



Before the sun rose the next morning, Paisley's little feet clunked onto the floor, traipsing the well-worn path from her twin bed down the hallway to her parents' room. And just like that, another day began before 6 a.m.

Thankfully, the early morning brought an easy bedtime. Paisley was too sleepy for her usual chorus of more stories, more songs, more sips of water. Shelby said goodnight and closed her door before Bryan even left the office.

P is zzz

Shelby texted Bryan. No reason for him to rush home from late meetings hoping to catch Paisley awake.

Pattern piece in hand, Shelby lowered down to the floor, pressing her knees into the soft white carpet of the front room by the foyer. The long table in the dining room had been her first choice for a sewing space. But when a large section of \$14/yard satin blend soaked up unforeseen grease splotches from Tex Mex takeout, she couldn't again risk mixing food and fabric. The front room, where the cushion of carpet met the flat hardwood floors, became the next best place.

Smoothing the pattern piece across pink and white dotted fabric, Shelby double checked its position, ensuring her first cut was precise and efficient. For all the equipment and notions needed to sew a dress, the pattern was the single most important factor that determined how the dress would look finished.

Style, trendiness, and fit were all a byproduct of pattern choice. Every single piece, whether large or small, played a significant role. Alter the pattern in any way, and the entire outcome would change.

Shelby cut into the cross grain, guiding her sewing scissors along the fabric's edge. Her grandmother Dear, who taught her to sew, gave her this exact pair for her twelfth birthday. Back then, Shelby's sewing repertoire included unique pajama pants and sundresses none of her friends were wearing. Showing up in her own creations drew in heaps of praise from friends and teachers, making her life feel stable—even when it wasn't.

Shelby's left hand secured the slippery rayon fabric while her right hand squeezed together the shears' silver handles. She sliced pieces of the soon-to-be dress into existence. Scraps fell away into the rejection pile. All scissors made noise when they cut, but these sounded like a sword, slashing through the future dress with precision and might.

A text rolled in from Blakeley.

Are you coming?

They were at Zia's, the Greek place, for the neighborhood mom's night out. Shelby had originally RSVP'd, but later canceled, realizing the outing fell smack in the middle of the baby-trying window.

In addition, Shelby was desperate for the extra sewing time. The online exposure from winning the contest in February created an explosion of orders overnight. Shelby went from sewing six dresses a month to a surge of 58 new orders in the queue within 48 hours of *Buzz Now's* announcement.

Part of the seemingly insurmountable challenge of fulfilling so many orders was due to the hook of her business model. She wasn't just making women's dresses, competing with the zillions of retailers who could make dresses better, cheaper, faster. *Treasured Pockets* created matching dresses for mothers and daughters to wear together. The classic premise with up-to-date designs set her shop apart.

Can't tonight. Bryan's not home yet.

Hate to miss!

Shelby replied to Blakeley. Baba ghanoush and baklava couldn't compete with the lure of slaying this dragon.

Shelby laid the opaque tissue-paper pattern on the bias of the dotted material, preparing to cut the next piece of dress. The child-sized dresses took about four hours from first cut to final hem. She could sew them faster without pockets. But for her clientele, those were a key selling feature. In fact, they had inspired the name of her label.

Pockets, after all, created options, alternatives. A child could decide whether to leave found treasure behind or take it with her, safe in a pocket. Shelby knew firsthand how helpful it was when a little girl could haul away those treasures herself instead of loading down mommy's purse with fascinating rocks and twigs.

The mommy dresses took closer to seven hours because of the invisible zipper, added lines, and extra darts and seams to ensure a flattering fit. No pockets on this dress, though. There wasn't a mother out there who would want extra material bunching up around her midsection.

Shelby methodically pinned the front middle to front side pieces of the A-line dress, preparing to sew the princess seams. She'd sewn this exact dress so many times, she knew the steps by heart.

In the months after winning the contest, she'd considered

hiring another seamstress to help her fill the backlogged orders. Adding another person complicated everything about owning a business. Hiring a friend sounded simple enough, but she didn't know anyone who could sew with her speed and skill. Dear would have been the perfect person to help, but she passed away all too soon, not long before Shelby launched her shop.

Having no sewing help and only so many workable hours in the day, Shelby had to shut down her online store to sew the existing orders. She was finally on track to mail out the last orders this week.

With the fabric pieces pinned in place, Shelby sat down at her sewing table in front of the top-of-the-line overlock machine she inherited from Dear. A surge of energy ran through her as she prepared to tackle her favorite part of sewing: stitching the seams. Securing one remnant of fabric to another transformed unshapely scraps into a thing of order and beauty, a metamorphosis of pure magic.

