

Rashed, My Friend

Muhammed Zafar Iqbal

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Translated by
Yeshim Iqbal



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Somoy Prakashan

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1.

I still remember the day Rashed first came to school. The class had just started. Sir had opened his register to take the roll when a boy came and stood at the door. There was a dripping wet paper in his left hand. He held it carefully and looked into the class. He looked as if he had lost a goat or something and was looking for it inside the room. After standing there for awhile he finally decided to come in. Majid Sir looked at him with a frown and said, "Hey, who are you? What do you want?"

He didn't reply but put the paper on Sir's table and wiped his hands on his pants. Slightly surprised, Sir asked, "What's this?"

"A paper."

"I can see that. What paper is it?"

"I don't know." He glanced vaguely at the class. "The office gave it to me."

Sir briefly looked the paper over. "An admission paper? You want to get admitted to this class?"

"I don't know."

"What do you mean by you don't know?" Sir scolded, "How did this get so wet?"

"It fell in the drain."

"The drain?" Sir made a face and pulled his hand away.

"It's not dirty Sir – I washed it."

"You washed it?" Sir looked at the boy in surprise. After looking at him like this for a little while he asked, "What's your name?"

"Laddu1."

"Laddu?"

The whole class burst into laughter. Sir said angrily, "Quiet! Absolutely quiet!" Once we had quieted down, Majid Sir asked the boy again, "What's your real name?"

"I don't have one."

"You don't have a real name?"

"No."

"Your name is just Laddu?"

The boy nodded his head.

"Nothing before or after that?"

"No."

Sir looked at the boy again in surprise. Then he said, "Can just Laddu be anybody's name?"

"No," Laddu replied thoughtfully.

"Then?"

"Put something else with it."

"Put something else with it?"

“Yes.”

“What should I put with it? Muhammed? Laddu Muhammed?”

“All right,” the boy agreed.

Sir regarded the boy with amazement, then suddenly slapped the table and said angrily, “Never! No one in my class can go by the name Laddu Muhammed. You tell your father to give you a real name.”

The boy scratched his head and said, “There’s no use, Sir.”

“Why not?”

“Dad won’t give me a name.”

“Why won’t he?”

“He’s too lazy. Besides, he’s kind of crazy. I have a brother and he doesn’t have a full name either.”

“What’s his name?”

“Chomchom2.”

Sir shouted at us as we all roared with laughter again. “Quiet! Be quiet! Or I’ll bash your heads in.”

After we had stopped laughing, Sir looked at the boy and said, “Your mother-”

“I don’t have a mother.”

“Oh.” Sir suddenly became quiet. He tapped on the table for awhile then said, “Then should I give you a real name?”

The boy brightened. “All right.”

Majid Sir studied the boy for a few minutes then said, “Okay then, you tell your father that tomorrow you will be given a new name.”

“All right.”

Then Sir looked at us and announced, “Tomorrow each of you write down and bring a nice name. Will you remember to do that?”

We nodded. We would remember.

After Sir left we went to size the boy up. Whenever a new boy came to class he had to be sized up. Who knew, maybe someone would come who was such a good student that he would always get ninety or ninety-five out of one hundred in all the subjects and make our lives miserable - like Ashraf did. Or maybe the new boy’s father would turn out to be the District Magistrate, and if we beat him up for some reason, his father would send police to get us the way Masum’s father did. Or maybe he’d be somebody who was such a bully that he’d absolutely eat us alive- like Kader did. You can’t tell any thing from before. So the boy needed to be sized up.

I went to him and asked, “Are you going to be first in the exams?”

The boy made a face and said, “Are you crazy?”

“Then what’ll you be?”

“I’ll fail. In all the subjects.”

“In all the subjects?”

“Yeah.”

Dilip said worriedly, “How do you know from before?”

“What’s not to know? Why do you think I came to school?”

“To fail?”

“Yeah. If I fail two years in a row, I don’t ever have to study again. Dad said so.”

Fazlu asked wide-eyed, “You won’t ever have to study again?”

“No.”

We looked at one another. Fazlu’s eyes narrowed in jealousy, he said, “If you fail won’t your father beat you up?”

The boy chuckled and said, “My father never beats me up. He’s sort of crazy you know.”

“What does he do?”

“He talks and tell stories. Discusses things.”

“With you?”

“Yeah.”

“What does he talk about?”

“Usually politics.”

“Politics!” We were astonished. What was this kid saying? His father discussed politics with him?

I asked in surprise, “Do you understand discussions about politics?”

“Why not? What’s not to understand?”

We all looked at the boy carefully. He had a head full of messy hair. His shirt was missing buttons and fastened with a safety pin. He was wearing blue pants and was barefoot. He had a fairly dark complexion and dreamy eyes. Looking at him, anybody would think he was just a normal kid, but he wasn’t normal at all. He didn’t have a mother and his father talked about politics with him. And he didn’t even have a real name. None of us admitted it, but we all became just a little bit jealous.

The next day each of us had brought a name we had chosen. After class had started, Majid Sir gave a long and impressive lecture on the necessity of having a full, nice name. Sir loved to give lectures. Then he made the boy stand at the front of the class. I think he was a little embarrassed that everyone was making such a big deal out of him. Sir said to us, “Now each of you read out your names one by one. Everybody else vote for the name you want. We’ll use whichever name gets the most votes.”

So we began to read out our names, and everybody raised their hands to vote. Ashraf wrote down the names and the number of votes for each name on a piece of paper. After going on like this for awhile, we realized that it wouldn’t work. The two names that had the most votes were ‘Rabindranath Tagore³’ and ‘Kazi Nazrul Islam⁴’. So then Sir had to make a new rule that we couldn’t use famous people’s names. Then the most popular name turned out to be ‘Robert Brown.’ Then Sir had to make another rule that we couldn’t use foreign names. Fazlu, who was sort of the stubborn type, had to start an argument with Sir about what was wrong with having a foreign name. On top of that, the boy called Laddu, looking shy, had to say that he didn’t mind having a foreign name.

Then Sir gave another lecture on the importance of having a name from one’s own country – he lectured about the nation, culture, history, etc. Sir really loved giving lectures. Once he had finished the lecture, he said, “Forget the voting. You just read out the names, and I’ll choose one I like.”

So we read out the names we had. Sir wrote down the ones he liked on a piece of paper and read them out. The first one was Ali Zakaria.

Sir studied the boy for awhile, then said, "No. If your name is Zakaria you have to have a sort of long face. Your face is round. This name doesn't suit you."

The second name was Kaiser Ahmed. Sir shook his head again and said, "Kaisers have curly hair. Your hair isn't curly. It looks like a bird's nest since you haven't combed it, but it's not curly. This name won't do."

The next name was Hasan Ferdous. Sir liked this name a lot; in fact he almost decided on it, but at the last moment he changed his mind, "To be a Ferdous, you have to have pale skin."

In our class there was a boy called Ferdous Ali and he was absolutely black, but Sir still didn't agree. He read out the next name, Rashed Hasan.

Sir really liked this one. He read out the name in a couple of different tones of voice, then said, "This is a good name. The name has a kind of character, what do you say?"

We had no idea how a name could have character, but we nodded our heads all the same. Sir asked, "Who chose this name?"

The shyest boy in the class, Ronju, stood up. Sir said, "Very good name! Where did you get it from?"

Ronju said so softly we could barely hear him, "My uncle goes by this name when he writes poems."

"This is a pen name?"

"Yes."

"What's his real name?"

"Gojonofor Miah."

Sir nodded. "Poet Rashed Hasan sounds much better than Poet Gojonofor Miah. Your uncle's right. You can sit."

Ronju quickly sat down. Majid Sir called Laddu to him. When he went, Sir put his hand on the boy's head and said, "Today the eleventh of September, 1970, I, Majid Shorkar, class teacher of class seven section B, do give you the name liked by all, 'Rashed Hasan.'"

Nobody had told us what to do but we all shouted out together in joy. That made Sir even happier, he nodded his head and said, "From now on when I use your new name, you reply, all right?"

The boy nodded.

Sir called, "Rashed Hasan."

"Yes?"

"Very good." Sir looked at us and said, "If any of you ever calls Rashed Hasan Laddu, I'll break your head. From now on, his name is Rashed."

Fazlu tried weakly, "But Sir, he's had the other name for so long--"

"Let that be. From today it's Rashed. He has a new name; doesn't he have to get used to it? No one is to call him Laddu, is that clear?"

We very reluctantly nodded our heads.

Once Sir left Fazlu immediately told Rashed, "I'm not going to call you no Rashed-Fashed. That kind of gentlemanly name doesn't come out of my mouth."

I nodded and said, "Laddu's better. Your face looks like a Laddu-Laddu kind of face. I'm going to call you Laddu."

Rashed gave a toothy smile and said, "Whatever you want!"

Class captain, Ashraf, said seriously, "I'm going to tell Sir. I'm really going to tell him."

"Go ahead!" Fazlu showed Ashraf his thumb and walked away.

If Rashed himself didn't have any objection to being called Laddu then what was the point in the class captain telling Sir? Besides, the class captain, Ashraf, would go all red and pretend to be angry but he would never complain to Sir like the other class captains did. Ashraf had a good heart. His one problem was that he was way too good in his studies. He would come first in the exams with his eyes closed. Not only did he always come first, he always talked properly, wore clean clothes, and even kept his hair combed. Just looking at him you could tell he was kind of the goody-goody type.

But Rashed didn't have any problems like that. I knew he'd become a friend pretty fast.

2.

We quickly discovered that Rashed was a mischievous rascal. We had decided to call him Laddu and he hadn't had a problem with that. But when we really did call him Laddu he would never reply. He would pretend that he hadn't heard us. He would ignore us and sit there with a dreamy expression until we called him Rashed. Then he'd give a huge smile and look at us with big eyes and say, "You calling me?"

Fazlu and I both got all mad and decided that no matter how hard he tried, we'd still call him Laddu, not Rashed. But after a week or two we found with surprise that along with everyone else we were also calling him Rashed.

Finally we gave up. He really did like the name Rashed Hasan, and if we used it he would become so happy. So we decided that we might as well call him that.

In a couple of days we realized that Rashed wasn't like every other kid. He didn't talk too much at all, but that didn't mean he was dumb. He had announced that he would fail two years in a row and not have to study anymore, but that wasn't going to be as easy as it had seemed. Even if he failed in all the subjects, it looked as if he was going to pass in English. How a kid of his size could know such hard English was a mystery to us. Usually those of us who came from rich families read comics and stuff and learnt good English. Rashed didn't look like one of those kids; his father was a carpenter or an electrician- definitely not a rich person. Rashed told us himself one day- since his father didn't know English, Rashed would sometimes read and explain English newspapers to him. He would use a dictionary and spell words out and then somehow he ended up learning English! He could easily say hard things like, 'freedom of speech,' and 'economic repression,' in English.

There were other surprising things about Rashed as well. Anybody could say anything to him and he would never get angry. On his first day at school, Fazlu made a poem out of him:

Daddy's Laddu,
In a test gaddu,
Totally faddu.

Not exactly an amazing poem. But if your name was Laddu and you had to hear the poem every thirty seconds, then you definitely might get a little annoyed. But not Rashed. Every time Fazlu said the poem, Rashed would laugh like crazy, as if it was the funniest thing he'd ever heard in his life. Fazlu tried for a morning then gave up. If somebody wouldn't get mad when you tried to annoy him, then why waste your time?

You could say whatever you liked to Rashed but you couldn't ever touch him. He wouldn't really mind if anybody gave him a little push or something while fooling around, but if anybody ever pushed or shoved him when they were angry, he would turn around straight away and shove him back twice as hard. He'd do it with us all the time, but one day he did it to Kader. Kader was our class bully. He had failed so many times that now he was in our class, otherwise he probably would have been in college by now. He was the only boy in our class who would go to get his beard shaved off at a barber's. Not only his beard, he also shaved his armpits. We never bothered Kader. Sometimes he would come up from behind and slap our heads and swear at us, and we would just take it quietly. One day for no reason he pushed Rashed in the chest and said, "Hey Faddu, I'll smash you to a pulp."

Rashed turned at once and shoved Kader with all his might. "My name isn't Faddu."

Kader never imagined that somebody from this class would ever dare to touch him. Caught unprepared, he lost his balance, fell over a bench and tumbled to the ground. It took him a few seconds to understand what had happened. When he finally did understand, he got up with eyes red and angry like a mad pig's, and he would have torn Rashed apart if the Math Sir hadn't come in then.

At tiffin break Kader held Rashed against the wall and said, "Hey Faddu—"

"My name is not Faddu."

"Messing around with me? I'll stab your guts out!"

Even in that position, Rashed laughed and said, "Go ahead and try!"

Kader took this as humiliation and slapped Rashed with the back of his hand. More of an attempt to humiliate Rashed than to really hurt him.

Immediately Rashed's foot came up like a spring. Lightning-fast, he kicked Kader in the stomach so hard that Kader let go of him and sat down.

At this point, you were supposed to run away, but Rashed didn't even try. Instead he went to Kader and started to lecture like an adult, "Fighting is not right. Fighting does not solve any problems—"

This was the last straw for Kader. Getting up with a scream, he jumped on Rashed like a tiger. Kader was a head taller than Rashed, weighed twice as much, and was at least one and a half times older. Kader could pass as a real thug, and in comparison Rashed was just a little kid. It looked as if Rashed wouldn't stand a chance in a fight with Kader. But when fighting, more important than physical strength was courage. Rashed didn't lack in courage at all. In fact he even didn't look the slightest bit scared. If he wanted to, Kader could squash him to a pulp, but Rashed didn't know that. Every time he took a punch, he'd give one straight back. Kader even had to back away once or twice when he got hit badly. But Rashed got beaten up too badly for words.

At school little scuffles happened all the time, but real big fighting didn't occur too often. When a real fight started we would try to fix things ourselves. If things would get really bad we might have to call a teacher. That day if it had gotten a little worse we

would have had to do that, but we managed to pull Kader and Rashed apart. Quite a few people had to hold Kader back, he was huffing and wheezing in anger like a mad bull. Rashed was a different matter, he spit out some blood and said calmly, as if nothing had happened, "Fighting is not right. If you really have to fight, then you should fight with someone your own size. If an elephant-sized guy like you wants to fight, you should find another elephant-sized guy. Not me. It's a shame."

We had thought that the matter wouldn't go to the teachers, but somehow the headmaster found out about it. He sent for the two of them. We hung around outside his room and tried to figure out what was going on inside.

The headmaster had two canes. Apparently one was from India, it was called "Shillong especial". The other one was from the Garo hills and it was called "Garo especial." The school's bearer, Kalipod, oiled them up with turpentine oil every Friday. If anybody fought, the headmaster would first give them both a beating with the Shillong especial. Then he would listen to what they had to say. Whoever was at fault got the Garo especial. We had been pretty sure that Kader would get a double-dose of the Garo especial that day, but he came out of the headmaster's room smiling and happy. He hadn't gotten the Garo especial. Rashed had refused to say a word to the headmaster. If Rashed had told the absolute truth, Kader would have been in big trouble. Everyone at school knew Kader. The headmaster probably just waited for the opportunity to beat him.

In the evening, Rashed's face swelled up pretty badly. He pressed his face here and there and asked me, "Hey Ibu, does it show?"

"Yeah."

"Does it really show?"

"Yeah."

"Oh. This is too bad. This is really too bad."

"What is?"

"The way my face has swollen up."

"If you get into fights like a dummy, of course that's what's going to happen. Are you going to get into trouble at home?"

"No no, why should I get into trouble?"

"So then?"

Rashed pursed his lips for a few seconds then said, "I hope Kader doesn't have any problems."

"Kader? Why would Kader have problems?"

"Kachu Bhai really has a temper."

"Kachu Bhai? Who's that?"

"He lives in our neighborhood. Thirty-six inch chest. The thugs from the N.F.S.7 once tried to stab him in the stomach – and the knife just slipped away. He eats four raw eggs every morning."

"Are you friends with him?"

"We live in the same area, of course we're friends. He really likes me – 'cause I give him all the news about politics."

Rashed looked so worried that I got scared.

The next day Kader didn't come to school. Kader didn't exactly come to school all that regularly anyway so nobody thought too much about it. But Rashed looked very

worried. When Kader didn't come the next day either, Rashed got even more worried. That was when we all began to get scared. I asked Rashed, "What happened to Kader?"

"I dunno."

"Didn't you ask your Kachu Bhai?"

"Yeah. He won't tell me anything."

"What do you think? Do you think he killed Kader?"

Instead of laughing this off, Rashed said seriously, "Can't say anything. Kachu Bhai is really hot-headed."

"Did you tell Kachu Bhai about Kader?"

"I didn't want to, but he made me." Rashed sat there looking worried.

We got chills up our spine. What a terrible thing! Did Kader get murdered because he beat up Rashed? We all sat around together, not being able to concentrate on our classes. What would happen when the police came? How was Kader murdered? Where had Rashed's Kachu Bhai dumped the dead body? Kachu Bhai who eats four raw eggs every morning.

But the next day Kader came back to school. At the beginning we didn't recognize him. Kader used to have very fashionable hair. Between classes he would very seriously comb it. The hair on top of his forehead used to stick up straight like a pine tree. But not any more. His head was bald and shining like a ball. We were shocked. You wouldn't ever believe that Kader would shave off all his hair unless you saw it with your own eyes.

Fazlu raised his eyebrows and asked, "Your-your hair?"

Kader said heavily, "Shut up, shala8."

Fazlu didn't have the guts to say any more. I said softly, "We thought you had been murdered."

Kader gave me a poisonous look and snarled, "Say one more word and I'll murder you."

Dilip asked, "Why'd you shave off all your hair? Is your father okay?"

"Shut up shala malaun9."

Rashed said, "You're lucky it just went over the top of your head. Kachu Bhai really has a temper."

Kader started to say something, then stopped. He looked at Rashed the same way somebody who is scared of leeches would look at a leech hanging off his leg. There were both fear and disgust in his eyes. He obviously didn't even want to touch Rashed.

After that Kader never bothered Rashed or us again.

3.

On Thursday afternoon after school I asked Rashed, "Want to come to our neighborhood?"

"What's in your neighborhood?"

"We're there."

"Who?"

"Me, Fazlu, Dilip. Ashraf's there too."

Fazlu reminded, "And Kader."

I laughed and said, "Kader's never going to come near you again!"

Rashed nodded and said, "That's true."

I asked again, "Want to come?"

"What do you guys do?"

"We play."

"What do you play?"

"We play robbers. There's a factory and we play in that too."

"Factory? What factory?"

I said seriously, "We haven't decided yet. Cars or medicine. But for now all we make is biscuits."

Rashed said in surprise, "You guys can make biscuits? How do you make them? Play biscuits?"

"No, no. Real ones."

Dilip made a face and said, "Biscuits or junk! You mix sugar with wheat and heat it on a stove and you think you get biscuits?"

