I lost touch with Don and his wife, when he finally nailed a job as head of a school for delinquent teenagers on the East coast of England (this time wearing sandals, so maybe shoes were the problem after all!). The man was so unpretentious and committed to working with disadvantaged folk: qualities I really admired.

On leaving, he gave me his amazing collection of ‘70s vinyl, to add to my rather meagre lot, and they drove off in the Cavalier, waving. Thanks Don, maybe one day you’ll divulge ‘the secret of the sandals!’

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