Her favorite seam of all was sewing her paisley-flourished label, *Treasured Pockets*, into the neck of the dress. Winning *Buzz Now's* design contest had created an unbelievable opportunity for her designs to be worn by so many women and girls, season after season, bringing moms and children together. As a mother, she could think of no better compliment than for her daughter to want to look and be just like her, from the pattern of her dress to the very fabric of her soul.

Another text rolled in, this one from Bryan.

Getting an oil change then picking up BBQ.

Want anything?

No thanks. See you soon.

To prevent any more interruptions, Shelby turned her phone face down on the sewing table. She ran the first pinned edges of material under the energetic feed dog of the serger. The ball of

her foot edged the pedal toward the floor, causing the machine to whirr into action.

An intricate quartet of needles stabbed each stitch of thread into place, securing one swatch of dress firmly to another. The buzzing noise from the machine was oddly soothing, reminding her of all the long, hot summers at Dear's sewing sundresses for the schoolyear to come.

Amid the hum of progress, Shelby could sense the prize peeking out from behind the mountain of work. For the better part of the year, she spent all her free time sewing dresses for customers. Finally, there would be help—*so much help*—scaling up production. No more emergency trips to the fabric store to select missing notions. No more Friday afternoons waiting in line at the post office.

Standing at the ironing board pressing open the completed seam, her thoughts turned to the months ahead. Blakeley's comments about elementary school planted a vision of the future that didn't feel so far away. Only one more year lay between them and full-time Kindergarten, when suddenly, miraculously, so much of Shelby's time would be hers again.

Unless, perhaps, a new little one emerged to need her.

Another baby would blanket a layer of challenges over every aspect of their lives. Having grown up as an only child, she welcomed any extra load a new life would bring.

This part of the baby-making month always left her feeling jittery, so excited to become pregnant again, but also dreading the disappointment if things didn't unfold as she hoped. For too long, that had been the unfortunate trend.

Even so, she couldn't wait to start testing.

As she paired together two elbow-shaped pieces of fabric and interfacing, right sides together, excitement brewed inside thinking about the weeks ahead. For an exhausting sprint to finish up at her sewing station. And a sweet little marathon to be, hopefully, underway deep within her.



THE NEXT DAY was as hot as the one before. Paisley spent the lazy afternoon on the sofa behind her iPad. Shelby spent the screen time hours finishing the next dress, completing everything except the final hem.

“Time to go, Little P,” Shelby said.

“But my show’s not over,” Paisley said.

“Doesn’t matter. Miss Maye is home now. We need to go tell her about Runa.” It was Maye who informed Shelby of the dire need for sponsor families at Caring Hope. Considering she lived across the street, it was only right to introduce their sponsor child in person before Shelby plastered the announcement all over social media tomorrow.

At the mention of Runa’s name, Paisley popped up from the sofa without any fuss. They walked to the foyer, where a pile of shoes rested like an anthill on the floor. How many times had she asked Paisley to put them away?

Ignoring the mess, Shelby nudged her daughter outside onto the sunbaked front walk. Before shutting the door, she clicked through her mental checklist.

Iron off. *Check.*

Phone in purse. *Check.*

Sponsorship envelope. *Check.*

Oh right. The picture.

“Be right back.” She dashed inside and pulled Runa’s photo off the fridge.

The cicadas hummed ceremoniously from the treetops as Shelby and Paisley started across Oak Blossom Lane in matching chevron sundresses.

Paisley rang the doorbell. Moments later, Maye opened the door, her blue eyes shining under a curtain of short, sandy brown hair. “Why, hello to my favorite mother-daughter models! Those dresses make me want to grab my camera. Y’all come in, come in.”

Shelby and Paisley followed Maye inside. In the kitchen, she offered iced tea and lemonade. A plate of warm chocolate chip cookies rested on the rustic farm table. Paisley scurried over to a bowl full of chocolate candies. She popped a red one into her mouth and two blue ones into her pocket.

Their catch-up about the photoshoot puddled together as predictable chit-chat until Paisley snatched the white envelope from her mom's purse.

"Miss Maye, look at this," Paisley interrupted.

"What is it?" Maye leaned forward and rested her hands on her knees.

"We got a new friend."

"Did you make a new friend at the photoshoot?" Maye asked.

"No, we got a new friend in the mailbox." Paisley took the picture from Shelby's hand and passed it to Maye. "Look, see? Her name is Runa. She lives on the other side of the ocean."