I said, "Is everything going to happen at once? These things take time."

Dilip made a face again and said, "Tastes like sweet bread! Yuck!"

Fazlu had once eaten all the biscuits himself. He got angry at Dilip and said, "What do you mean, 'yuck'? Have you ever eaten one?"

"Soft and mushy like bread. Dirty black--"

I stopped him and suggested, "Next time we have to use baking soda. If we use baking soda they'll be crunchy."

Fazlu added, "We have to use flour instead of wheat. Then they'll look nice."

Dilip was still making a face. He shook his head and went on, "Smell like kerosene--"

Annoyed, Fazlu said, "Would you be quiet? Always criticizing everything."

Even after Dilip's criticism, Rashed was very enthusiastic about making biscuits. He said, "If you can really make good biscuits, it would be very useful. Wouldn't it?"

"How?"

"All the poor kids in the country can eat them for breakfast."

Then we remembered that Rashed was a political character. He always thought about the people of the country. So we also nodded seriously and agreed, "That's true."

Fazlu, a little too serious, said, "Then we should make medicine. People need medicine. Nothing's going to happen if you don't eat biscuits. But if you get sick then you need medicine."

Dilip, as usual, made a face and asked, "You guys will make medicine? You guys?"

"What's wrong with that?"

"Medicine for what?"

"Fever, cough, and runny nose. And headaches."

Fazlu added, "And upset stomachs."

"How will you make it?"

I said solemnly, "We'll ask Shafiq Bhai. He'll tell us."

Dilip became quiet. There was nothing Shafiq Bhai couldn't do, so what choice did Dilip have other than to stop talking? Shafiq Bhai lived in our neighborhood. He was in college, I. Sc. or B.Sc. or something. Whenever we needed anything, we would go to Shafiq Bhai. He always arranged something for us. When we had done a play Shafiq Bhai had made us the masks (Man, that was a great play!) When we had opened a circus Shafiq Bhai had painted our cat and made it into a tiger (it was an absolutely real tiger, if

only it wouldn't go 'meow'). When we made a laboratory Shafiq Bhai had gotten us magnets and litmus paper (we did so many science experiments then!).

Dilip said, "Let's go to Shafiq Bhai."

"Let's go."

We headed for Shafiq Bhai's house.

Shafiq Bhai was standing near his house's wall and talking with Aru Apa¹⁰. Aru Apa studied for her I.A. or her B.A. or something at the local women's college. She lived next door to Shafiq Bhai. I've noticed before that the two of them really like to talk to each other. When she saw us, Aru Apa said wide-eyed, "Oh look! It's the losers' team!"

We pretended we hadn't heard her and walked on. The last time we had had a football team, Aru Apa had stayed up late at night and made us jerseys. Every team scored so many goals against us, we became known as the losers' team. So we stopped playing football. Aru Apa reminded us about that whenever she saw us. She called from behind us, "How long till you set a world record for losing goals?"

I said seriously, "Stop fooling around, Aru Apa."

"When did I fool around? I went through so much trouble to make you those jerseys and then you go and lose every game? Did you ever score a goal? Ever?"

Shafiq Bhai rescued us. He said, "Why are you bothering them so much Aru? They didn't score goals this time so they will next time. It's not their fault that the other teams foul so much."

We nodded our heads vigorously. Shafiq Bhai looked at us and asked, "What's up with you? Where are you going?"

"We came to see you."

Fazlu added, "For a special reason."

Dilip looked at Aru Apa out of the corner of his eyes and said, "For a secret special reason."

Aru Apa raised her eyebrows at us. "That means you won't say it in front of me?"

We shook our heads no.

Shafiq Bhai told us, "Come inside then."

We followed Shafiq Bhai into his house. Aru Apa called from behind us, "Next time don't come to me for the losers' team's jerseys! Or I'll break your heads!"

That probably wasn't the best thing to do, but what else could be done?

Shafiq Bhai lived in his uncle's house. Not a close uncle, some kind of a distant relative. Shafiq Bhai had fixed up a little room for himself near the front of the house. We went to the room and explained the whole matter of opening a medicine factory for the good of the country. Shafiq Bhai listened to us seriously. I could bet on it that if Aru Apa was here, she'd laugh and joke about it and make fun of us.

Fazlu said, "Shafiq Bhai, you have to tell us how to make medicine."

"Of course." Shafiq Bhai nodded. "But I've never made medicine before. I'll need to look into a couple of books first."

"Then do that."

"I will. When I find out how to do it I'll let you know. What kind of medicine do you want to make? Homeopathic or allopathic?"

I scratched my head. "Which one's better?"

Fazlu said, "Homeopathic tastes better."

Dilip said, "But allopathic is more useful."

"Then let's go with allopathic."

Shafiq Bhai asked, "Tablets or capsules?"

We looked at one another. Dilip asked, "Which one's easier?"

"I think tablets."

"We'll start with that then."

"All right."

We talked over some of the details for awhile with Shafiq Bhai. We were about to leave when he said suddenly, "The country is in a bad state, you know that?"

Before we could say anything, Rashed replied, "I know."

"What do you know?"

"Yahiya Khan¹¹ has closed down the National Assembly. West Pakistan won't give the Bengalis power."

Shafiq Bhai looked at Rashed in surprise. So did we. Rashed was talking totally like an adult. Shafiq Bhai said, "How do you know that the Bengalis won't come into power?"

"West Pakistan survives by exploiting us. If we get power then they won't be able to exploit us anymore."

I think Shafiq Bhai got even more surprised then. He said, "I don't think I've seen you before."

I informed him, "He's new in our class."

"What's your name?"

"Rashed Hasan."

I said, "Before his name was Laddu."

"Laddu?"

Rashed laughed a little and said, "Now my name is Rashed."

"Rashed, it looks like you keep up with all the news."

I said, "Yes, Rashed always talks about politics with his father."

Shafiq Bhai asked again, "If Sheikh Mujib¹² doesn't come into power, then what do you think will happen?"

"Civil war."

Fazlu chuckled and quipped, "What's civil war*? A fight inside the house? Mom against Dad?"

"No, silly," Shafiq Bhai said, "Civil war is when a war happens inside a country. If East Pakistan fights with West Pakistan, then that's a civil war."

Dilip asked fearfully, "Will there really be a civil war?"

Shafiq Bhai said slowly, "I think there will. I think West Pakistan will never let Sheikh Mujib come into power – even though Sheikh Mujib got more seats, they still won't let him come into power – because then they won't have the power to themselves anymore. But the Bengalis won't take that lying down. They won't take that at all."

"What will they do?"

"They'll protest. Actually movements have already started. Non-cooperation movements. Pray that they work. That they give up the power."

Rashed shook his head. "They won't. Not for anything."

We left Shafiq Bhai's house very seriously. There were such serious problems ahead for the country, it wouldn't do for us to laugh and joke now. We walked till we came near our house. In front of the house the wall's paint was peeling off. We climbed the wall, stepping in the little holes here and there, and sat on top of it with our legs swinging. We were sitting and thinking about the country when Ashraf came by with a bat and a ball. A few other kids came out from the nearby houses. Then we started a cricket match in the field, and forgot about the country and its problems pretty soon.

As evening came along Rashed said he had to go. Rashed was hopeless at cricket. He couldn't bowl or bat, and even while fielding he would stand there and think about things only he knew about. The ball would go right through his hands without him even realizing he had to catch it.

I asked Rashed, "Where do you live?"

"Very far away. Near the bridge."

"Then go. It'll become dark by the time you get home."

"I'm not going home for a long time yet."

"Where're you going to go?"

"There's a torch procession at night."

"You're going on a torch procession?"

"Yeah. Since I'm young they don't want to give me torches, so I have to go early and talk them into it."

Fazlu narrowed his eyes and said, "Oh! If only I could go with you!"

Rashed replied, "If you want to then come along."

Fazlu sighed deeply.

Dilip said, "Fazlu, going on a torch procession? That'll be the day! Won't his father beat the hell out of him?"

Fazlu nodded sadly.

Ashraf said solemnly, "You shouldn't take part in processions until you grown up. Political parties will take you down the wrong path."

Again Rashed talked like an adult. "You have to get on the path first before you can decide which path is right and which one is wrong."

Before leaving Rashed left his schoolbooks with me to take to school the next day. Ashraf went home with his bat and ball, and Dilip and Fazlu left as well. The others had already gone. I sat alone in the field for awhile, then headed home. Shafiq Bhai's room was dark, which meant he wasn't home. Who knows, maybe he had gone on a torch procession like Rashed. At Aru Apa's house I saw Aru Apa and her mother standing on the veranda and talking. When Aru Apa saw me she called, "Hey Ibu, where are you going now with your books?"

"They aren't mine."

"Whose are they?"

"Rashed's. He went on a torch procession so he left them with me."

"What are you talking about? Such a little kid on a torch procession?"

"Yes."

"When he goes home won't his father beat him up?"

"No. Rashed and his father are very good friends."

"Sounds like fun! It wouldn't be too bad, having a father like that, what do you say?"

"Rashed said his father is sort of the crazy type."

“What do you mean, ‘sort of’? I’d say completely, if he sends such a little kid on a torch procession.”

I was leaving when Aru Apa called again, “Hey Ibu, want a candy?”

I softened a bit at the offer of candy. Aru Apa wasn’t a bad person, but I thought she was a little nuts. When I went to the veranda she thrust some candy into my hand and said, “Try them, they’re really good.”

Aru Apa’s mother inquired, “How is your mother, Ibu?”

“Yes, Auntie.”

“Tell her to come over one day. I don’t find the time to get out of the house these days.”

“I’ll tell her, Auntie.”

Aru Apa said to, “Let me ask you something, will you give me an honest answer?”

I started to sweat; here went Aru Apa’s teasing. I asked fearfully, “What?”

“Do you like me?”

I swallowed and answered, “Yes.”

“Will you marry me?”

“Get out of here! Always joking.”

“When did I joke? I’m seriously asking you. Will you? I’ll cook for you. When you grow old I’ll pick out your gray hairs for you. Will you?”

“Cut it out.”

Aru Apa’s mother said, “Why are you bothering the boy?”

“Who said I’m bothering him? Your son-in-law, Mother, see if you like him. You have to cook fish heads for him. Ibu, you do eat fish heads, don’t you?”

“Oh Aru Apa, you and your teasing.”

“You’ll see, I’ll take care of you very well. I’ll get you candy every day. Will you marry me?”

Aru Apa’s mother smothered a laugh and said, “Why are you bothering Ibu? Let him go. It’s getting dark.”

After Auntie went in Aru Apa started having even more fun. She brought her head down near my face and said, “Look - look at my face. Do I have an ugly face?”

“Why would you have an ugly face?”

“Then? Why don’t you agree?”

“As if you’re really going to marry me!”

“Why not I?”

“You’re so old and I’m so young. Besides—”

“Besides what?”

“Besides, I know who you’re going to marry”

“Who?”

“Shafiq Bhai.”

Aru Apa jumped up and looked around. Then she grabbed me by the hair and hissed, “If you ever dare tell anybody I’ll absolutely break your head.”

“All right I won’t. But tell me, I’m right, aren’t I?”

“Quiet! Be quiet you naughty little rascal.”

I gave a toothy grin. Finally I had found something to use to get even with Aru Apa.

At night a torch procession went by very close to our house. There were thousands and thousands of people, looking eerie with their torches. I looked for Rashed for a long time but I couldn't find him. It's not like I was supposed to find him in such a crowd.

Even after the procession left the slogans rang in my ears. There were a lot of slogans, among which one was very nice, "My *desh*¹³, *pur* *desh*, Bangladesh, Bangladesh!" Not bad. If we became separate from Pakistan and named our country Bangladesh. What a beautiful name, Bangladesh! A country of our very own.

4.

Sometime in the middle of March Rashed brought a flag of independent Bangladesh. It was a dark green flag, with a red circle in the middle. In the middle of the circle was something yellow. I couldn't quite tell what it was.

Fati asked, "What's the yellow thing? Looks like a bird."

"No, dummy" Rashed said with a laugh. "Why should it be a bird? It's a map of independent Bangladesh."

We looked at it again carefully. Once Rashed had pointed it out to us, it really did begin to look like a map.

Rashed said, "The person who made the map didn't do it right. It was supposed to be golden. Golden Bengal you know."

We stared at the flag in awe. It was an awesome flag, holding it in our hands we felt a kind of excitement. Our very own flag! I asked Rashed, "Where'd you get this?"

Instead of replying, Rashed laughed mysteriously and said, "Hee hee I have everything!"

"This is going to be our free country's flag?"

"Yes."

We stared open-mouthed in astonishment at the flag. We just couldn't believe that we would really have our free country. We would have our own separate flag! In Urdu class we wouldn't have to read out lines like, *ek kitta mati mai lata hai*¹⁴. anymore!

Then there was a lot of excitement everywhere. Non-cooperation movements were going on all the time. At the beginning I didn't quite understand what that meant, but Rashed explained it to me.

On the third of March there was supposed to be a meeting of the National Assembly. On the first Yahya Khan stopped that. *Bhutto*¹⁵ and Yahya Khan were the best of friends, and whatever he said happened. The National Assembly meeting was supposed to have drafted the constitution of the country. Now that wouldn't happen. Sheikh Mujib called a non-cooperation movement. They were called non-cooperation movements because no one would cooperate with the Pakistani government anymore. Now the country was running on Sheikh Mujib's orders.

We were speechless with excitement. I asked, "That's what's going on in the country?"

"Yeah. Now *Bangabandhu*¹⁶'s seeing—"

"*Bangabandhu*? Whos that?"

Rashed laughed and said, "You guys don't know anything! Now everyone calls Sheikh Mujib *Bangabandhu*"

We said the word a couple of times, it was a little too deep, but it sounded very nice.

"Whats Bangabandhu seeing?"

"He's seeing what Yahya Khan is doing. If he sees that Yahya Khan doesn't want to give up power then he'll kick him out. We'll become liberated Bangladesh immediately"

I never used to read newspapers before. These days I read them with interest. It took a day for newspapers to come from Dhaka to our little town, but the news was always hot. It seemed as if there were processions and shootings happening everyday in Dhaka. One or two people were dying everyday from bullet wounds. We were hoping that within a couple of days Bangabandhu would kick the Pakistanis out of the country and we would have our independent Bangladesh.

Then one day Rashed brought some bad news. Apparently Pakistans military president Yahya Khan had come to meet Bangabandhu and he had brought Zulfikar Ali Bhutto with him. They might give Bangabandhu power and the National Assembly would start again.

"Oh, no!" Faiz said, his face dark. "Then we won't get our independent Bangladesh?"

Rashed answered solemnly "If they really do give up the power then how will we?"

"Independent Bangladeshs beautiful flag—"

Rashed scratched his head and said, "But they're real bastards. Remember what they did in November when there was that cyclone?"

"What did they do?"

"A couple of hundred thousand people died in the cyclone and that bastard Yahya Khan didn't even go to see! He went to China then went straight back to his own country"

"Really?"

"Then *Maulana Bhashani*¹⁷ really yelled at him, remember?"

We didn't know about this but nodded seriously anyway

Rashed said seriously, "What Maulana Bhashani said was right."

"What did he say?"

"He said, some have six points, some have eleven points, but I have only one point— this nation must be free.

Faiz's eyes shining, clapped his hands and exclaimed, "Then nobody can stop independent Bangladesh!"

"Why not?"

"Don't you know Maulana Bhashani has pet genies?"

"Genies?"

"Yeah." Faiz nodded. "They bring him all the news."

"News of what?"

"Whats going to happen in the future. Genies know everything from before. They must have told Maulana Bhashani that Bangladesh will be liberated! What Maulana Bhashani says is never wrong—"

Dilip, a little startled, asked, "Whats a genie?"

"Don't you know what a genie is? Haven't you ever heard of genies and ghosts and stuff like that?"

"Well, yeah, but what are genies like?"

Faiz thought about it for a while then replied, "I think genies are Muslim ghosts."

Dilip asked fearfully "Ghosts can be Hindu or Muslim?"

"I think so."

"Do they have riots? Killings?"

Faiz scratched his head and replied, "I guess so."

"Do ghosts die then?"

Fatma really began to look worried. He thought about it for a long time then said, "If they have killings then I guess they must die."

"People die and become ghosts. What do ghosts become when they die?"

Fatma suddenly got angry "Would you shut up now?"

Dilip didn't want to shut up, but right then we heard slogans, a big procession was heading our way. There was a huge independent Bangladesh flag at the front, and the slogan was, "Joy Bangla!" This was a new slogan, we had never heard it before. One person said the first part, then everybody else said the second part. Like 'Yahya as skin', 'Pull it off clean' and 'Mydesh and your desh', 'Bangladesh Bangladesh.', But this only had one part. One person said 'Joy Bangla' then everybody else said, 'Joy Bangla.' It was an awesome slogan. Saying it made us think the country really was becoming liberated!

This time, we too followed Rashed with the procession, shouting 'Joy Bangla' at the top of our lungs. When we came near the market, Rashed pointed out Ahsan Manil to us. From the second floor, somebody was peeking out through a gap in the curtain.

"Who's that?"

"I'm sure it's Araf Ali."

"How do you know?"

"Who else would it be? See he doesn't have the guts to stand out in the open and watch. He's peeking through the curtain like that."

"Why doesn't he?"

"Such a huge procession, how would he have the guts? Don't you know Araf Ali has three wives?"

"What happens if you have three wives?"

Rashed got very annoyed. He said, "You guys don't know anything. If you have three wives you're an illiterate fanatic. All the fanatics, *Jamate Islamis*¹⁸, *Nejami Islamis*¹⁹, they're all on Pakistan's side. Don't you know that?"

"Oh."

We had walked along with the procession up to Khan Bahadr's house when Rashed stopped again.

I asked, "What is it?"

"I bet Khan Bahadr's hiding and watching."

"Watching what?"

"The procession. He was a Pakistani minister - he can't stand the idea of liberated Bangladesh. If you go and whisper, 'Joy Bangla' in his ear, he gets so mad all his hair and his beard stand up straight."

We left the procession and stood there with Rashed. When the procession had left we saw Khan Bahadr slowly come out of his house and stand on the veranda. Rashed was right, he was glowering in anger. It looked as if he would eat the whole procession raw if he could.

Fatma said, "Can I throw a rock at him?"

"Oof! Why would you do that?"

We stood around in front of Khan Bahadr's house for a while then headed home.

The next couple of days were very tense. If Yahya Khan and Bhutto really gave Bangladesh all of Pakistan's power, then Bangladesh would not be liberated. It would stay as

Pakistan. But Rashed kept insisting that would not happen. Yahya Khan was a scoundrel, but Bhutto was a hundred times worse. The whole thing was just a ploy - they actually had some other intention. They would never give the Bengalis power. We were hoping that was true, that the meeting would break up and Bangabandhu would kick Yahya Khan and Bhutto's butts, get out of here! Go and stick your thumbs in Pakistan - from now on it's our independent Bangladesh.

