



## **Madam Button Queen**

**Samreen Shah**

My name is Nabila and I am 10 years old. I used to live in Khulna, my village, but four years ago we came to Dhaka. We came to make money. My baba says that one day we will go back to Khulna with lots of money and build a big house. He says that we will all live together and I could even have a doll from India. 'One doll? I ask baba. He smiles and says 'No, 10, Madam Doll Queen!'

In Dhaka our home is small. It is a square shack made from wood and sometimes when the wind goes 'whoosh' through it I think it will fall on me. There is just one room and we cook, play and sleep in it. I have one brother and two sisters. My brother goes to school. I want to go to school. I asked my baba if I can go. I said I want to be a teacher. I asked why Ahmed gets to go to school when I am smarter than him. My baba laughed and said that one day I will marry a rich man, and I will sit at home and have the best clothes, but until then I have to make some money so I can have a good wedding. My mama says with no money there is no husband for me or Nasreen or Naila. At night when we are all asleep, I think about this rich man and if he already has money why can't he pay for the wedding.

I work in the Tausum Garment Factory. My mama works there too. In one year so will Nasreen and Naila. I work downstairs and my mama works upstairs. She works with the big machine and says that we are lucky we have jobs. I work downstairs in a room with no window. There are lots of children my age and we sit cross legged on the floor, with clothes piled up against the walls. They are waiting to leave the small room and go on the aeroplane to big countries like America and England. The clothes are pretty and I like the ones for girls. I would like to wear jeans one day but my baba says good girls don't wear trousers. My job is to sew buttons onto these clothes. Mr Boss says that my fingers are small and I do a good job. I sew up to 500 a day and my fingers sometimes hurt. The buttons are every colour and I match up the right one to the clothes. I like the buttons, they are round and perfect. Sometimes I think they are sweets and I want to put one in my mouth but Mr Boss gets very angry if we do a bad job, and one day when Leela lost a button he yelled at her and made her cry. She was sent home and replaced with Munna. Leela's parents cried too because they are poor and their baba is ill. Next to me sits a Hindu sister. She is 11 and her job is to cut all the loose thread off the garments. She does that all day 'snip snip snip' sometimes her eyes water. I don't know if her eyes are tired or she is crying. We get 30 minutes lunch and we sit upstairs. The security guard has to lock the gate. I ask him 'Security Sir, why do you lock the gate when we eat?' Security Sir looks sad and says, 'Boss says I have to, then no one steals the clothes and runs away.' I tell Security Sir that my baba won't let me wear the clothes so I won't steal. I want to walk outside because my legs feel stiff. I want to feel the sun for a little bit. Security Sir looks sad again and says that these clothes are more important than people. I eat my rice and think that the buttons I sew must be very expensive. I feel proud to touch them. Today I sew each one even better than before. I am Madam Button Queen and these buttons are my people.

My mama is a queen too. She told me she was called into Mr Boss's room. He said the Big Boss is making a special dress for a very famous actress. The dress will be a gift and my mama is to make it. She will work night and day until it is ready. It is very exciting. When

we go home I always beg mama to tell me about the dress. She says it is made from chiffon and is long and green. I think it must be for Ashwariya Rai because she has green eyes. Mama says Supervisor Sir comes into the room and watches her to make sure she doesn't make a single mistake. He told her the actress will wear it to an award show. Silly man doesn't need to watch my mama. She is the best at sewing. That's why she was chosen by Mr Boss. Yesterday I asked mama if she will she get more pay for making this dress for this famous madam and mama laughed. She said 'Beti, I am just lucky to touch the material which touches the rich.' I don't understand my mama sometimes. When she laughs her eyes look sad.

But today Mr Boss is angry. I can hear him telling the supervisor that an agent came, and said that the boss from America wants 500 extra trousers by tomorrow. The boss is called Mr Gap and I think that is a funny name. Mr Boss comes downstairs. It is already 10pm. He says that no one can leave until the order is complete. Hindu Sister starts to cry and so does Mahmood. I rub the smooth round buttons hoping this is a joke. Mr Boss stamps upstairs, 'bang bang bang' he goes and I hear the gate lock. We cannot leave. My back hurts and so do my fingers. I am hungry. I want my mama. I want the floor we all sleep on together. I want to hear what Ahmed has learned and I want baba to hug me. I keep sewing the buttons. I am good at this. I sew them all on to the jeans and shorts. My thread going in and out, in and out. I can't imagine women wearing such short clothes. I wonder if they wear them in front of their babas. At 3am Mr Boss comes downstairs, his hair is messy and he has red eyes. He says we can go now and we will get an extra 20 Taka for today's work. We collect our wages on the way out. I have made 120 Taka. I don't care. I am tired and upstairs I see my mama. She is coughing and she says that lots of fabric must have got in her throat today. Security Sir has fallen asleep outside the gate and we are locked in. Someone shouts, 'Let us out you stupid man, we have to be back in this prison in three hours.' I wish people would not be rude to Security Sir. He is nice to me. He wakes up and opens the heavy lock. We all go home feeling like tired elephants.

At home baba looks worried. He tells mama that another factory has burned down and many people have died, including Ramu's wife. Her name is Sweetie and she had lovely long black hair. I am confused and look at my mama. I notice the green thread in her hair. Mama says '*O Allah*, why did people not leave?' Baba says no one could get out because all the doors had big locks on them. He said that people were jumping out of windows. I am scared. I do not want to go to the garment factory tomorrow. I want to stay at home. I don't want to be Madam Button Queen anymore.

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