"Runa. What a lovely name," Maye said, furrowing her brow. As Paisley darted off toward the living room, Maye drew the picture close and pulled down her reading glasses from atop her head. "Wait, Runa Binu?"

"Umm, yes ... I think so." Shelby took the papers out of the white envelope and double-checked the name on the student profile. "But—how on earth did you know that?"

Maye's eyes wandered up from the photograph to meet Shelby's. "Because I've met her."

"Wait, what?" Goosebumps formed on Shelby's arms as the questions tumbled out. "How on earth would you have met Runa?"

"I met her in Bangladesh."

"But when?" Shelby asked, feeling a sudden need to collect proof.

"On our last trip there ... nine, ten years ago. Gosh, I can't believe it's been that long. She was really little then, maybe two. And so tiny. Somethin' like 15 pounds. But I remember her. She

had these huge, bottlecap eyes." Maye peered into the photo as if looking for lost treasure. "Still does."

"Seriously?" Shelby found this hard to believe. Caring Hope had randomly selected a sponsor child for their family from over 30 supported countries. *Small world* seemed too much an understatement to even say. "What were you doing in ... in Bangladesh?"

"Roger and I went on a medical service trip. For part of it, we did physicals at an orphanage just outside of Dhaka. We gave the kids vitamins, vaccinations, checked their vision and hearing. That sort of basic care," Maye explained. "That's how I connected with Caring Hope. Their donors subsidized the orphanage and supported the staff."

Shelby glanced at the paperwork again. She didn't want to sound skeptical, but it seemed farfetched that this could be the exact same girl Maye met at the orphanage, especially considering their sponsor child wasn't an orphan.

"The student profile says Runa lives with her mother," Shelby said.

"Yep, I met her too. Can't remember her name. Just that she was a single mom working full-time. That's why Runa went to the orphanage during the day. It was a children's home, really." Maye tucked a tidy strand of sandy hair behind her ear. "I believe her dad had walked out on them right after Runa was born. Just disappeared from their lives."

Hearing the words, Shelby felt a familiar ache deep inside. When she was five, her own father had done the same disappearing act. Except she'd been old enough to remember watching him leave. He was home one day, then never again, completely evading the duties of having a family to start a new life without one. "That's ... that's terrible," Shelby said.

"Yes, it is. The children's home had a daycare, and certain families would qualify if they couldn't make it on their own. Runa's mom qualified for childcare and some extra medical resources. They have a sister school across the street that goes all

the way up to Grade 10. It's a really wonderful program for the orphans and street children. Caring Hope has supported them for a long time. That's probably how Runa was picked to be a sponsor child."

"Probably so," Shelby said, absorbing the new information. "I just hate to hear that about her father."

"It is really sad. Though not completely uncommon," Maye said.

Shelby agreed but stayed silent. In the four years since she moved in across the street, she never told Maye about her father. It never came up. And even if it did, Shelby was ill equipped to bring up painful wounds from the past.

In the confusing weeks and months after her father left, she was bombarded by all the grown-ups in her life asking how she was doing. She quickly learned to tell them what they wanted to hear. She was fine. She was great. She was happy.

Using her imagination to pretend everything was okay was the only way to stop all the painful questions. Besides, disclosing how she really felt would do nothing to change the outcome.

"Does it say if Runa has any siblings? I can't remember," Maye said.

"The student profile says she's an only child." Shelby stood silent. Paisley pulled a wooden puzzle from a shelf of toys and dumped out the pieces onto the coffee table.

Shelby skimmed the paperwork one more time. "This is a really crazy coincidence."

"It would be. Except, my dear, I don't believe in coincidences." Maye half-winked at Shelby, then kneeled on the carpet next to Paisley, who was almost done connecting the frame. "Paisley, did you know that I've met your new friend?"

"You know Runa?" Paisley stopped assembling the puzzle and looked up. Her eyes widened and her lips curled into a smile. "My Runa?"

"Met her when she was very little. Even littler than you." Maye poked a tickly finger toward Paisley's tummy.

Paisley giggled and swatted half-heartedly at Maye's hand. "Mama said I couldn't have her over 'cause she lives too far away."

"She does live far away. But I have an idea." As she spoke, Maye's eyes sparkled like Paisley's ornament.

"What's that?" Paisley looked at Maye, focused and eager.

"Maybe you two could be pen pals."

"What's a pim pal?"

"Good question. A *pen* pal is someone who lives far away, and you talk to them by writing letters back and forth. You can ask them questions and find out more about what it's like where they live."

"But I can't write. Or read."

"I bet your mama can write to Runa if you politely ask her to."