Nevertheless in our little town Bangladesh was already independent. There was a liberated Bangladeshi flag in every house and every store. I would see pictures of Bangabandhu wherever I went. Bangabandhu's speech could be heard everywhere - "This time the battle is the battle for freedom." We were all hoping for just one announcement, and then we would be independent Bangladesh for good. No more studying Urdu at school.

On the 25th of March I woke up in the middle of the night. There was a lot of yelling and shouting everywhere, people were running around in the house and something was being announced on a mike outside. I got out of bed and went to stand in the veranda. Mother and Father were standing there in the dark. I asked fearfully "What happened Father?"

He didn't reply I asked again, "What happened?"

He said slowly "War has started, my boy. The military have attacked Dhaka, thousands of people are thought to be dead. Now they are fighting."

"Who's fighting?"

"The Bengalis. Police. E.P.R. Students."

A man on a rickshaw went by shouting excitedly over a mike, "Hear, all! A liberation war has started all over the country! The Pakistani military have attacked the innocent Bengalis with all their forces! Thousands of dead bodies now lie on the streets of Dhaka! The brave police and E.P.R are trying with all their might to defend our country from the wrath of the Pakistani military! There is war all over the country Liberation war!"

The man's voice slowly faded away

Once they had woken up everyone went to stand outside. The streets were crowded with people. I had a strange feeling in my stomach. Fear, terror, excitement and with all that, a strange sense of joy

Bangladesh would be liberated!

5.

I barely got any sleep at night, and I woke up very early in the morning. Everyone was sitting in front of the radio, their faces dark. First Yahya Khan gave a speech. It was in English so I didn't understand anything. The way Father kept shaking his head told me it must be something pretty bad. Mother asked, "What's he saying?"

"He said it's all Sheikh Mujib's fault. The country was about to be destroyed, but somehow we saved it. He has to be gravely punished."

"Where is Sheikh Mujib now?"

"He said that he's been arrested. Who knows what's true and what's not."

Mother sat there pale-faced. After Yahya Khan's speech somebody began to give an announcement. There was a curfew at the time, if anybody went out they'd be shot, etc. etc. Usually the people who talk on the radio talk very nicely, but this time it sounded

as if they had brought the guy from a jungle or something – his pronunciation was so bad I could have thrown up. Annoyed, Father said, “Turn off the radio will you? Turn it off!”

I jumped forward and turned it off.

I went outside and found that there weren't too many people out. The people who were there were all standing around radios here and there, trying to listen to BBC and Radio Australia. Since I didn't understand English, I wandered around for awhile then sat on the wall, my legs swinging. A little while later a procession came by. In processions the people usually walk, but in this one they were practically running. This must be what they call fierce processions. Near the end of the procession were young boys, holding rifles, bullet belts hanging from their waists. How did these boys get rifles and guns so fast? Would there really be a war now? The thing they call civil war? I was trembling in excitement.

How the day went by I don't know. Just rumors and rumors. Nobody knew what exactly was going on, everybody had a different rumor. Once we heard that tremendous fighting was going on, and the Pakistanis were almost surrendering. Another time we heard that the Pakistanis had taken over Dhaka city, and there were thousands of dead bodies lying everywhere. We had no way of knowing what was true and what wasn't. They didn't say anything on the radio, *Akashbani*²⁰ Calcutta stopped all other programs and just kept playing the song '*Amar Shonar Bangla*²¹.' I didn't think the outside world knew anything either.

The day somehow went by like that. At night there were some new rumors – some were good, some were bad. We couldn't tell which one to believe. At night someone from BBC said that the situation in Dhaka was very bad. They were killing everybody – students, teachers, ordinary people. No one knew the exact number but a horrifying massacre had taken place.

The next afternoon an unbelievable thing happened. Suddenly from the Chittagong radio station somebody called Major *Ziaur Rahman*²² announced that Bangabandhu was fine. With him as leader, Bangladesh's liberation had been declared. Now the liberation war was going on. There was nothing left to fear.

We all screamed in joy the moment we heard this. It meant the Pakistanis weren't just killing away. Our army was fighting back. We breathed heavily in excitement. Who would win the war? Who?

We were bursting with pride for the person called Major Ziaur Rahman. He spoke about Bangabandhu over and over. Surely then the Pakistani's couldn't have arrested Bangabandhu. Bangabandhu himself had told everyone how to fight. Then what was there to fear?

The week passed away day by day. Slowly we were getting all the news. The first bit of news was the worst: the Pakistanis really had arrested Bangabandhu. The other news wasn't good either. On the 25th of March in Dhaka thousands and thousands of people had been killed. The war that had started died down significantly. While Yahyia Khan and Bhutto were pretending to talk with Bangabandhu, then thousands of Pakistani forces were airlifted in. Then after cold calculation they attacked. Since they didn't let Bengali forces keep any weapons, the police had done most of the fighting in Rajarbag. Hundreds of thousands of people were fleeing Bangladesh to go to India. All of the countries of the world were observing the situation with interest but none of them were

making any moves to stop Pakistan. The Pakistanis were just ruthlessly killing people and killing people.

At the beginning, our town had a vibrant excitement, but now the excitement had been replaced with a kind of fear. At school a training center had been opened for freedom fighters, and boys would train from there. Now that had closed down. The leaders, the ones who used to give speeches with voices that trembled with enthusiasm, were nowhere to be seen. Apparently everyone had gone underground! There were no police in town. One day right in the middle of the afternoon a huge robbery took place. From home we could hear the sounds of shooting. All together, throughout the whole town was a feeling of terror.

The Pakistani army took over the large cities. They would come to our little town any day now. Everyone began to leave the town and head for their villages. I asked Father one day, "Everyone is leaving for their villages?"

He didn't say anything.

"Will we go too?"

He gave a deep sigh and said, "Where will we go?"

"Village home."

He laughed weakly and said, "Now is there anything left of the roads? Is there any way to go? Haven't you heard what state the country is in?"

One day Dilip's father came to our house late at night. Dilip's dad taught with Father in college, and we called him Uncle. Normally Dilip's father was very handsome. Once when there was a play he acted as *Siraj-ud-dullah*²³, and he looked as if he was really a king! But now he looked a little weird. His hair was messy. He had stubble, red eyes – it looked as if he hadn't slept for a couple of days. He told Father, "Aziz, we're leaving tomorrow."

Father said, "Really?"

"Yes. From what we're hearing, we can't stay here anymore."

Father nodded.

Uncle continued, "There's no guarantee on anyone's life anymore. If you're Hindu or Awami League then you don't stand a chance. How can I take such a risk with my children?"

Father asked, "How will you go?"

"By bus up to the river. Then we'll cross the river by boat and walk from there."

"How long will it take to reach the border?"

"I don't know for sure. A week to ten days."

"Ten days?"

Uncle said, pale faced, "What will happen to my little boys and girls, only God knows."

Father told him, "You go, who knows, maybe we'll have to come after you."

Uncle lowered his voice and said, "I'm not telling anybody. You're the only person I told. Keep an eye on the house if you can."

Father shook his head. "I'll keep an eye on it?"

Uncle shook his head and tried to laugh. "I know we'll lose it all. I'll be happy if we just survive."

After he had given Father all the papers and stuff, Uncle embraced Father and almost began to cry. He said in a broken voice, "Please pray for my children."

"I will. Have faith in God. God will not tolerate such injustice."

When Uncle was leaving Father asked again, "When will you leave tomorrow?"

"Morning. Early morning."

I had thought I would wake up very early. But somehow it got late. I jumped up. Had Dilip and all left by then? I got out of bed and ran for their house without washing up or anything. How would it be if they left without me seeing them even once?

When I got there I saw they hadn't left yet – everyone was outside, and there were two rickshaws in front of the house. They would be leaving right then. When Dilip saw me he ran to me. His eyes were red. He wiped his nose, face and mouth with his sleeve and said, "We're becoming refugees."

"Refugees?"

"Yes. People who don't have any home are called refugees."

"Your home is right here."

"A little later it won't be our home anymore. We'll have to sleep on the streets. And live on *chira*²⁴."

"Chira?"

"Yes. Only chira." Dilip looked bewildered. He suddenly began to cry again. He said, "I don't want to go. I don't want to go to India."

I didn't know what to say. Suddenly tears came to my eyes. Dilip tried desperately to stop crying and said, "The military kill everybody who's Hindu. Now where will we stay?"

I told him, "When the country is liberated there won't be any Hindu-Muslim."

"By then we'll be dead and gone."

"Why?"

"Because we're Hindu. If they stop us on the street then we'll say we're Muslim. Dad fixed names for all of us. Muslim names. I picked mine myself."

"What is it?"

"Rakibul Hasan."

I looked at Dilip. My real name was Rakibul Hasan. Nobody remembers my real name since everyone calls me Ibu. But Dilip remembered.

Suddenly Dilip put his arms around me and burst into tears. He sobbed, "I don't want to die. I really don't want to die."

"Why should you die? Oof!"

"I know we'll all die. All of us. The military will kill everybody. The military will kill us all. They'll kill all of us then they'll kill you too. They killed my uncle. There was Shonjoy *Da*²⁵ and they killed him too. I know they'll kill us all."

Dilip kept sobbing. Dilip's father came and took his hand and led him away. Auntie came and patted me on the head and held me against her for a moment. She looked different for some reason. I couldn't understand why. Dilip's sister Shipra-dee²⁶ was wearing a sari that day. She looked at me and tried to smile. Then wordlessly they all got into the rickshaws. They weren't carrying too many things, just a few small bags. A bottle of water. Dilip was tightly clutching a book. I wondered what book it was.

As the rickshaw took off down the street I suddenly realized why Auntie had looked different. There wasn't any *shidur*²⁷ on her forehead. So that nobody would be able to tell she was Hindu.

Standing there on the street I told myself over and over not to cry, but then I cried anyway. Tears were running down my cheeks but I wasn't exactly sad. I felt a kind of rage – terrible rage. Terrible, terrible rage.

6.

The military came to our town on the 30th of April. By then the town was almost empty. There weren't too many people on the streets. Many of the stores were closed. The few people who were still left had fear written on their faces. A kind of suspicion and terror.

Father's face also began to look worried. When I wasn't around he would talk softly to Mother and shake his head. He had all kinds of worries about what would happen when the military arrived.

The day the military came was like any other day. Blue sky, clear day, warm breeze, dry dust flying around. Around eleven, a rumor spread that a military gunboat had come to the riverbank. Thousands of military were getting down from the gunboat, their faces like monsters.

I was kind of curious and wanted to see, but Father warned me seriously "Don't you dare leave the house."

So I didn't leave the house. I sat by the window and stared out at the street. The street was empty, there weren't any people. There wasn't even a rickshaw anywhere.

In the afternoon I saw Khan Bahadr walking down the road with two people. It looked like they were standing there waiting for a rickshaw, but where would they get a rickshaw now? After a while they started walking again. It looked like they were heading for the river. So Rashed had been right. They were genuine Pakistani collaborators. But I had to admit that Khan Bahadr had guts to go and see the monster-like Pakistani military.

After a while the sound of shooting suddenly started. It was coming from far away but there was no doubt that it was shooting. Then in the same way it had suddenly started, it suddenly stopped. After that there wasn't a sound.

Father closed all the doors and windows. We sat quietly inside the house. Father paced back and forth. Mother sat quietly, neither of them saying a word. There was a knot in my stomach, and every second seemed like an hour.

Around three somebody knocked on the door. Father fearfully opened the door to find Rashed standing there. Father asked in surprise, "What's this? What are you doing here?"

Rashed came in and said, "I'm very thirsty."

I brought him a glass of water. He downed the whole glass then looked at me and remarked, "It's so hot outside!"

Father questioned, "How could you leave the house on a day like this? Go home quickly!"

"I'm going."

"Won't they worry about you at home?"

"No."

Father looked in surprise first at Rashed, then at me. Rashed stared at the ground for a little while then suddenly looked up at me and said, "The military killed Khan Bahadr."

Father jumped in shock. Aghast, he said, "What? What did you say?"

Rashed looked down and said again, "The military killed Khan Bahadr."

"How do you know?"

"I saw."

This time Father absolutely jumped. "You saw?"

Rashed nodded.

"Where?"

"On the riverbank."

Father couldn't say anything for a while. He just stared at Rashed in astonishment. A little while later he calmed down enough to ask, "Why did you go to the riverbank?"

"To see the military"

"Were you alone?"

"Yes. I hid behind a coconut tree on the side of the road."

"You saw them kill Khan Shahib with your own eyes?"

"Yes." Rashed, face ashen, looked from Father to me back to Father again.

I asked, "Were you scared?"

"Yes."

"How did they kill him?"

"They shot him. Khan Shahib was walking along with two other people when two of the military stopped him. They talked about something with him, and then when Mr. Khan tried to walk past them, both of them lifted their guns and started to shoot him. The two other people tried to turn and run away but they got shot too."

"Did they die right then?"

"I don't know. Their three dead bodies were lying on the street, and the military people kicked them away to the side of the street."

Father, his face pale, asked, "You just saw all this with your own eyes?"

"Yes."

"You're so young... you saw this?"

Rashed nodded again. I saw that he was trembling slightly. He asked, "Can I sit here for a while?"

"Go ahead."

Rashed sat down quietly. The look in his eyes was a little strange. As if there was something he couldn't quite understand. He sat there for a long time then went away in the evening.

The military took a long time to come into town from the riverbank. First one team came crawling forward, aiming their guns. They came some distance then spread out and took their positions, guns aimed, and lay there while the next team came. When the next team came close the first team crawled forward again and took new positions. Then the second team came forward again. It looked as if they weren't taking any risks. In case anyone suddenly attacked them they would be ready. It took them two hours to come the two miles from the riverbank to the town. In this time they killed whomever they saw. They started with Khan Shahib and his companions, then they killed around ten more people on the streets. Some of them were going to the market, some were running away from the military some were just sitting on the street and resting, and some had gone to see the military out of curiosity. The military didn't let anybody go.

The military made their camp in our school. The scoundrels put up a huge disgusting Pakistani flag there.

At night every now and then the sound of shooting could be heard. We had no idea who was being shot, or why. We huddled together all night.

The next morning Rashed came again. Father said in surprise, "You went out again?"

Rashed nodded.

"Any news?"

"Yes. Araf Ali went to the military camp a little while ago."

"Who is Araf Ali?"

"Pakistani collaborator. Jamate Islami. Three wives."

I asked, "Didn't the military kill him?"

"No. He went with a big Pakistani flag. He was wearing a cap and shouting, Pakistan *Zindabad*²⁸. So the military didn't kill him."

I said, "They should have killed him."

Father looked at me with wonder.

The next day one after the other the houses in town were looted and set on fire. I sat at home and watched the smoke rising. I heard screams, not screams of terror but of joy. Dilips house was looted on Wednesday. In the afternoon Araf Ali came with two of the military and a few other people. All of them were wearing caps. These days wherever I looked I saw caps. First the two military circled the house a few times, then for no reason pushed at it here and there. Finally they kicked the front door open. Those guys were as strong as oxen.

First the two military went in, behind them Araf Ali. For a while noises came from inside the house, as if things were being broken. The two military and Araf Ali came out a little later. One of them was holding Dilips tape recorder - Dilips father had loved to listen to music. The other military guy had a box, I couldn't tell what was inside it. Araf Ali didn't have anything. He came out and declared to all the people standing there, "This malam has fled to India. Now his belongings are of *ganimot*²⁹. Now his belongings -"

Before he could finish the people in caps ran shouting into Dilips house. They piled things out of the house. I saw someone run away holding the wall clock under his arm. I'd seen the time so many times on that clock in Dilips house! A few people together piled out Dilips drum of rice. Some people were standing crowded together on the street. The military told them to loot the house as well. I didn't know whether they wanted to or not, but nobody had the guts to say no to the military so they fearfully entered the house. A little later I saw them too enthusiastically looting the house.

Mother watched through a gap in the curtain at the window. She said softly "How can you tolerate this God? How?"

A few days from evening. In the afternoon Rashed came. Father asked, "Do you have any news?"

"Yes."

"What news?"

"They burnt the MP's house."

"Where is the MP?"

"Underground. They didn't find him. They found his son-in-law and shot him dead. The dead body is still there."

"Oh."

"The bullet spins when it goes into the body"

"Is that so?"

"Yes. At the front there's a small hole, but at the back there's a huge one. Because the bullet spins as it goes through the body"

Father swallowed hard and said, "Oh."

Rashed nodded. "Yes. The bullets are made of lead. When they hit the body they fall apart. Because lead is soft."

"Oh."

"Up till now the military have killed about a hundred people. And captured around another hundred."

"Oh."

"They'll also kill the ones they captured."

"How do you know?"

"They give everybody a shovel to dig with. Each person will dig his own grave. Once they're done they stand next to the grave and get shot."

"How do you know?"

"I saw. You can see from the bushes next to the school."

Father just looked at Rashed in wonder. He asked, "Don't you get scared?"

"Yes. I can't sleep at night."

"Then?"

Rashed sat there quietly. Father said kindly "Go home Rashed. It's curfew a little later."

At night I heard Father saying softly to Mother, "I never imagined boys of 16's age would be able to talk so easily about killing people. Like it's so simple. Did you?"

Mother didn't reply. Father said again, "Why did this happen? Why?"

Mother still didn't reply.

"God what have you done to this country? What?"

I heard Mother crying softly. I had never seen my mother cry before. I felt as if my heart was breaking.

7.

One day Shafiq Bhai went to join the freedom fighters. But nobody knew that. If the news got out then Shafiq Bhai's uncle would be in big trouble. As far as everyone knew, Shafiq Bhai's father was not well, so he had gone home. But I knew the truth. I found out in a different way.

I had not seen Aru Apa in a long time. After the military had come to town there were never any young people on the streets. No boys, no girls. One day Mother sent me to Aru Apa's house for a book called *Khahnama*. That book told about dreams and their meanings. Mother had been having bad dreams for the past couple of days and wanted to know what they meant.

When she saw me Aru Apa called, "Well I but I haven't seen you in a while. Have you joined the *raj akar*³⁰s or something?"

"Raj akar? What's that supposed to mean?"

"You dont know? What planet are you on? Dont you know the military have formed a rajakar troop? Boarding, eating, looting are all free. At the end they pay wages. Give your name in—"

"Dont joke around with me!"

AruApa suddenly changed the topic and said, "Hey! but tell me the truth. Have I become as fat as a pig?"

I looked at her. Fat? She looked thinner.

"Why dont you say anything?"

"No AruApa. You havent become fat."

"I'm always hungry Got it? I want to eat whatever I see. That day I ate a whole banana tree."

"Get out of here! Since when do people eat banana trees?"

"You can! You can cook the pulp inside. If you marry me I'll cook it for you"

"Cut it out."

AruApa didnt bother me too much that day Suddenly she looked around then whispered to me, "Can you tell your Shafiq Bhai something for me?"

"What?"

"Tell him that today evening—" she stopped and said, "Better than that, let me write it down."

"Okay"

AruApa took out a piece of paper and began to write. I told her, "You could go to Shafiq Bhai yourself."

"Are you crazy? The place is crawling with military and I'm going to go out?"

I remembered that there werent any young people on the streets anymore. No boys and no girls. Only kids and old people.

I took AruApas letter and went to Shafiq Bhai's house. I kind of wanted to read what she had written, but it was wrong to read someone else's letter, so in the end I didnt. Shafiq Bhai never used to be home before, but these days people of his age stay at home twenty-four hours a day

Shafiq Bhai was sitting with his legs propped on a table and intently reading a small red prayer book. He had a stubble of a beard, pretty long. Looked as if he hadnt cut it in a while. When he saw me he asked, "Whats up, I bit?"

"AruApa sent a letter for you"

"Real I bit?"

He didnt look too enthusiastic, but I knew inside he was actually very eager. I handed over the letter. He put it in his pocket instead of reading it. I was sure he'd read it once I was gone. Shafiq Bhai asked, "How many *kalmas*³¹ do Muslims have?"

I answered, "Four."

"What are they?"

"Kalma Taiyeb. Kalma Shahadat. And -and—"

I couldn't remember any more. Shafiq Bhai pretended to be dumbfounded and shook his head. "Still don't know? You're in for a lot of trouble."

"What trouble?"

"When the military stop you first they ask, Bengali or *bihari*³²? If you say Bengali then sadly they kill you. If you're lucky and they dont kill you then they ask, Muslim or Hindu? If you say you're

Muslim, then they ask how many kalmas there are. If you can't say then it's either a bullet in the chest or a bayonet in the stomach."

"If I can?"

"Then they make you take your clothes off to see if you've been circumcised."

"Sick!"

"Why are you calling me sick? Call the Pakistanis that. Don't you see I'm keeping a beard?" He took out a cap from his pocket and put it on, then removed his glasses and said, "Now what do I look like?"

I laughed and said, "Like our school's bearer!"

"No silly I am Talebi Alem. Student of the *madrasah*³³. The military sometimes lets the madrasah students go."

"Why are you dressing up like this?"

Shafiq Bhai suddenly became serious. Absentmindedly he took out Aru Apa's letter from his pocket, stroked it a few times, then put it back. He muttered, "I have to get out of here."

"Where will you go? To become a freedom fighter?"

Shafiq Bhai quickly turned and looked at me. "Don't you dare tell anyone. If people find out it will be a disaster. All right?"

I nodded.

"The road I use probably won't have any military but I'm just getting prepared in case I get stopped. When it's a question of life or death you just don't take any risks."

"Shafiq Bhai."

"What?"

"Will there be Joy Bangla?"

"You mean, will Bangladesh be liberated?"

"Yes."

"Of course. Do you have any doubts?"

"If you say so, then I won't."

"I don't know how many people will die for liberation, but this country will be liberated. It has to be."

Shafiq Bhai stared at his hands with a kind of ferocity in his eyes. I got a little scared watching him.

A few days later when I went to look for Shafiq Bhai, he was gone. I knew he had joined the freedom fighters. Just thinking about it made me excited. Oh! If only I could go too!

I went to Aru Apa's house. She was sitting on her bed absentmindedly, head on her knees. When she saw me she said, "Ibu, come here."

Aru Apa looked sad. She didn't joke about marrying me that day. She said slowly, "Ibu, why did it happen like this?"

"Like what?"

"This living day by day. After each day passes by I think, at least I'm still alive."

I really wanted to say something to comfort Aru Apa. But what could I say? I thought about it for a while then said, "Aru Apa."

"What?"

"All the freedom fighters have gone to fight. Someday Bangladesh will be liberated and everything will be all right."

“Do you really think so?”

“Yes, Aru Apa. It will.”

“We’ll go to college again? You guys will play football? You’ll lose games and come back looking all sad? We’ll buy candy from the store?”

“Yes Aru Apa.”

Aru Apa pulled me into her arms. Her eyes were shining with tears.

Rashed came to see us that afternoon. The two of us sat on the wall, legs swinging. A little later Fazlu joined us. The three of us sat quietly looking at the street. People were walking on the streets again. Rickshaws and cycles were there too, but it still wasn’t like before. I sat quietly for a long time before asking Rashed, “Any news of the country?”

“Yes.”

“What?”

“Liberation war has started big-time. Teams are formed with three weeks of training. They’re given stenguns and grenades and let go.”

“Stenguns?”

“Yes.”

“What are those like?”

“Small. They can be folded and hidden. Automatic. If you hold the trigger down the bullets keep coming out, tat tat tat...they come with cartridge clips. If one finishes they put in the next one.”

“And grenades?”

“Grenades are bombs. You have to pull the pin out with your teeth and throw the grenade. Three seconds later it explodes. Boom. Those military bastards don’t have a chance.”

Rashed took a piece of paper out of his pocket. “Take a look at this.”

“What?”

“I made a list.”

“List of what?”

“A list of the collaborators. The people who are against ‘Joy Bangla.’”

I looked at the list. First was Khan Bahadur’s name. Then Azraf Ali. Then a few more names I didn’t recognize. Next to some of the names was written ‘Muslim League’. Other names had ‘Jamate Islami’, others had *Islami Chatro Shongho*³⁴, and others had Random Opportunists. Everybody’s address was there too.

Rashed explained, “You know why there’s a cross next to Khan Bahadur’s name, right?”

“Because he’s dead?”

“Yes. The military killed him.”

“What are you going to do with this list?”

“When the freedom fighters come I’ll give it to them. The first job after liberation will be to execute the traitors. If you don’t execute them then—”

“Then what?”

“Then after ten or twenty years they’ll bring back the Pakistanis!”

“Oof! How would that happen?”

“It happens. I’ve read about it in books.”

We stopped talking. If he really had read about it in books then I couldn't argue with him about it anymore. And everybody knew that Rashed was a political person. It wasn't surprising for him to read books on politics instead of 'Screams from the Haunted House.'

Rashed was quiet for a little while before he said, "Now we have to finish this list. Then we have to make a map."

"Map? Map of what?"

"Our school. The military have camped there. When the freedom fighters attack--"

"We made a map, remember?" Fazlu looked at us wide-eyed. "Remember?"

I remembered. Last year we used to play treasure hunting day and night. One team would hide the treasure and the other team would look for it. The map would show where the treasure was hidden. We had very carefully made a map of the school for that. Rashed heard all this, eyes shining. He wanted to know, "Where's the map?"

Fazlu and I scratched our heads. Our things were never where they were supposed to be. Fazlu said, "I'm sure Ashraf has it."

"Yeah," I nodded, "Ashraf did most of the work for it. Remember, he measured everything onto graph paper before drawing it?"

"Yeah. Where the pond is, where the library is, the *jamrul*³⁵ tree. Then remember how annoyed we were at Ashraf? He always took things too far!"

Rashed clapped his hands together. "There's nothing to worry about at all if we have that map! Now all we have to do is mark where the bunker is. And the trench and the arms depot. Then when the freedom fighters come--"

"Then what?"

"Then they'll use this map for the fight!"

"Really?"

"Yes." Rashed looked at us, eyes shining. "Will you guys help me?"

"Yes."

"It's top secret. Absolutely top secret."

"Okay."

We were trembling with excitement. Breathing heavily, we sat there, hands in fists, looking at the street.

Suddenly the people on the street began to move around quickly. Rashed whispered, "The military's coming. The military."

We held our breaths and watched. First a few thin people holding rifles walked by. They looked like Bengalis. Rashed whispered, "Rajakar troop."

Behind the rajakar troop came the military, wearing shiny clothes. They were holding weapons and had bullet belts hanging from their waists.

Rashed whispered, "Chinese machine guns."

The military walked by in one line. Their boots sounded on the paved road. Who knew where they were going?

Rashed got down from the wall. I asked, "Where're you going?"

"Let me see what the military does."

Rashed started to follow them. I was curious too but I remembered Father's strict orders not to go anywhere.

In the evening, the eastern sky became red. It looked as if there was a fire somewhere. The military had been going in that direction.

8.

Our school had been closed for quite a while. I had thought that nothing could be better than not going to school. But for the past few days I had noticed that it wasn't quite like that. Since we couldn't go to school, we couldn't do anything else either. No going out, no playing, no nothing. For a little while we had worked on the map of the school, but now that was finished. Rashed was adding the extra things to it. I used to play a lot with Dilip, but now I didn't now where he was. I had seen Ashraf and Fazlu a few times, but it seemed like both of them were always depressed. Rashed wandered around, his face always tight. He believed that the freedom fighters would come any day now, and then the military, collaborators, and rajakars would be finished!

I wasn't allowed to go too far from the house. But I'd go around a bit anyway. There weren't too many kids of my age around. Quite a few times I came face to face with the military on the street. My heart started to thump, but they ignored me. Slowly I became a little bit more courageous. There were always lots of military people standing around together. They would go into stores, take whatever they wanted, and leave without paying. Once when somebody asked for the money, he got hit in the stomach with the rifle's butt. His nose and mouth started to bleed.

But I would never say talk about any of this at home. Then they would stop me from going out of the house. Father just kept on telling me to stay at home and do English translations.

One morning Rashed came and asked me, "Do you have ten *paisa*³⁶?"

"What for?"

He lowered his voice and said, "I need to buy an envelope. I'm short of ten paisa."

"Who are you going to send a letter to?"

Rashed lowered his voice even more. "Azraf Ali."

"What are you going to write?"

"I've already written it. Look." He carefully took a piece of lined paper out from his pocket. On the top on one side was written, "Joy Bangla" and on the other side was, "Joy Bangabandhu." Below this was the letter. It read:

Shala Azraf Ali,

You Pakistani collaborator *Mir Jafar*³⁷ traitor.

You're not only a traitor. You speak of Islam but you don't practice it. God will not show you any mercy on Judgement Day. We will not show you any mercy in this world either. You'll be punished for your treachery by death. If you want to eat anything good before your death, you better eat it quick, because in just a few days you will go to hell. And you will burn there for eternity.

Ha ha ha ha ha.

From – angel of death.

I stared at Rashed in surprise. Rashed chuckled and said, "Let's give the son of a bitch a little scare."

"But the handwriting shows that it's you. It's a little kid's handwriting."

Rashed scratched his head and added another line at the bottom. "I wrote it with my left hand so you can't tell who it is."

I nodded. "Yeah, now it's ok, he'll think that you wrote it with your left hand 'cause it looks so awful."

Rashed said angrily, "My handwriting is not awful. Stop talking so much and give me the money."

I stopped arguing and gave him the ten paisa. Then the two of us walked to the post office and bought an envelope. We wrote Azraf Ali's address on the front, put the letter into it, and dropped it into a mailbox.

Two days later Rashed came and told me, "I think the letter worked."

"How come?"

"Azraf Ali is scared out of his wits! He doesn't even come out of his house." Rashed laughed in delight.

Rashed and I walked near Azraf Ali's house. We saw two construction workers making the boundary wall higher. A rajakar was standing guard at the front, holding a rifle.

Two days after this Rashed did something unbelievable. I was with him that day. We were coming near the market, and stopped for awhile in front of the Peace Committee's office. They had burnt down the *Awami League*³⁸ office. They hadn't burnt the NAP office, just ransacked it. The Peace Committee fixed it up for their office. The Peace Committee had a very easy job, to loot people's houses with the rajakar troop. To use the military to kill the relatives of the people they had enmity with. To burn down the houses of anybody who went to be a freedom fighter. If the military captured anybody, their relatives would come and fall to their knees and cry in front of the Peace Committee. They never came empty-handed – they always brought money.

We peeked into the office and saw Azraf Ali sitting in a chair, looking very angry. An old man was squatting at his feet. He was sobbing. The poor man, his son or another relative must have been captured by the military.

We watched that for awhile, then went to the rajakar troop's office. Before it used to be Dr. Nogen's chamber. Dr. Nogen was an L.M.F. of the olden days. He was a really good doctor. He was so good he could even keep a couple of M.B.B.S doctors in his pocket. He could feel a patient's pulse and be able to tell what the patient had eaten a few days ago. Everyone had told Dr. Nogen to leave for India, but he refused. He had spent his whole life here, this was his land. He would never leave it. A week after the military came the rajakars shot Dr. Nogen and turned his chamber into their office. If we had time, we would go and hang around their office. We tried to see what they said and did. That day we were standing there when Chunu Miah came out with two rajakars. Chunu Miah wasn't holding anything, but each rajakar held a rifle. Before, Chunu Miah used to pull carts, but after the military came became a rajakar commander in one jump.

It didn't look right to stand in front of the rajakar office, so we were walking away when Chunu Miah said, "You do know the chairman Azraf Ali, don't you?"

"Yes."

“Go and give him the news right now. Don’t delay you sons of a pig.”

“No, we won’t.”

“Go you bastards, go.”

We quickly began to walk. Chunu Miah and the rajakar troop had really vulgar language. They couldn’t say anything without swearing or cursing. We kept walking and the two rajakars came behind us. Even though they had been told to go quickly, they didn’t hurry. They stopped at a little teashop and lit cigarettes.

As we came near the Peace Committee office, we saw Azraf Ali coming. He was alone. Rashed suddenly stopped walking and said, “You go on. Let me have some fun.”

“What fun?”

“You’ll see. Go on. Make sure nobody sees you.”

I quickly went into an alley.

Rashed opened the top button of his shirt and pulled it over his head so that his face couldn’t be seen. Then he ran up to Azraf Ali and yelled, “Hey you Pakistani collaborator – two freedom fighters are going to shoot you dead in five minutes.”

“What? What did you say? What? What?”

Rashed had vanished by then. Azraf Ali looked a little scared. He stood there for awhile looking in the direction Rashed had run away, then shook his head and kept walking. It looked like he was trying to brush the matter away. Then he suddenly stopped walking – he had seen the two rajakars standing on the other side of the road. The rajakars saw him as well and went running towards him.

I suddenly realized what Rashed had done! Azraf Ali thought that the two rajakars were freedom fighters, coming to kill him. His jaw dropped in fear and terror. He started to scream and turned and ran as fast as he could. First Azraf Ali ran by, then behind him the two rajakars. I came out of the alley and saw Azraf Ali running along with his fat flabby body. He stumbled and fell, then somehow got up and kept running, screaming all the time. He tripped again, straightened, then promptly fell once again. This time he couldn’t get up. He tried to get up a few times and when he couldn’t, he desperately tried to crawl forwards, still shrieking. He was old and fat and not used to running. Who knew if he had broken any bones or not when he had fallen.

By then the two rajakars had caught up to him. Azraf Ali suddenly put his two hands together and started to sob. I had never seen anybody so scared in my life. Now I saw it. That must have been what they call death-fear. There was such frightening terror and fear in his eyes. That must be how people look right before they died.

Sobbing and holding his hands together, Azraf Ali sat in front of the two rajakars with his head down. He was blubbing, “My sons please forgive me. Forgive me. I swear on God. I didn’t do it on purpose, I only did it to save my life. I’m on Joy Bangla’s side, I’m on Bangabandhu’s side. I ask forgiveness, forgiveness, forgiveness—”

A crowd had begun to gather. The two rajakars stood there in utter astonishment. Azraf Ali moved forward a little and wrapped his arms around the rajakars’ legs. He started to rub his face against one of their feet. His beard got all dirty from the rajakar’s shoe. His cap fell off, revealing his bald head. His eyes and nose were streaming and he looked absolutely disgusting.

I just stared at him in wonder. My skin prickled, and I couldn’t quite tell why, but for some reason I was feeling ashamed. To see somebody so demeaned was very

shameful. But I couldn't bring myself to leave. There was always an attraction to see forbidden things. I stood there, trapped in that attraction.

The two rajakars pulled Azraf Ali up and said, "Sir, we're not freedom fighters, we're rajakars."

Suddenly Azraf Ali seemed to understand his mistake. He sat there looking at the rajakars stupidly, then turned to look at everybody who was watching. I saw his face slowly turn bright red in extreme rage. He turned his head and looked around. There were several kids standing around him, and he looked for Rashed among them. Suddenly I cringed in horror, Rashed was standing right there! What if he was recognized? But Azraf Ali didn't recognize him. He looked around, trying in vain to find Rashed, then said in a savage voice, "Where is that son of a pig? Where?"

Somebody asked, "Who?"

"That son of a pig, that scoundrel kid—"

"Who? What happened?"

"If I don't teach his fourteenth generation a lesson. If I don't bury his whole family in the same grave. If I don't make vultures roam in his burnt house then my name isn't Azraf Ali!"

One of the rajakars asked, "Who are you talking about, Sir? Who?"

"This kid came and told me—"

"What did he say?"

"He said – he said—" Azraf Ali suddenly stopped and looked around viciously.

I was stupefied by Rashed's bravery. He was standing right under Azraf Ali's nose and watching the fun. Around him were a lot of other kids. How would Azraf Ali ever find Rashed out of them all? Besides, Rashed's head had been covered with his shirt, so Azraf Ali hadn't even seen his face.

One of the rajakars growled at everyone, "Everyone watching the fun? Go on, get out of here."

The people showed no signs of leaving. In fact more people, sensing that something interesting was going on, were crowding around. Azraf Ali must have hurt himself badly by falling so awkwardly; he was sweating heavily. He was gasping, probably he wasn't used to running around. Not being able to stay standing, he fell down again and groaned.

The rajakars tried again to disperse the crowd, but it didn't work. Instead the crowd kept getting bigger. Finally, having no other option, they stopped a rickshaw and got Azraf Ali into it. He was still groaning in pain as they took him away.

When the people had gone away, I whispered to Rashed, "You're awesome! Dangerous."

Rashed laughed, showing all his teeth. "That was just for fun! When I really get him, then you'll see!"

At night I heard Father say to Mother, "Did you hear what happened to Azraf Ali today?"

"Who's Azraf Ali?"

"Chairman of the Peace Committee."

"What happened to him?"

"A freedom fighter caught him on the street. He said, 'Your days are finished. Recite the kalmas—'"

“He said that? A freedom fighter?”

“Yes. The freedom fighter had a stengun. The moment he took it out, two rajakars appeared.”

“Oh no! Then what happened?”

“Some people are saying there was a fight. Others are saying there wasn’t any fight, the freedom fighter just vanished.”

“Really?”

“Yes.” Father was laughing as he continued, “And Azraf Ali thought the rajakars were freedom fighters! He was holding their feet and sobbing.”

“Really? Then have the freedom fighters begun to come?”

“That’s what it looks like.”

I struggled to hide my laughter. I didn’t tell them what really happened!