Hearing the brilliant idea, Paisley's eyebrows rose. Her ears perked. "I want to be a pim pal! Mama, can I be a pim pal with Runa?"

"That's a fun thought. And it's *pennn* pal. *Nuh-nuh-nuh*." She turned to Maye. "But we can't send her anything. I emailed Caring Hope last week, and they said it was too difficult to get specific items to individual children."

"Well, Miss Maye might know a sneaky way around that." She tucked her lips together, suppressing a smile. "Wait here. I have something to show you."

While Shelby and Paisley worked on the puzzle, Maye disappeared upstairs. She returned minutes later, her hands gripping an oversized green album.

When she returned to the kitchen table, they each pushed back lemonade and tea glasses to clear a spot. Maye opened the book wide, revealing images of leafy forests, tin-roofed buildings, flooded rice fields. She turned page after page until she found what she was looking for.

"Here she is." Maye's finger landed in the bottom corner of a

group picture containing what must have been around 40 people. Most were young children.

"That's Runa?" Paisley asked.

"Yes, that's Runa."

"But she's a baby."

"She *was* a baby, a toddler actually, when I met her. Looks like she's grown quite a bit. She's bigger than you are."

"Did you get to play with her?" Paisley asked.

"I did, some. She liked to collect rocks."

"Hey, I collect rocks too." Paisley reached into her pockets and procured three rocks, a leafy twig, and the blue chocolate candies. "I found these magic crystals in the driveway."

"Are these all the kids at the children's home?" Shelby asked, still engrossed in the album.

"Yes. And their caregivers. We took the picture so we could remember all their faces. I was just getting into photography at the time. Had no idea I would be pulling these out for something like this."

"I wanna meet her too. Mama, can we go see her?"

"Oh goodness, no, sweetie. It's way too far away."

"But we can go in an airplane. Like we did to Florida. And we can color and watch movies and eat snacks 'til we get there."

"Sweetie, we can't go see Runa. It's too far and too expensive." Not to mention she probably couldn't even locate Bangladesh on a map.

"But what you *can* do," Maye said, "is email my friend Ravi." She turned a few pages in the photo album. Her finger guided their eyes to a picture of Roger standing next to a much shorter man with dark brown hair, vibrant eyes, and a smile that leaped off the page. "He's the rep from Caring Hope who took us around and organized our stay. He works very closely with the children's home."

"Really? Are you still in touch with him?" Shelby asked.

"Sure am. He emails out a newsletter every month. Always sends inspirational updates about the work he's doing."

Sometimes I write back, but I haven't in a while. I bet he'd happy to ask Runa your questions. He might even help if you want to send her a little gift or something."

"Mama, can we do that? Can we mail Runa a present?"

"Yes. That is something we most certainly can do." Shelby was enjoying Paisley's fascination with their sponsored child more than she realized she would.

Maye walked across the kitchen to retrieve her phone from its charger on the countertop. "I'm going to forward you his latest email. He's a wonderful writer. So sincere and really dedicated to his work. You can reply straight to him. Tell him you know me. He's very good about writing back within a day. Sometimes in minutes."

"And he'll give me an address to mail something to Runa?" Shelby asked.

"I'm sure he will."

"I'm curious, though. How will we know if she gets it?" Shelby felt like Paisley, flooding her friend's ears with so many questions.

"Knowing Ravi," Maye said, "he'll probably give you the address of his office, and he'll deliver it himself."

"That would work," Shelby said, still hesitant at how seamlessly this was coming together. And how close she suddenly felt to this faraway child after learning what they had in common, growing up as the only child of a single mother.

"Mama, can you email him now?" Paisley asked.

Shelby considered the request. She was happy to email Ravi but saw an opportunity for cooperation. "Yes, I will email him. Soon as your shoes are all picked up and put away."

"Ugh," Paisley groaned. "Fine."



To: shelby@treasuredpockets.com

From: ravinder.amon@caringhope.org

Date: September 10, 2012

Subject: Re: Mail for Runa Zaman

Dear Shelby,

It is wonderful to hear from a friend of Maye! Thank you for sponsoring our sweet angel Runa. I would be happy to share your daughter's notes and packages with her. My address is below. Runa attends Eternal Promise School for Girls, which is not far from my office. It would be very easy to drop off mail to her and would bring me great joy to do so.

We are really grateful you are supporting a family in so much need. Thank you again for your continued generosity. May the Lord bless you with the peace, happiness, and love you truly deserve.

*Sincerely,
Ravi*

*Ravinder Amon
Dhaka Community Programs Manager
Caring Hope Organization*