The next day Rashed and I wrote a second letter to Azraf Ali. It started like this:

This time you rubbed your face on the rajakars’ feet
You begged forgiveness - and they forgave you.
But in just a few days when I stand in front of you,
There will be no use in rubbing your face on my feet
No use! I will never forgive you.

9.

A week later Rashed came very early in the morning. With no school and nothing to do, there wasn’t any hurry to get up, and sometimes it would be almost ten before I got up. Rashed came and woke me up. Rubbing my eyes, I got up and mumbled, “You? So early?”

“It is not early. It’s ten ’o clock!”

“It’s already ten?”

“Yeah.” Rashed said worriedly, “I think Auntie’s mad at you.”

“Why?”

“I asked, ‘Is Ibu home?’ Auntie said, ‘The lazy bum is still asleep. See if you can wake him up.’ She told me to drag you out of bed and get you up.”

Trying to get the sleepiness out of my eyes, I said, “That’s just how Mother talks. Why are you here so early?”

“There’s news.”

My sleep vanished. “What news?”

“Can’t say now. Let’s go out.”

“I haven’t washed up or eaten or anything.”

“Then you eat and stuff. Why are you lying there like a lazy bum?”

I got up and washed my face. Mother said to Rashed, “Do you want to eat with Ibu?”

“No thanks Auntie, I’ve eaten already.”

“Eat a little more?”

“No Auntie. But I could have a cup of tea.”

“Tea?”

“Yes please. Hard liquor without milk. Fresh leaves.”

Mother looked at Rashed, slightly surprised. It took her a little while to figure out what 'Hard liquor without milk. Fresh leaves.' meant. Rashed always said this when he went to Aziz Miah's restaurant to drink tea. At home I never drink tea, but Mother made Rashed tea without milk with new leaves and hard liquor. While I ate breakfast Rashed enthusiastically sipped his tea. He said, "First class tea!"

After breakfast Rashed and I went out. We sat on the wall, legs swinging. Rashed lowered his voice and said, "The freedom fighters are here."

"They're here?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"On the other side of the river."

"Really?"

"Yes. A small team is here on a special mission."

"What mission?"

"Special mission."

"What's that?"

Rashed shook his head. "I don't know. They want to meet us."

I jumped up. "They want to meet *who*?"

"Us."

"Why?"

"Remember we made that map? With everything about the military camp on it? Remember?"

"Yeah."

"The freedom fighters really liked that."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

"How did they get the map?"

"I gave it to them."

"You did? How?"

Rashed laughed mysteriously. "I have connections everywhere!"

"Now they want to meet us?"

"Yes."

"But we're- we're so little!"

"Who cares about being big or small. The matter is responsibility. Just because we're kids doesn't mean we can't take on big responsibilities."

I nodded. "That's true."

This was so exciting, I started breathing heavily. I gulped and asked, "How will we meet them? When will we meet them?"

"Tonight?"

"*Tonight*?" I was flabbergasted, how would we meet them tonight?

Rashed shook his head. "That's what they said. There's no time. I'm going to go. Are you coming with me?"

"Me? Tonight?"

"Yes."

"How? What will I say at home?"

"I don't know all that. Make up something-"

“What should I say?” I thought about it and realized I couldn’t let the chance of seeing a real team of freedom fighters pass me by.

Rashed suggested, “Tell your mother that tonight you’ll spend the night with me. If you want I can tell her?”

I shook my head. “Your telling won’t help. If your mother or father told her it might work. Besides, now there’s military everywhere, there’s a curfew every night after ten, so Mother won’t let me go anywhere at night-” As I was talking, I suddenly remembered Aru Apa. I looked at Rashed. “But-”

“But what?”

“We may be able to use Aru Apa.”

“Aru Apa?”

“Yes-” I furrowed my brow and thought about it. We could make a plan. If we got caught it would be a disaster. Father would absolutely kill me. But if we couldn’t even do this much for the country then how would it be? I asked Rashed “You want to come and check with me in the afternoon? Let me see what I can do.”

Rashed left. I went to Aru Apa’s house to put my plan into action. Aru Apa was listening to the news on the radio. Her eyes were dancing as she said to me, “Have you heard?”

“What?”

“The freedom fighters have really started to fight. Just what you would call amazing! They’re not just fighting however they want, everything is carefully planned. I think I’ll cut off my hair, dress like a boy and become a freedom fighter!”

I looked at Aru Apa and said, “Then you won’t be able to talk, your voice will give you away!”

Aru Apa made her voice deep and said, “I’ll talk like this, then won’t it do?”

I laughed at Aru Apa’s antics.

Aru Apa turned off the radio and asked, “How come you don’t come over these days?”

“I’m here now!”

“I bet you need something. What is it?”

“You won’t tell anyone, will you?”

“You’ve left me and married somebody else?”

“Oof! You and your teasing!”

“Fine I won’t tease anymore. What do you need?”

I put on an innocent face and told a big lie. “Father gave me six pages of translation to do.”

“Six pages?” Aru Apa pretended to be dumbfounded. “Such torture? Has your father joined the Pakistani military or something?”

“I thought I would finish it. But-”

“You didn’t?”

“No.”

“Now you want me to do it for you?”

I nodded.

“Never!” Aru Apa slapped the table.

“Aru Apa I’ll never ask you to again, this is the last time. You don’t have to do it for me, I’ll do it myself. You just have to help me when I get stuck. Will you? Please!”

“Okay fine. But on one condition.”

“What condition?”

“After we get married, give me a nose ring-”

“Stop teasing! I’m talking about something important-”

“Okay okay. Talk.”

“You can’t tell Mother or Father that you’re helping me with the translation.”

“All right, I won’t.”

“I’ll come over tonight to do it.”

“What?” Aru Apa pretended to be surprised. “How can you come to the in-laws’ house before we’re even married?”

“Oof!”

Aru Apa pressed the end of her sari to her face and giggled. “All right, come over then.”

“If it gets too late then I’ll stay over. Then you can read ‘The Prince and the Pauper’ book to me! Remember, there’s just a little bit left?”

Aru Apa said, “Okay.”

I looked at Aru Apa carefully. She didn’t suspect a thing. I held my breath and said, “Then will you tell Mother? Don’t mention the translations.”

“Yes I’ll tell her.”

I carefully let out my breath. The hard part of my plan was finished. At night I would tell Mother that I was going to Aru Apa’s, and nobody would suspect anything. Then I would go to Aru Apa’s house and tell her that I wouldn’t be able to make it that night, we’d have to do it another day. Aru Apa didn’t suspect anything, and Father and Mother wouldn’t even know that anything was wrong.

It was a foolproof plan, but I was still nervous. I tried for a long time to calm myself down. I felt bad telling such a big lie to Aru Apa, but I wasn’t doing it to be naughty. I was doing it for the country, for the freedom fighters.

Aru Apa looked at me and said, “What is it? Why do you look so serious all of a sudden?”

I forced a little laugh. “Who said I look serious?”

“Yeah, you should stay cheerful like a kid. If kids look serious then it doesn’t look nice.”

“Hey Aru Apa, can I ask you something?”

“Go ahead.”

“I’m a kid, but suppose I have an responsibility which is an adult’s responsibility, but only I can do it- I mean, me and some other people like me- then, well-”

Aru Apa looked at me sharply, and suddenly I began to stutter. I kept stammering and Aru Apa looked at me with surprise before asking, “What are you saying? Responsibility? What responsibility?”

“No, I mean-”

“Tell me what you’re talking about. Open up.”

“No it’s nothing.” I stopped talking.

Aru Apa knitted her eyebrows and looked at me. I started to get a nagging feeling of worry. I had had such a nice plan, but now it looked as if it wasn’t going to work. I had to open my big mouth and get myself into trouble. Aru Apa kept gazing at me as she said, “Listen, if you’re thinking about joining the freedom fighters, then forget it. If you try

that then you'll just get into trouble and you'll get the other freedom fighters into trouble with you. You're still a kid – totally a kid.”

I frantically shook my head. “No no I'm not talking about that.”

“Yes. Don't talk about that! You'll have plenty of opportunities to help the country once it's liberated.”

I nodded. “Yes I will.”

“Study hard. Do translations, and it'll help the country. Don't do anything crazy.”

“Don't worry, I won't.”

When I left Aru Apa's house I carefully let out a long breath.

10.

It wasn't too late, only eight, but it was so dark! Rashed and I walked cautiously in that darkness. There weren't too many people on the street; these days nobody left the house at night. When we reached the market, we had to hide behind a store – a few rajakars were walking by and talking. At the river we had to go down to the field, now there were always military on guard both sides of the bridge. In the daytime the military would stop people and ask them a thousand questions and if they suspected anything at all they would shoot them by the riverbank. Nobody used the bridge anymore – they usually crossed the river by boat.

It seemed that Rashed knew the area pretty well. After walking for a mile or so, we came to a place where lots of boats were standing together by the riverbank. Rashed looked around and called in a hushed voice, “Hanif Bhai–”

“Who is it?”

“Me, Rashed.”

“Over here.”

We somehow got into the boat. The boatman asked, “Anybody else coming?”

“No.”

The boatman pushed the boat away from the bank. The person called Hanif asked, “Who's this with you?”

“My friend Ibu. I told you about him, remember?”

“Oh.”

It didn't look like the Hanif person liked to talk. He sang to himself, sitting there on the boat, “*Oh my dear, my dear, why have you left me...*”

He was completely tuneless, and the words had no meaning, but he kept on singing to himself. It was dark, and there was a cool wind from the river, and after a little while of sitting there with the swaying boat, I actually began to enjoy the song.

I lowered my voice and asked Rashed, “Is he a freedom fighter?”

“No, he just works for them.”

“Oh.”

We got down on the other side of the river and started walking. After walking for a long time, we came to a small house hidden by trees. A dog was barking on the street. Someone asked roughly, “Who is it?”

“Hanif.”

“Which Hanif?”

“From Chandni Bazaar.”

Rashed whispered in my ear, “Secret password.”

Someone came out from the darkness. There was a rifle hanging from his shoulder. He said, "Come inside. Who are these kids?"

"The ones I told you about."

"But they're just little babies!"

Inside, a lantern was lit and there were quite a few people sitting around. A couple of them were playing cards on a bed. A few stenguns were shining in the lantern's dim light.

A guy wearing glasses asked, "How you doing, Hanif?"

"Good. I've brought the people who made the map of the military camp."

"Well! They're just babies!" The guy with the glasses looked at us and exclaimed, "Come closer!"

We went closer. He ruffled our hair and said to us, "Looking at the map, I thought you'd be older. It was a first-class map! Where did you learn to draw such nice maps?"

Rashed replied, "We didn't learn! We just kind of guessed."

I added, "We made the map when we used to play treasure hunting. There's a kid called Ashraf with us and he drew all the buildings, classrooms, the pond, trees, everything! And Rashed did the other stuff- everything in the military camp."

The glasses guy shook his head in disbelief and said slowly, "You've done an amazing thing. An amazing thing! But I had thought you were older. Like those big kids in class nine or ten. If I had known you were so little I never would have told you to come. Not for anything. Won't they worry about you at home?"

We hesitated, then said, "No."

"Why not?"

"They don't know at home."

"They don't know?" He sat there with his head in his hands for a few moments. Then he looked at us and said, "What's happened has happened. You can call me Kajal Bhai."

"Kajal Bhai?"

"Yes. My real name isn't Kajal though. We're here on a special mission, so I'm not allowed to tell anybody my real name. And I really like the name Kajal. So from now on my name is Kajal Bhai."

A bearded man pulled on his beard and joked, "Sometimes I forget- and call you Surma instead of Kajal!"

Kajal Bhai gave a full-throated laugh and said, "Oof! Surma is a girl's name."

Another one suddenly sang out, "*If your eyes are bad, why do you put kajal on them?*"

Everyone laughed loudly. Kajal Bhai looked at his watch and said, "The second team still hasn't come – should we wait for them or begin?"

A kind of dark man tugged at his beard and commented, "The gunboat on the river is a real menace, it takes a long time to cross it. And since there's military on guard on the other side, they can't come straight, they have to go really far out of the way and come through the paddy fields."

A fair guy said, "With those boxes of ammo on their heads!"

"But the villagers do help."

"That they do. If they didn't then what would we do?"

Kajal Bhai said, "Then let's start without them."

“Yeah, start.”

Kajal Bhai took a few papers out of his pocket and put them down. He held the lantern up to them. We put our heads up and saw our school’s map. Rashed said wide-eyed, “Our map!”

“Yes.” Kajal Bhai laughed a little and said, “Now you can call it a gold mine.”

Kajal Bhai looked at the map for a little while before asking, “Is this drawn to scale? One inch corresponding to ten yards?”

“Yes.” We nodded. “Ashraf drew the whole thing out on graph paper – he walked around and measured it all.”

“Very good.” Kajal Bhai studied the map again. “The library is a little distance away from the school. You wrote here arms depot. Is that right?”

Rashed nodded his head. “Yes.”

“How do you know?”

“I saw.”

“What did you see?”

“I saw the military come back after an operation and store all their weapons there. The boxes of bullets go there. There are always a few people on guard there. The people who carried boxes of bullets on their heads said that it’s full of just machine guns and machine guns.”

Kajal Bhai marked the library on the map with a red pencil. Then he asked, “Where’s the door of this?”

We showed him. “There’s one over here, and another one over there.”

The fair guy tsk-tsked with his tongue and remarked, “It would have been better if it was on that side.”

Kajal Bhai replied, “Yes. But that’s not a big problem.”

Everyone discussed the pond for awhile. At one point Kajal Bhai asked, “If somebody lies on the pond’s incline, can he be seen from the school’s second floor?”

“No.” Rashed and I shook our heads together.

“How do you know?”

“When we play hide-and-seek we hide there sometimes.”

“So that means if somebody’s on the pond’s incline then he won’t be seen from the bunker on the roof?”

“No.”

“Good.” Kajal Bhai happily made a couple of crosses on the map around the pond. “If we cover from here then the whole thing is safe. The whole thing can be covered with just two SMGs.”

Everyone nodded.

The bearded guy said, “The problem with the thing is the bunker.”

“Can’t we try with mortars?”

“No.” Kajal Bhai shook his head. “There’s houses and stores nearby. We might end up killing the public.”

Rashed volunteered, “There’s never any military on the bunker on the roof. They only go up there if they have to.”

“How do you know?”

“I’ve seen. Sometimes they run up to the roof while they’re practicing. Besides now it’s the rainy season. The roof on the bunker isn’t too great, so nobody really stays there.”

“Really?”

“Yes. And the military is really scared of leeches. In the rainy season there are always a lot of leeches there. And—”

“And what else?”

“The second floor of our school isn’t finished yet. The stairs are open. They go this way.” Rashed showed Kajal Bhai on the map. “You have to use these stairs to go to the bunker.”

Kajal Bhai furrowed his brow and studied Rashed. Rashed went on, “If anybody stays on this side of the road with a stengun or a machine gun and shoots towards the stairs, then nobody will be able to get to the roof.”

Kajal Bhai gazed at Rashed with surprise, then asked, “What’s on this side of the road?”

“Noor Muhammed bakery. It makes bread. On this side is the Uttam Laundry. Over here is a teashop.”

“Is it a brick building?”

“Yes.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yes.”

“We could cover the stairs from there?”

“Yes.”

Kajal Bhai and the others started to talk about all kinds of things with the map. Two of them even got into an argument about something. Kajal Bhai stopped everybody and said, “I think that this location is very good for an attack. We could take nice positions. I would like to get a couple of rocket launchers from the arms depot. We’re really short of rocket launchers. If we can’t do that, then it wouldn’t be a bad idea to blow the whole thing up.”

The fair guy objected, “But we can’t change the global plan. The primary mission is at zero plus twenty-four hours—”

“No. I’m not changing the primary mission. This operation is for the second team – all the local kids.”

I wanted to know, “What’s the primary mission?”

Kajal Bhai laughed and said, “That’s a top secret operation, and I’m not supposed to tell anybody. Nobody knows when or where it will be. I’m the only person who knows the details.”

The dark guy said, “You know what our orders are?”

“What?”

“If for any reason we ever get caught by the military, then the first thing we have to do is shoot Kajal Bhai dead ourselves. So that they can’t get anything out of him by torture.”

Rashed raised his eyebrows and said, “You’ll shoot him to death? Kajal Bhai?”

Kajal Bhai made his eyes all big and exclaimed, “If we’re caught! If we’re caught! Not before that—”

Everyone laughed.

The fair guy explained, “At the beginning the battles were totally without planning. But now everything is carefully planned out. The whole country has been divided into eleven sectors. Each sector has a job—”

Suddenly a whistling sound came from outside. Immediately everybody stopped talking. Kajal Bhai carefully turned down the lantern. He got up from the bed, picked up a stengun, and went to stand by the door. The fair guy whispered to Rashed and me, “Lie down on the ground.”

We lay down. My heart was thumping with excitement. I lay there and listened, hardly able to breathe. I heard the sound of footsteps and talking from outside, then all was quiet. Again the sound of whistling could be heard, this time twice. Then everyone slowly began to talk again. Kajal Bhai left the room.

The fair guy said, “Looks like the rajakars are really acting up.”

“We should do a brush fire and let them know we’re here – then they won’t dare to come close!”

Everyone roared with laughter again.

That night we ate dinner with the freedom fighters. There wasn’t too much to eat – coarse red rice and egg. Everyone ate this with such appetite that you’d think they were eating *korma polao*³⁹. There was tea after dinner, since there was no sugar it was made with molasses. Tasted kind of like custard. Once we were done eating, Kajal Bhai set out a mat and two worn-out, thin pillows on the floor and told us, “You two sleep now. In the morning we’ll take you back to town.”

Rashed protested, “I’m not sleepy yet.”

“But you still have to sleep. Pretend it’s an order from the high command.”

We lay down then. Rashed and I whispered as we lay there. Our first encounter with real freedom fighters – amazing!

We lay there quietly. We just couldn’t go to sleep, we were so excited. A dog was barking outside. A fox howled somewhere in the distance. The sound of a fox howling at night gave me an empty feeling in my chest. I wondered what the reason was. From even further away came the sound of shooting. Maybe the military had shot someone on the bridge.

I thought I would never fall asleep. But as I lay there, I really did doze off at some point. As I slept I dreamt that I was a freedom fighter. I was trudging through the mud with a huge machine gun. Just like a real freedom fighter!

11.

Somebody woke me up in the middle of the night, “Ibu, hey Ibu, get up! Look who’s here!”

I jumped up. It took me a little while to figure out where I was. Rashed shook me again and said, “Look Ibu! Look.”

There was someone standing there in front of me in the lantern’s dim light. He had long hair and stubble. There was a *gamcha*⁴⁰ tied on his head. He was wearing a short *lungi*⁴¹ and green boots. I looked at him again carefully and suddenly I knew who he was. Shafiq Bhai!

Shafiq Bhai hugged us hard, not wanting to let us go. After a little while he said, “Now see if you know this guy. Don’t look yet – close your eyes.”

Rashed and I stood there with our eyes closed. We could tell everybody was making someone stand in front of us. Then Shafiq Bhai said mysteriously, “Okay, now open your eyes.”

We opened our eyes and saw Kader standing there. He was wearing a short lungi, there was a gamcha around his waist, and he was holding a rifle.

“Kader! It’s you!”

Rashed and I ran forward and leaped on top of him so hard he fell down, us with him.

Kader cried, “What’re you doing? What’re you doing? Let go! Let go or it won’t be good.”

We didn’t let him go. Kader was in our class, but he had never been a friend. But suddenly, holding him late at night, in the lantern’s dim light, we felt deep compassion for him. Kader yelled, “Let go! Let me go! It won’t be good – I’ll do a brush fire.”

We still didn’t let him go. We couldn’t say anything but, “It’s you Kader! You!”

Everyone else stood around us, laughing. Finally we let go of Kader. Kader stood up and brushed himself off, then looked at us and laughed. He was looking grown-up somehow. Rashed and I started to question him.

“Are you really a freedom fighter?”

“How did you become one?”

“They took you?”

“We want to be freedom fighters too then!”

“Will they take us?”

“Did you fight?”

“In a real battle?”

Kader didn’t say anything, he just laughed like an adult. When we said that we wanted to be freedom fighters as well, he said, “No, they won’t take you. You’re too small.”

“Then how’d they take you?”

“I’m only in your class ’cause I failed so much. Otherwise I would be in college!”

“Oof! Liar.”

“You guys are freedom fighters. Kajal Bhai said you made an awesome map. A map of the military camp. There’s going to be an operation with your map. Right?”

We nodded.

“So then?” Kader said softly, “It’s very hard. Hard eating, hard sleeping, hard living. There’re sores on my feet from walking through the mud in these shoes. There’s lice in my head so big you wouldn’t believe. I go two or three days with no food except for dry chira. And boxes of ammo are so heavy – you wouldn’t believe.”

Kader laughed a little and said, “But you won’t believe how much all the villagers care for us. That day an old lady held me and sobbed. She was saying, ‘You’re so little, why do you have to go to fight? Stay with me, I don’t have any children. You’ll be my son, my treasure.’”

“She said that?”

“Yes. If we stay in any of the villages, then they butcher a cow just for us. But we’re not allowed to do that.”

“You’re not?”

“No. If we eat at anybody’s house then people will find out. Later the military will go and burn the house.”

Suddenly Kader remembered something. He said wide-eyed, “We caught a rajakar!”

“You caught a rajakar?”

“Yes. The shala fell asleep while guarding at the Kodomtola Bridge. Then we crept up behind him and caught him. We tied his hands behind his back and blindfolded him, and brought him with us.”

“Blindfolded?”

“Yes.”

I asked, “What will you do now?”

Kader said vaguely, “They’ll kill him I suppose.”

“Kill him?” I started up in horror.

“I guess.”

“H-h-have you seen them kill anybody?”

“Yes. I was there when they killed Ullapur’s Peace Committee’s chairman.” Kader made a sound and spit on the ground. “Number-one collaborator.”

“Have you killed anybody?”

Kader didn’t reply. He dug at the ground with his foot then said softly, “I don’t know. It depends on the fight. Nobody knows who gets killed, when, on whose bullet. You can’t tell a thing. We’ve ambushed a couple of times near the sandy riverbank.”

Kader suddenly changed the topic and said, “Let’s go check out what the rajakar shala’s doing.”

We went out with Kader. In the yard a man was tied to a tree. He was crouched over, his two hands tied firmly behind his back. His eyes were also tied with a piece of cloth. A lamp was glowing next to him. In the dim light of the lamp, the crouched man looked absolutely eerie.

Kader went close to him and called, “Hey shala.”

The rajakar didn’t say anything.

“Hey shala Pakistani collaborator.”

The rajakar still didn’t say anything. Kader went a little closer and pushed the man’s head with his foot. ‘Son of a pig, bastard, why don’t you say anything? Should I get you with the rifle’s butt?’

I didn’t know whether Kader would really hit the man in the head or not with the rifle’s butt, but right then Kajal Bhai and a few others joined us. Kajal Bhai came close then stood quietly for a little while before saying, “Let him go. He’s been tied up in such a way his blood circulation will stop.”

Somebody said in surprise, “I’ll untie him?”

“Yes. Let me talk to him a little.”

“And then we’ll shoot him?”

Kajal Bhai didn’t reply.

After the rajakar’s blindfold had been removed and his hands untied, he rubbed his wrists and watched us fearfully. He was just a villager. He didn’t look any different from a young freedom fighter. Kajal Bhai went forward a little and asked, “What’s your name?”

The man muttered, "Afzal."

"Afzal?"

"Yes."

"Afzal, do you know what the Pakistani military have done in this country?"

The rajakar didn't reply.

Kajal Bhai raised his voice and asked, "Do you?"

"Yes."

"What have they done?"

"Burnt houses."

"And what else?"

"Killed people."

"How many people have they killed?"

The rajakar didn't reply, he just sat there with his head down. Kajal Bhai shouted, "How many people have they killed?"

"A lot."

"Then why did you join them?"

The rajakar lifted his head and started to say something, then stopped. Kajal Bhai said, "Go on, say it."

"*Hazi Shahib*⁴² said to join the rajakars. Good pay. I'm an ignorant person, I don't understand anything—"

"So you joined the rajakars? Won't you open your eyes and see which team you're joining?"

The rajakar sat there with his head down.

"You don't understand anything, you're ignorant, but you do understand the country."

The rajakar nodded. "Yes."

"You have betrayed your country and its people. Do you know what the punishment is for betraying your country?"

The rajakar didn't say anything. Kajal Bhai suddenly thundered, "Do you know what the punishment is?"

Then the rajakar burst into tears. It felt very bad to see an old person cry. That day I had seen Azraf Ali, today I was seeing this man. I shuddered.

Kajal Bhai shouted again, "Why don't you reply? Tell me!"

The rajakar still didn't reply. He covered his face in his eyes and kept crying. Kajal Bhai looked at him for awhile then suddenly said kindly, "Afzal."

The man slowly lifted his head and looked at Kajal Bhai. "Yes?"

"Get up."

The man didn't quite understand what Kajal Bhai was saying. He sat there and looked at Kajal Bhai in surprise. Kajal Bhai moved forward and took the man's hand and pulled him up. He said, "You have nothing to fear. We won't harm you."

The man stared at Kajal Bhai in surprise. He looked like he couldn't believe his ears.

"You joined the rajakars – you betrayed your country and its people. But I believe you – you didn't understand what you were doing. You have made a mistake, a very big mistake. If someone makes a mistake he must be given a second chance. We will give you another chance. We will let you go—"

The rajakar suddenly dropped down and held Kajal Bhai's feet. "I won't go. I will stay with you. Take me as a freedom fighter--"

Kajal Bhai pulled the man up. "No! Never touch anybody's feet."

"I'll rip Hazi Shahib's throat out."

"No no no. You don't need to rip out anybody's throat. Afzal we are not here to kill our own people. They Pakistanis are doing that. We are here to save this country."

Sobbing, the man said, "I will give my life for you Sir. My life. I swear. I swear on God."

"Very good," Kajal Bhai said, patting the man on the back. "If you must then give your life for the country. God will be happy. Loving your country is a part of your faith. Those who don't love their countries are traitors. No matter how much he prays and fasts, he is still a traitor. And the place for traitors is hell."

Kajal Bhai said to somebody, "Give Afzal something to eat. Let him stay with us for today and see what we do a little. Then let him go."

"I won't go Sir. I won't. I want to stay with you."

"If you want to stay then stay. But first you have to go back to your village. You have to tell everybody who joined the rajakars with you to join the freedom fighters instead. All right?"

The man nodded obediently.

"Now go and eat something."

After Afzal had gone inside with a few of the others, Kajal Bhai lowered his voice and said, "Keep an eye on him. Be careful about what you say. Make sure he doesn't hear anything he shouldn't. Tell everybody to be very good to him."

"Still, for all he's a rajakar--"

"If we can get a rajakar on our side then it's twice as good."

"True."

"We got a report that if you explain things to rajakars, then they can be brought on to the freedom fighters' side. Let's see if that's true or not. But be very careful. When you let him go, blindfold him again."

"Blindfold him?"

"Yes. So that he won't be able to do anything if he wants to betray us."

"What do you think? Is he going to betray us?"

"I doubt it. How many people are there who can betray their own country?"

Kajal Bhai looked at us and said, "Well, my little freedom fighters? Want a cup of tea?"

We nodded our heads.

"Then let's go. See if you can go to sleep again after the tea. We'll take you to town in the morning.

Kader said softly, "It's almost morning." I looked at the sky. The darkness was slowly giving way to the light of the morning.

Looking at the sky and feeling the early morning breeze suddenly made me unspeakably happy.

Oh! When the country would be liberated it would be so wonderful. I didn't know why, but tears came to my eyes.

I was tiptoeing home early in the morning. Hanif had dropped us off near home a little while ago. As I neared Aru Apa's house, she called me sharply, "Ibu—"

I froze in horror. Aru Apa was standing as still as a statue near the window. I suddenly got scared looking at her. Aru Apa said coldly, "Come here."

I stammered, "Aru Apa, there's this thing, I mean right now at home—"

Aru Apa looked at me terribly and said icily, "Come here."

I went to her. Aru Apa opened the door. The moment I went inside she grabbed my hand. She grabbed it so hard it started to hurt. She stared at me, her eyes savage, gritted her teeth and said, "Where were you last night?"

Startled, I stood there, head down. It was a disaster, I had been caught.

"Where were you?"

I stood there quietly. Aru Apa shouted, "Where were you?"

"Aru Apa, I can't tell you."

"You have to—" Aru Apa said fiercely, "Or I will kill you. I will absolutely kill you."

Aru Apa looked as if she really would kill me. I said somehow, "Aru Apa—"

"Do you know that I have been standing here all night? All night. Do you know that? Do you?"

"Aru Apa—"

"Everyone at your house knows you're here. I know that you have run away from home. Where were you? Where were you last night?"

"Aru Apa, I can't tell you."

"You *have* to." Aru Apa squeezed my hand so hard that the pain brought tears to my eyes. Her face horrible, she said, "You have to tell me. You have to. You used me in your plan – now you have to tell me. You have to—"

"Aru Apa—"

"You have to. You have to tell me where you were last night."

"Aru Apa I can't tell you."

Aru Apa let me go. She pushed me in the chest and said, "Go. Never come to me again. Never. Go. Get away from here."

Aru Apa had never spoken to me so harshly. All of a sudden tears came to my eyes. But I could never tell Aru Apa the truth. Rashed and I had touched Kajal Bhai and sworn upon the country that we would never tell a soul. I kept my head down to hide my tears. Aru Apa opened the door and said, "Go on, get away from here. Get away from here right now. And never come back."

I took out a paper from my pocket and handed it Aru Apa. She asked, "What is this?"

"Your letter. From Shafiq Bhai."

"Shafiq?" She jumped up. "Shafiq's back? Did you meet him?"

"I can't tell you Aru Apa. I swore on the country—"

"D-did you meet the freedom fighters?"

I stood there with my head down.

Aru Apa bent down and pulled me to her. Holding me against her chest she said in a broken voice, "You're such a small boy, you should be flying kites, you should be playing ball. But you're working with the freedom fighters? With your own life in your hands? You? A little boy like you? A little boy like you?"

Holding me tightly in her arms, Aru Apa began to cry.

Although Aru Apa knew I had been out somewhere the whole night, she didn't tell anybody. So Father and Mother had no idea about anything. But I was very careful the whole day, if by mistake I said something like, 'last night's mosquito bites-' then I was finished. Since I hadn't slept well at night, in the afternoon my eyes were falling shut, but I somehow managed to stay awake the whole day.

The next morning I sat legs swinging on the wall like usual. Father had gone to the college a little while ago. The military had announced to keep the college open. There weren't any students in the college but Father still had to go and sit there. Father went to the college very sadly every day. Father would probably leave everything and just go off somewhere soon. Who knew where he would go. Maybe to his village home. The roads still weren't safe though, that was the problem.

I figured out that it was Wednesday sitting there on the wall. Every Wednesday there used to be a big market here. People would come with all kinds of stuff to sell from the nearby areas. There wasn't a thing you couldn't get from the Wednesday market. That stopped after the military came. In the past few weeks it was slowly starting up again. Not as big as before, but there was a small market. I saw people bringing ducks, chicken, vegetables, pots and baskets. People bringing baskets of fruit on their heads. It was June, and extremely hot even in the morning. I saw someone go by with a basket of bananas on his head; he was sweating like crazy. The moment his eyes met mine, he looked away, and then I suddenly recognized him. He was with Kajal Bhai's team, last night we had had tea together. There weren't only fruits in that basket then, there must also have been weapons! My heart was thumping in excitement. When would they attack? Tonight? I thought about following the man and seeing where he went and what he did. But then I decided not to, if he was pretending he didn't know me, I had to pretend that I didn't know him.

I fidgeted restlessly. If Rashed came I would talk to him. I was sure they would attack tonight. Had Shafiq Bhai arrived? Kader? Where was everyone? At the Noor Muhammed bakery? I jumped off the wall and right then Rashed walked up. His face was serious. I ran to him and said, "Rashed do you know tonight--"

Rashed held a finger to his lips. "Shh, quietly."

I lowered my voice. "Tonight's the operation in the camp."

Rashed gazed at me in surprise. "How do you know?"

"I saw one of the freedom fighters go by with a basket of bananas! There must be weapons under the bananas."

"Yes." Rashed nodded. "There's a problem."

"What problem?"

"Shafiq Bhai has gone to Noor Muhammed bakery. He has a light machine gun with him. But--"

"But what? Is Noor Muhammed Pakistani?"

"No no. Noor Muhammed's all right. He's genuine Joy Bangla."

"Then what is it?"

"Shafiq Bhai couldn't take too much ammo with him. He needs at least an hour's worth of bullets. He only has around ten minutes' worth."

"Why don't they take some more to him?"

“They can’t. There’s strict patrolling near the school. There are two rajakars at the check post. And a few of the Pakistani Military sit around at one of them. They open everything and see.”

“Then?”

“Everything else is ready. But if Shafiq Bhai doesn’t get any more ammo, then they will probably have to cancel the program. The success of the operation depends on controlling the bunker on the roof.”

“Then?”

“They’re still trying. But it’s a dangerous situation.” Rashed was quiet for a moment. “I have an idea.”

“What?”

“How would it be if we took ammo to Shafiq Bhai?”

“Us?”

“Yes, you and me. Fazlu and Ashraf if they want to.”

“How?”

“We’ll tie the belts of bullets to our bodies and wear our clothes on top. They won’t suspect anything since we’re kids. What do you think?”

“Will Fazlu and Ashraf agree?”

“Why not?”

“What if they tell?”

Rashed narrowed his eyes at me. “Did you tell anybody where we went that night?”

“No. But Aru Apa found out from Shafiq Bhai’s letter.”

“But did you tell anybody?”

“No.”

“Then should the others? Do you think you’re the only one with a sense of responsibility? You’re the only one who’s good, and everyone else is bad? You’re the only one who’s smart, and everyone else is dumb?”

“Did I say that?”

“Then what are you trying to say?”

“I’m saying that for all we’re still kids—”

“So what? Grown-ups think that we don’t understand anything just because we’re kids. But both of us know that that’s not true. We understand everything. Sometimes we pretend we don’t, but actually we understand everything.”

“That’s true.”

“Now is a time that has never come before.” Rashed started talking like a grown-up. “Now the grown-ups themselves don’t know what to do, how are they going to tell us? Now we have to decide what to do ourselves. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“Then let’s go.”

“Where?”

“To call Fazlu and Ashraf.”

First we went to Fazlu’s house and got him. When he saw us he happily came out of the house and said, “It’s good that you’ve come.”

“How come?”

“I’m totally bored of sitting here and playing snakes and ladders. And that Shiuli is such a cheat! If she comes close to a ladder she cheats and goes up it. And when she lands on a snake—”

Rashed said sternly, “You play snakes and ladders?”

Taken aback, Fazlu asked, “Why? What’s wrong with that?”

“Don’t you know what’s going on in the country? We have so much to do—”

“Like what?”

“Suppose the freedom fighters are fighting with the military. And they need help. Will you help?”

In an instant Fazlu’s eyes became huge. He stammered, “Really? Really? Swear on God?”

“Yes. Will you?”

Fazlu started breathing heavily. He said, “Of course I will! What are you talking about? What do I have to do? What?”

“Easy. Easy. I’ll tell you everything. But the thing is, you can’t tell anybody. Not a soul. Not even if you die. When I say not even if you die, I mean it. You might get caught by rajakars. You might get caught by the military. They might stab you to death with bayonets. They might kill you on the riverbank – but you still can’t tell anyone.

“I swear on God. I won’t tell. I swear on God.”

Rashed looked at me and said, “Didn’t I tell you that everyone will help?”

Fazlu said, “Now tell me what we have to do.”

“I will. First let’s see if we can get Ashraf.”

Ashraf also agreed the moment we told him. I had thought he wouldn’t agree. He was the class’s first boy, he never did anything absurd. Before when Rashed used to go on processions, Ashraf used to shake his head and say, “It’s not right for such young boys to go on processions.” But this wasn’t processions or politics. This was the country and its liberation. Military and freedom fighters. Staying alive and dying.

13.

The four of us started to walk towards Rashed’s house as Rashed explained his plan to Fazlu and Ashraf. Ashraf started breathing heavily. He asked, “Have you tried it? Can you walk with the belts tied to your bodies?”

Ashraf was our class’s first boy. He never talked to anybody informally.

“I haven’t tried it, but why wouldn’t we be able to walk?”

“What if the bullets can be seen? What if they come out?”

“We’ll have to try it out first.”

“Yes.” Ashraf said worriedly, “We’ll have to use thin rope or thread and tie them really well to the body.”

“Yes.”

“Do you have thread?”

Rashed scratched his head. “If we look around we’ll find some.”

Ashraf shook his head and said, “What if you don’t find any? We’ll buy some on the way. I have money.”

Ashraf was our class’s first boy. He never talked to anybody informally and he always had money!

Fazlu suggested, "How about if we carry a ball while we're going? So that it looks like we're going to play?"

Ashraf's eyes began to shine. He said, "Good idea! Do you have a ball at home?"

"No."

"I do. You guys wait, I'll run and get it."

Rashed's house was very far away; it took us a long time to get there. There was a lock on the door. Rashed opened the door with a key tied to his waist and went inside. I asked, "Isn't anybody home?"

"Who's going to be home?"

What kind of a question was that? His father, his mother, his brothers and sisters would be home. Before I could ask him anything, Rashed pulled out a box covered in a jute mat from under the bed. There were coiled belts of bullets inside the box. I had never seen bullets before. I carefully touched them. Smooth, shining bullets. They felt somehow cold, touching them made me shudder. Who knew, maybe these very bullets would go inside a Pakistani military's brain!

Fazlu asked, "Where did you get these?"

"If you want I could tell you. But it's better if you don't. Then if you ever get caught, you won't be able to say anything no matter how much they torture you."

Fazlu paled a little at the mention of torture, but he nodded seriously and said, "That's true."

Rashed took out a belt of bullets. We tried on Fazlu first. His shirt and undershirt were taken off and the bullets tied securely to his body with thread. Fazlu put his undershirt and shirt back on and asked, "Well? Can you tell?"

"No." Ashraf shook his head. "You can't tell."

I said, "You look a little fat. But you're so thin. A little fat looks good on you."

Rashed said, "Try walking."

Fazlu hesitantly walked forward a few steps.

"Well? Any problems?"

"No. It's a little heavy, but I can walk."

"Try moving your arms and legs around."

Fazlu moved his arms and legs, a little awkwardly, but pretty well.

Rashed looked at us and asked, "What do you think? Will it work?"

Ashraf replied enthusiastically, "A thousand times!"

We began to twist the belts around our bodies one by one with quite a bit of enthusiasm. With our clothes on top, the bullets couldn't be seen. The belts were pretty heavy, so we didn't delay and headed straight out.

Rashed murmured, "Be very careful. Make sure no one suspects anything if they look at us."

"Yeah, we have to talk and everything really normally as we go." I said, "When we walk by the rajakars, don't go too quickly and don't go too far away from them."

"Yes." Ashraf nodded.

"We could even talk with the rajakars if we want to. What the time is or something like that. If they stop somebody to check him we could stop and watch too."

"Yes. That's what we would do normally anyway."

Ashraf bought four lollypops from a store. Apparently you could walk very normally if you were eating something. Licking the lollypops as we walked, we discovered that this was true.

At the cross section of our school, two rajakars were standing there and watching everybody go by. If anybody had a bag or a sack then they would stop him or her and open them up. Talking away, we went by very close to them. One of the rajakars looked at us out of the corner of his eye, but he didn't say anything. As we left the two rajakars behind, all of us let out long sighs of relief. The second team was still left.

The second team was a little ahead. There were two militia, dressed in black, along with the rajakars there. The militia had looked frightening. High foreheads, high jaws, sharp noses, somehow they looked cruel.

As we walked by, one of the rajakars said, "Hey kid, where are you going?"

We had decided from before that if we were asked anything, then instead of everyone talking at once, only one person would answer. So Ashraf bounced the ball and said, "To play football."

The rajakar said to the others, "Look at what the shalas want to do! They're going to play football in this sun!" Then he looked at us and said, "You do know that you're not allowed to go through the school, don't you?"

Rashed replied, "We know. We're not going to the school."

We walked away and the two militia looked at us scornfully. If only they knew what we were carrying and what it would be used for that night!

The Noor Muhammed bakery was right in front of the school. Rashed said in a hushed voice, "Go in slowly. No hurry."

Inside Noor Muhammed was sitting in front of the register. When he saw us, he said without lifting his eyes, "What do you want?"

"Biscuits."

"What biscuits?"

"Chandni Bazaar cookies."

Noor Muhammed jumped up in exactly the same way someone jumps if he gets poked with something hot. Rashed lowered his voice and said to us, "Secret password!"

Noor Muhammed raised his eyebrows. "What did you say? What did you say?"

"Chandni Bazaar cookies."

"Chandni Bazaar?"

"Yes." Now Rashed lifted his shirt to reveal the belts. That worked like magic immediately. Noor Muhammed jumped to his feet, saying, "Oh God! Come inside. Inside—"

We hastily went inside. Inside, hot air was coming out of a big stove making bread. The sweet aroma of the bread suddenly made me hungry.

Noor Muhammed still couldn't believe his eyes. He kept gulping. "Who sent you?"

Rashed said seriously, "We don't have the permission to tell you."

"Oh oh. Of course."

"Please open the belts quickly. We don't have time."

"Yes yes. I'm opening them." Noor Muhammed brought a small knife and cut the thread and hid the belts of bullets. Was Shafiq Bhai here anywhere? I thought about

asking Noor Muhammed but in the end I didn't. Freedom fighters weren't supposed to show curiosity.

We were leaving when Ashraf said, "Wait, let me get a couple of biscuits. So that nobody will suspect anything."

Ashraf took some money out of his pocket, but Noor Muhammed said, "I don't need the money my boy, I don't need the money. Which ones do you want?"

Fazlu pointed them out; big biscuits made with coconuts. Noor Muhammed opened the container, took the biscuits out and handed them to us.

Eating the biscuits, we left the bakery. No one noticed us, but we weren't about to take any risks. We kept walking straight. There were rajakars on guard on the other side of the street, but now what was there to fear?

We took another road back to Rashed's house, tied the belts to ourselves again, and went back. This time before we left we rubbed some mud onto our bodies, so it would look like we had played football.

This time we walked from the other direction, making it look like we were coming back after playing football. Who knew if the rajakars remembered us- even if they did it was okay, they wouldn't suspect anything. We weren't scared the way we had been the first time. I even asked a rajakar what time it was. He didn't reply though. Rashed told us, "He stole the watch from somebody, but he doesn't know how to tell the time, that's why he's not saying anything." Rashed was probably right!

We took almost all of the bullets to the Noor Muhammed bakery in the two times that we went. This time we met Shafiq Bhai for a few seconds. He didn't look at all like the picture you imagine of a freedom fighter. He was wearing a short lungi, he was barefoot, and there was a red gamcha hanging from his neck. When he saw us he winked and said, "Well aren't you just little tigers?"

We didn't say anything, just laughed a little. Then Shafiq Bhai came and hugged us to him one by one. "If a country with little tigers like you isn't liberated, then which country will be?"

When we were leaving he said in a hushed voice, "You will remember that this is top secret?"

We said we would remember.

On the way home we realized that we were in for it that day. Some of us would get yelled at, some of us would get beaten up. We comforted ourselves, what would happen with a little scolding or beatings, some people were getting shot for the country!

I wasn't yelled at as badly as I had thought I would be. Father pretended to give up on me when he heard that I had played football in the sun and gotten all muddy. While I was washing my hands and feet and cleaning up I heard Father and Mother talking very seriously. Mother said, "So many days' family life."

Father said, "First comes people. Then comes family life. If we survive then we can do it all again."

Mother said, "That's true."

"We can't stay like this anymore. I can't imagine what they did to Sikdar Shahib that day. One day they'll do it to me." Father looked at me out of the corner of his eyes and stopped talking.

I asked, "What will they do Father?"

"Nothing."

Mother said, "Then that's best. The house can stay like this. We should go while we have the chance."

I asked, "What chance?"

Father said, "A chance to go to the village home. Forhad Shahib is going, we'll go with him. We'll stay a few days at his village, then set out. These days I hear the buses are running again."

"Forhad Shahib means Aru Apa's father?"

"Yes. Don't tell anybody my boy."

"I won't."

I wouldn't tell anybody even if he hadn't said that. Now we weren't supposed to tell anybody anything. Everything had to be kept a secret. Had I told anyone that there would be a terrifying battle that night?"

14.

At night after eating I went to bed like every other night. But I knew that tonight was not like any other night. Tonight the freedom fighters would attack the camp, now they were slowly advancing from all around. When the darkness would get deeper, when everyone in the world was asleep, then suddenly their machine guns would roar. Bullets flying, grenades exploding, mortars machine guns people screaming—

I started breathing rapidly, not being able to sleep. I tossed and turned on the bed.

I had thought that I would stay up the whole night, but at some point my eyes closed. I dreamt about a war in my sleep and I kept jumping awake every couple of minutes. Then I would go to sleep again and then wake up again a little later. Once I dreamt that Shafiq Bhai was shooting away with a machine gun and Kader was running in the midst of it all. I cried, "Kader don't go—" Kader turned his head and said, "Who is it? Who?"

I cried, "Me."

"Who?"

"Me, Ibu."

"Ibu! Where are you Ibu?"

"Right here."

Kader couldn't see me, he looked around and called, "Ibu Ibu Ibu—"

And right then I woke up and I heard someone standing underneath the window near my bed and calling softly, "Ibu, hey Ibu."

I asked fearfully, "Who is it?"

"Me. Rashed."

"Rashed! What happened?"

Rashed whispered, "Can you come out? I need to talk to you."

There was no way I could go out the door without making a noise, Father or Mother would wake up. I could go out by bending the already weakened grill on the window, so that's how I went down. I asked, "What happened Rashed?"

"There's a problem."

"What problem?"

"Someone else was supposed to go with Shafiq Bhai."

"Who?"

“Another freedom fighter. He couldn’t go.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know, there was some kind of a problem. I think there’s a lot of patrolling on the streets. So I thought that I would go.”

“You! You? What are you going to do?”

“Help Shafiq Bhai. There always has to be somebody else to hold the belts of bullets. Don’t you know that?”

I hadn’t known, so I didn’t say anything.

“I had started out, but when I went near the postmortem house I thought I saw something moving inside.”

I shuddered. “Really?”

“No silly how would it be real? There’s nothing known as ghosts.”

“So then?”

“I’m still scared. Will you come with me?”

“Me?”

Leaving the house late at night and getting involved in a terrible battle is not a kid’s job. If it had been any other time I wouldn’t have done it. But now it was different. I said, “Let’s go.”

Rashed looked at me in surprise, then laughed. I said, “Why are you laughing?”

“I thought you wouldn’t agree, and then I wouldn’t have to go either. But no there’s no other choice, I have to go.”

“Y-y-you didn’t really want to go?”

“I want to and I don’t want to. I’m scared. But somebody needs to be with Shafiq Bhai. The whole operation depends on Shafiq Bhai. If anything happens to Shafiq Bhai it’s going to be a disaster for the freedom fighters.”

“Then let’s go.”

“Let’s go.”

We cautiously left in the darkness of the night. Rashed said he would be able to reach the Noor Muhammed bakery through all kinds of back alleys and stuff. I would never believe it if it was anybody else, but Rashed was a different matter. Rashed never said anything stupid. He said bizarre and unbelievable things, but never anything stupid!

Shafiq Bhai was extremely surprised to see us, it was dark everywhere so I couldn’t see his face, but his voice sounded as if he wasn’t only surprised, he was also a little angry. He said, “Are you crazy? This isn’t a kids’ game!”

Rashed said, “If you want us to we will leave right now. We thought you would have trouble alone.”

“So then *you* come?”

“Can’t we do anything? Didn’t we make the map? Didn’t we bring the ammo?”

“What if something happens to you now?”

“What if something happens to *you*?”

“I’m here to fight-”

I said, “We’re also here to fight. This is our country just as much as it yours-” My voice trembled as I said it.

Rashed said, “You just have to tell us whether or not us staying will cause any problems, and we’ll leave right now. Right now.”

Shafiq Bhai didn't say anything for awhile, then he let out a long sigh and said, "All right, stay. Come here, let me show you a few things. If anything happens to me, you hold down the trigger until the belt is finished. Then you get out of here. You understand?"

"Yes."

"Now come on, let me teach you some of the basics."

In the middle of the night on the roof of Noor Muhammed's bakery, Shafiq Bhai began to teach us how to use a light machine gun. The whole time we kept on whispering, but I understood that suddenly Shafiq Bhai wasn't talking to us like we were kids anymore. He was talking to us like we were his equals. Like we were also grown up.

Rashed and I suddenly grew up on that dark night.

The three of us were sitting there quietly. A little while ago there had been clouds in the sky. Suddenly the clouds had vanished, and now the stars could be seen. We sat there quietly and gazed at the stars in the sky. Shafiq Bhai said, "When the shooting starts, you two lie down on the ground."

"All right."

"When the military realize that I'm giving cover from here, they're going to shoot over here. They'll try to stop me. We have to finish the whole operation very quickly. We can't give them too much time."

"What happens if you give them too much time?"

"They'll bring heavy weapons. R.R.s or something."

"What's an R.R.?"

"Recoilless rifle. Powerful stuff. They can even destroy buildings and tanks."

"How long will the fight be?"

"Not too long. We have to finish the operation quickly. That's our hope. If we can blow away the arms depot then we're done."

"What happens then?"

"Then we move away. They'll cover us from there."

Shafiq Bhai was quiet for awhile before he asked, "Are you scared?"

"Yes. I feel like throwing up."

Shafiq Bhai laughed softly. "You're not used to staying up so late, that's why you feel like throwing up. And even if you're scared then just don't lose your head. This is a scary thing. Being scared is normal. Just try to keep cool. You'll see, everything will be all right."

We stayed quiet. Shafiq Bhai said, "I'm just wondering what will happen to your parents when they find out about all this!"

I said weakly, "What's the worst that could happen!"

We sat quietly again. There wasn't a sound from the military camp in front of us. It looked like everyone was asleep, they didn't even know what they were in for! What a horrifying fight would take place.

I whispered, "Shafiq Bhai"

"What is it?"

"Are you afraid?"

Shafiq Bhai laughed softly. "Yes Ibu I am. Everyone is afraid when they're supposed to be. Only insane people aren't. There's nothing wrong with being afraid, but

you must do what you have to anyway. And that is what's called bravery. You'll see when the battle begins all of a sudden you won't remember to be scared. You'll only think about what you have to do. Shooting to give the other freedom fighters cover—"

Right then the darkness of the night and the silence was shattered by the roar of a machine gun. Frightened, Rashed and I put our heads down and lay down, Shafiq Bhai didn't move at all. He said slowly, "Jamal. That's Jamal."

The sound of bullets could be heard again, first randomly, then continuously. There were a few big explosions, Shafiq Bhai craned his head to see, then said, "He threw the grenade pretty well. That's nobody but Rafiq. Do you see how strong he made the muscles in his arms by bowling in cricket? It's amazing, how hard he threw that."

A racket had started in the camp, people screaming at one another. People running around. I said, "Shafiq Bhai, shoot. Shoot—"

"As late as I can. We don't want them to know our position. If they try to get on the bunker on the roof then I will."

"There's nobody on the bunker is there?"

"No. You were right."

Rashed and I lay there with our heads down.

Rashed bravely lifted his head to see once, then put his head down again.

The sound of shooting was deafening. Among that I could hear people's voices, I thought I heard someone shout out, "Joy Bangla!" Oh, it had been so long since I had heard that slogan. Even among all the shooting and noise, I could hear my heart pounding, sounding like a drum. I put my head on the ground and thought, "Oh God, keep us all alive. Keep us all alive. Keep us alive keep us alive."

Shafiq Bhai said, "Hey shala trying to get on the bunker. Now I'll let you have it, I'll—"

Right next to my ear the machine gun roared.

Rashed lifted his head and cried, "Is he dead? Is he dead?"

"I don't know. He rolled away. I can't tell if it was because he got shot or just to take cover. Don't get up, they'll shoot at us now."

Before Shafiq Bhai was finished talking something whistled past above our heads and immediately there was the sound of shooting. They must be shooting at us. The bullets moved faster than sound, so we heard the sound later. I lay there, head against the ground, and said, "Oh God, Oh merciful, let us win this war. Let us win this war."

Shafiq Bhai kept shooting on and off. The empty cartridges were flying, the air was filling with the heavy smell of gunpowder. In the middle of it all Rashed and I lay crouched on the ground. Rashed shouted, "How is it, Shafiq Bhai?"

"Good. Very good. Stay down, don't get up."

We lay there and witnessed a terrible war. War. Which meant one person deliberately trying to kill another person. Thinking calmly and coolly. A war which we weren't supposed to fight. A war on which there were Pakistani military on one side. Who had spent all their lives learning one thing- how to kill other people. And on the other side, boys like Shafiq Bhai who weren't supposed to be fighting, there were supposed to be studying in schools and colleges.

Bullets were whistling past above our heads. Bits of brick were falling off the wall where bullets were hitting it. Things were breaking apart and collapsing all around

us. In the middle of all that we lay there with our heads down. I prayed, “Oh God, Oh merciful-”

Then Shafiq Bhai got shot. We didn’t understand, suddenly Shafiq Bhai made a sound, like he was in pain, then somehow rolled away backwards. Frightened, I called, “Shafiq Bhai, Shafiq Bhai.”

Shafiq Bhai didn’t reply.

Rashed rolled towards Shafiq Bhai. I went behind him. When we were close to him we called, “Shafiq Bhai—”

Shafiq Bhai groaned then gasped, “Go and give cover.”

“Cover?”

“Yes, quickly.”

We understood that Shafiq Bhai was telling us to shoot. I protested, “But you—”

“Quickly.”

Rashed and I crawled towards the SMG. We held it tightly and pressed down on the trigger. Immediately with a terrifying roar the whole SMG started to shake like it was alive. Bullets came out from it like fire.

“A little lower, to the right.” Shafiq Bhai was having difficulty speaking. He breathed in then said, “Aim for the stairs.”

We aimed the gun towards the stairs and held down the trigger. Again with a terrifying sound bullets shot out of the machine gun, and it kept shaking violently. Someone who tried to climb up the stairs jumped away.

“Stop. Now stop.”

We stopped.

Shafiq Bhai made a weak sound. “Again. Start again now.”

We held the trigger down again. The machine gun shook violently with a deafening roar. Bullets rained out from it. The breathtaking terror was no longer there. Not only terror, I also wasn’t feeling sorrow or pain or anything. There was a strange dull feeling in my head. As if even if anything did happen it wouldn’t matter. Like this had never begun and it would never end. Like our whole life was just holding down the trigger here. There had never been anything outside of this. There never would be.

“Stop. Now stop.”

We stopped. And right then everything lit up in a massive explosion. We felt a rush of hot air. It seemed that the whole universe had shattered into pieces. There was another explosion as soon as the first finished, then another and another.

Shafiq Bhai said in a tired voice, “Job well done.”

“What happened to you?”

“I’ve been shot.”

“Where?”

“In the leg. It ricocheted off the SMG and hit me. I’m bleeding. I can’t tell whether I’ve broken a bone or not.”

Shafiq Bhai groaned and tried to move his leg. He couldn’t. When he tried to get up he just fell down again. He made a weak sound and took a handkerchief out of his pocket and tied it firmly around his leg. Then he leaned against the wall and said in a tired voice, “What a bother!”

Shafiq Bhai looked. There were still one or two explosions happening. There was fire everywhere and people running around among it. Shouting and noise everywhere.

Shafiq Bhai was looking out when he suddenly saw something and started. He turned to us and said, "You leave. Right now."

"Leave?"

"Yes, right now. Quickly."

"But what about you?"

Shafiq Bhai said in an exasperated tone, "You don't have to worry about me. Get out of here now. The military is coming. Run--"

"But we can't just leave you--"

Shafiq Bhai said, "I will take my responsibility. You leave this instant. Right now."

"But--"

Shafiq Bhai screamed, "Leave. *This is an order!*"

We stood up. I couldn't think of anything else. We were in a kind of trance. There was fire everywhere. Everything seemed somehow unreal in the flames. People were screaming and running around. Someone was holding his child against his chest and running, his wife right behind him. There was such frightening terror in his face.

Then suddenly we froze. A team of military was running towards us, several rajakars with them. All of them ran right by us. They were heading for Noor Muhammed's bakery. What did they know?

15.

When I reached home the sky was beginning to lighten. There were a lot of people standing on our house's veranda, they were all watching the fire in the east. I had thought that everyone would come running to me and ask me where I had been. But nobody asked me anything. I saw a couple of other little kids running around. The adults were talking excitedly, and everyone seemed sort of happy. When she saw me Mother said, "Go on Ibu, go back to bed. The fight is over."

Then I realized that Father and Mother didn't even know I hadn't been home and had just come back. They thought I had been at home all along and had come out with everybody else at the sound of the fighting. If everything had ended well then it couldn't have gotten much better than this. But everything had not ended well. Shafiq Bhai was lying wounded on Noor Muhammed bakery's roof, I didn't know if he had moved from there, if he had been able to hide. How could I keep such important news to myself? I wanted someone to ask me so I could tell them. But nobody asked me. I heard Father telling Aru Apa's father, "Now the fighting isn't just random anymore. Seems like it's organized pretty well."

Aru Apa's father replied, "That's what it looks like. It's not so easy to attack such a big military camp and blow away part of it, is it?"

Mother said, "Oh, who knows if any of the freedom fighters have been shot. God keep those boys alive."

Aru Apa was also there with everyone else. She patted me on the head and said, "Did you see, Ibu, how the freedom fighters fought?"

I stood there quietly. Aru Apa said, "Just what you'd call amazing!"

I still didn't say anything. A little surprised, Aru Apa said, "What is it, why aren't you saying anything?"

Suddenly tears came to my eyes. Aru Apa bent down and looked at my face. She asked, "Why is there soot on your face?"

I hadn't known, it must have been the machine gun's gunpowder. I tried to wipe it away, Aru Apa wiped my face with the end of her sari and suddenly noticed my eyes were filled with tears. She said in surprise, "What is it Ibu? Why are you crying?"

I tried to stop crying.

Aru Apa suddenly suspected something. She looked at me sharply for awhile then took my hand and led me off to one side. Then she lowered her voice and asked, "Did you run away from home again?"

I didn't say anything.

"Did you see the fight from up close?"

I lowered my head. Suddenly Aru Apa asked in a voice filled with fear, "Did anything happen to anyone in the fight?"

I stayed quiet.

Aru Apa almost cried out, "Shafiq? Did anything happen to Shafiq?"

I couldn't say a word. Tears streamed out of my eyes.

Aru Apa moved away a step, held onto the wall and composed herself.

Everyone was standing on the veranda and watching the sky. It looked like the red fire would touch the sky. The freedom fighters' fire. Nobody knew that Aru Apa's world had crumbled apart with that fire.

Around ten someone went around with a mike, announcing that the town was peaceful and there was nothing to fear. The gallant Pakistani army had executed the miscreants that had come. And that's not all. They had caught someone live. That wounded miscreant would be taken to the *Eid-gah*⁴³. For attempting to break the largest Islamic country in the world this Indian agent would be given an exemplary punishment. The Peace Committee's chairman Azraf Ali had called everyone to be present at the *Eid-gah* to witness this punishment.

Listening to the announcement on the mike, I started to shake. By 'miscreant' and 'Indian agent' they meant Shafiq Bhai. Shafiq Bhai couldn't escape from Noor Muhammed's bakery, the military had caught him. Now all of the people in the Peace Committee would kill him together? Would they kill him? Would they kill Shafiq Bhai?

My whole body suddenly seized up and before I knew what was happening I violently threw up. Mother ran over and held me. "What happened all of a sudden? What happened?"

I looked at Mother and said, "The Peace Committee people are going to kill Shafiq Bhai."

"What are you saying?"

"Yes Mother, Shafiq Bhai was shot in the fight last night."

"How-how do you know?"

I began to sob. Mother held me tightly against her and sat there quietly. She said slowly, "Oh God, what have you done God?"

Rashed came around eleven. He had stopped by at the *Eid-gah*. There was a long noose hanging from a tree there. The place was surrounded by rajakars. Azraf Ali had

arrived, when they brought Shafiq Bhai he would be hanged. I asked, "Won't the freedom fighters try to save Shafiq Bhai?"

"I don't know. I'm sure they will. But how?"

"Then?"

"I bet the freedom fighters assume that some of them will die like this." Rashed said hopelessly, "I don't know."

We sat there quietly. Rashed said slowly, "Do you know what I did?"

"What?"

"I told the people who had gone to see the fun that it's rumored that there's a suicide squad of the freedom fighters there. There's going to be terrible fighting. They'll die themselves and kill everyone else too."

"You made that up?"

"No. I didn't make all of it up."

"Then?"

Rashed shook his hands and said. "Don't ask me. But you know what, when the news reached the Peace Committee, they suddenly got scared, and people are moving away."

"Does that mean they won't kill Shafiq Bhai now?"

"I don't know."

Right then another man went by on a rickshaw, announcing something on a mike. The announcement said that due to unavoidable circumstances, the exemplary punishment had been delayed. Everyone was requested not to go to Eid-gah. A new time would be announced shortly.

Rashed looked at me and laughed weakly. "I guess my news worked, Shafiq Bhai is alive for now."

"But for how long?"

"I don't know."

All day helicopters kept coming to our town. There must have been a lot of dead and injured military. The helicopters were taking away the badly wounded military. No one was being allowed to go to the rail station. A special train had come with a lot of military on it. Dead bodies were being taken on to the train by stretchers. When they blew away the arms depot, they also blew away part of our school. The library, where they had been so many good books.

Two days later we heard that Shafiq Bhai was still alive. Not only was he alive, he had been admitted to the Government Hospital. The Peace Committee and the rajakars wanted to kill him right away, but the Pakistani military wanted to keep him alive so that they could get information out of him. They were going to torture him to make him talk, and before torturing someone, he had to be perfectly healthy. Word had it that nobody knew the most horrible torture methods better than the Pakistani military. Putting people into water head first with their feet tied with a rope, putting hot needles under their nails, ripping their nails off, hanging them up and whipping them, and all kinds of other things.

Rashed and I went a few days and wandered around the Government Hospital. Once we even went inside, there were two police and rajakars sitting in front of a room in the corner. When we bravely asked who was inside, they shouted at us and shooed us away. But we asked around for awhile and figured out that Shafiq Bhai was in the room. He was better than before, he could walk with a limp. He was being given really good

medicines to make him well as soon as possible. Within a few days he would be taken to the camp and tortured. Then he would be killed. Usually people died while they were being tortured, and they didn't have to be killed again.

We became very upset when we heard all this.

The next day we were still upset. When one person is upset, everyone else becomes upset too. So when Ashraf said it would have been better if Shafiq Bhai had just died in the battle, then we became even more upset. Fazlu was about to say something even more upsetting when Rashed interrupted him, "How about if we rescue Shafiq Bhai?"

The three of us jumped up, startled. We said, "What did you say?"

"How about if we rescue Shafiq Bhai?"

"Rescue? R-r-r—" Fazlu couldn't finish his sentence.

"Yes." Rashed lowered his voice. "They're going to take Shafiq Bhai to the camp any day now. Once they do that he's finished. If we're going to rescue him we have to do it now—"

"But but—" Ashraf stuttered.

"But what?"

"Is it so easy? Police and rajakars are on guard twenty-four hours. Shafiq Bhai can't walk, how can you go to rescue him? Where will you keep him?"

Rashed frowned. "I have a plan. Listen to it first and think about it. It's an extremely dangerous plan but it might work. It involves the four of us."

"The four of us?"

"Yes. The plan depends on two things. One: If the doctor at the Government Hospital is Joy Bangla or not. Two: a stengun."

"A stengun?"

"Yes. The second thing is taken care of."

"What?" I asked in surprise, "What did you say?"

"I have a stengun. The freedom fighters gave it to me to hide, not to use. But if I need to use it in my judgement then I will."

Rashed stopped, then went on, "I had doubts about the first thing, but now I don't. The Government Hospital's Dr. Sirajul Karim is completely Joy Bangla. He secretly treats wounded freedom fighters in the hospital. I got this confirmed yesterday."

"From where?"

"Don't ask. You don't need to know."

We remembered that it was not right to show curiosity in something we did not need to know.

Ashraf said, "First tell us the plan. Let's hear it."

"It's very dangerous. We might get killed. Or—"

"Or what?"

"Or if things get complicated a couple of rajakars might get shot by our stengun. But I don't want that."

I shook my head. "Neither do we."

"First tell us the plan."

"Then listen. Other than the stengun we need a small pair of scissors, a few letters, and a bandage."

I frowned. "Bandage? Scissors? What are you talking about?"

“Then listen—” Rashed told us his plan. After hearing it our jaws dropped open. We hadn’t had the slightest idea that Rashed was so smart. When he grew up there was no doubt he would be an Einstein or a *Nasiruddin Hojja*⁴⁴.

Fazlu clapped him on the back and exclaimed, “First-class!”

“What do you think? Will it work?”

Ashraf said, “A thousand times!”

“Then everyone has to promise right now that you won’t tell anyone.”

We said in unison, “We won’t.”

Then the four of us put our hands together and vowed that we would save Shafiq Bhai.

16.

Dr. Sirajul Karim’s house was attached to the hospital. It had been made in such a way that if need be he could get to the hospital quickly. He wasn’t too old. He was a little plump; the hair on the front of his head was thinning a little. He had two kids. The next morning we went to see him, which was the first thing to be done in the plan. First we had decided that all four of us would go, but the Rashed said only one of us should go. So then we decided that Ashraf would go. But Ashraf didn’t agree, he said that last year Dr. Sirajul Karim had treated him for chicken pox and might recognize him. So then everyone told me to go. I didn’t want to go at all, but somebody had to do it. So I agreed. I practiced what I had to say and how I had to say it a few times, then went to the Doctor’s house. When the doctor saw me he said, “Whom do you want, my boy?”

“You.”

“Me?”

“Yes. Doctor Uncle, I have come to see you on very important business.”

“What?”

“I have to tell you secretly.”

“Secretly?” The doctor looked at me in surprise, “What does a little kid like you have to say that’s so secret?”

“There’s something.”

“Then come on inside.”

I went inside with him. We went to a room and he closed the door behind us. He sat down in a chair and said to me, “Go ahead.”

I swallowed and said, “Shafiq Bhai from our neighborhood is a freedom fighter. He was shot the day the military camp was attacked.”

Doctor Shahib frowned at me, taken aback.

“Now Shafiq Bhai is in your hospital.”

Doctor Shahib still didn’t say anything. I continued, “We want to rescue him. We need your help for that.”

Doctor Shahib said angrily, “Little kids should act like little kids. Life is not so easy. Life is not an adventure book. Go home and play. Go.”

“Please listen to what I have to say.”

“No, I won’t.”

I said desperately, “We helped in the attack on the military camp. We took ammo to them. The freedom fighters stay in touch with us. We have arms. If need be we take the arms to them. We-”

“I don’t want to hear anything. Go home.”

“Just listen to how we want to do it.”

“No.”

“If they take Shafiq Bhai to the military camp then they will inhumanly torture him to death. Inhuman torture—”

Doctor Shahib stopped me and said, “Don’t play with fire. Go home. I have a lot to do.”

Doctor Shahib stood up and so did I. I was almost crying with anger and disappointment. I stopped my tears and tried one last time. “Doctor Uncle, now a time has come which has never come before. No one quite knows what to do now. Just because you are grown up and we aren’t doesn’t mean you know more than we do—”

Doctor Uncle was a bit startled. I said again, “Just because we are young doesn’t mean we don’t understand anything. You were also young once.”

I paused for breath then said, “If we don’t do anything then they will kill Shafiq Bhai today or tomorrow. We have to save him now. If you help it will be easier. If you don’t it will be harder. That’s the only difference. “

I was leaving when Doctor Shahib stopped me, “Wait a minute.”

I turned and said, “Yes?”

“Let me hear your plan.”

I explained the plan to him. Truth to tell, he listened to it all then started to laugh a little near the end. He asked, “Whose idea is this?”

“We have a friend, his name is—” About to say his name, I stopped. I shook my head and said, “But I can’t tell you his name. I don’t have the permission to.”

Doctor Shahib widened his eyes. “You don’t have the permission?”

“No. We don’t tell anybody anything that isn’t absolutely necessary.”

“That’s not bad.” Doctor Uncle paused then said, “I just want to know one thing.”

“What?”

“Suppose you get caught. Then they’ll beat you up and say, ‘Who was with you?’ What will you say? You’ll say Doctor Uncle was. And then what? You’re just kids, they’ll probably beat you up and let you go. But what about me? They’ll shoot me on the riverbank. My body will float on the river and get eaten in two days by dogs and foxes and vultures. I have two children and a wife, they’ll get kicked out of the house onto the street. Am I right?”

I frantically shook my head. “If we get caught we’ll never say your name. Never.”

“You don’t know what torture is. You don’t know how people are tortured. If you get caught, not only you, you father will also tell them everything! You cannot even begin to imagine what will happen when this Shafiq boy is taken to the camp. Do you understand? I would like to give him a lethal injection. Do him a favor.”

“But you won’t have to do that. We will—”

“That’s what you think. I heard it all.” Doctor Uncle laughed mysteriously and said, “I don’t agree.”

I had thought that I had convinced him. But he had backed out again. I stammered, “But- but-”

“Do you know what adults do when kids act crazy?”

“What?”

“They scold them. If need be they grab them by the neck and throw them out. Now I’m going to grab you by the neck and throw you out.”

Doctor Shahib laughed a little and patted me on the back. He said kindly, “Get out of the house.”

“I should get out of the house?”

“Yes. Get out of the house.”

I dumbly left the house. No one had ever kicked me out of their house before. This was the first time. Doctor Shahib had kicked me out of his house, but he hadn’t humiliated me as much as he should have. There had been no anger or scorn in his voice. He hadn’t spoken forcefully. He had just said the words, as if he was only saying them because he had to.

I waked along absentmindedly. When I came near the teashop Rashed, Fazlu and Ashraf joined me. Ashraf lowered his voice and said, “What did he say?”

“I didn’t quite get it.”

“You didn’t get what?”

“I think I almost had him convinced. But once I had said everything he said, ‘I don’t agree.’”

“He said that?”

“Yes, then he said, ‘Now I will grab you by the neck and throw you out of the house.’”

“Grab you by the neck?”

“Yes, then he patted me on the back and kicked me out pretty nicely. He didn’t say anything angrily even once.”

Rashed said darkly, “But I thought Doctor Shahib was on Joy Bangla’s side.”

“Yes, he is. But he doesn’t want to get involved in any plans with kids like us. He was scared.”

Rashed, face tight, said determinedly, “If we don’t do anything they’ll kill Shafiq Bhai anyway. We have to try. Without Doctor Shahib. When he sees that we’ve done something without him then he won’t have a choice.”

We nodded.

Ashraf said, “We should check out the hospital one last time in case we have to make any changes.”

“Yes.” Rashed said, “There’s no point in all of us going. Two is enough. Ibu and me can go. You guys wait here.”

“Okay.”

Rashed and I followed a girl into the hospital. The hospital smelled of phenyl inside. From somewhere patients’ screams could be heard. Shafiq Bhai’s room was off to one side, a rajakar was sitting and smoking outside of it. We didn’t go there. On the other side near a door was a table with an empty stretcher on top of it. I was a bit puzzled, our plan required a stretcher, which I had told Doctor Shahib. He hadn’t agreed with us but he had still arranged the stretcher. I quickly walked past the corridor into another room. In the room were rows and rows of beds, among which one bed near the wall was empty. Just like I had told Doctor Uncle.

I grabbed Rashed. “Rashed!”

“What?”

“Doctor Uncle arranged everything for us! Look at the empty bed! The stretcher!”

“But how? Didn’t he tell you that he didn’t agree?”

Suddenly I understood everything! I said, “Don’t you understand? If we get caught then no one will believe that Doctor Shahib was with us!”

“Why not?”

“Remember he told me that he didn’t agree, not only that he even threw me out of the house!”

“But the stretcher? The empty bed?”

“Can’t the be a stretcher in a hospital? Can’t there be an empty bed?”

Rashed looked at me and laughed in delight. “Then we have nothing to worry about!”

“No.”

In the afternoon we all went home to shower and eat. No one would have the slightest idea by looking at us that we were about to do something so incredible. Something could go wrong, something could, someone could die, but I removed all those thoughts from my head. At the dining table Mother said to me, “What’s wrong Ibu, why are you so quiet?”

“No, nothing.”

“You do know that we’re leaving.”

“When?”

“Oh, tomorrow or day after. Forhad Shahib, Aru’s father, arranged a boat today.”

“Oh.”

“Do you know anything about what’s going on?”

“Anything about what?”

“How Shafiq is or anything.”

“He can walk a little.” My voice trembled as I said, “They’re going to take him to the camp any day now.”

Mother gave a sigh and looked away.

17.

Around five I left home. I had a couple of storybooks with me, none of which had my name on them. I had written nonsense names inside them. I went first to Fazlu’s house. Then with Fazlu to Ashraf’s. Ashraf came out with a ball. Fazlu and I were barefoot, Ashraf was wearing a pair of tennis shoes. We ran better barefoot, but Ashraf claimed he couldn’t run without the tennis shoes. We were all wearing two different shirts, one on top of the other. If we took off the shirt on the top then the one on the bottom would be seen. It was a pretty warm day, and wearing two shirts, we felt like we were boiling. Besides the shirts there was something else in our pockets— handkerchiefs. We had knotted the two ends and made them like tubes so they could be slipped on as masks. There were two holes in the handkerchiefs for eyes, so that after we put them on we wouldn’t have any trouble seeing. I had tried it on at home in front of the mirror, it looked hideous, but our faces would be covered.

We stopped at a teashop near the hospital. I looked at Ashraf and Fazlu and attempted a laugh. I didn’t think it worked too well though. Rashed wasn’t with us, he would bring the stengun and meet us directly at the hospital. Ashraf said, “Then let’s separate now?”

“Yes.”

We looked at one another. I had a weird feeling in my stomach – like how you feel right before you get the questions in the final exams. Fazlu, his face thin, said, “I’m a little scared.”

I said, “You could very well be.”

“Do you think everything will be all right?”

“Of course!” Ashraf slapped himself on the chest and said, “I prayed two *rakhats*⁴⁵ of *nofol*⁴⁶ prayers.”

I said to Ashraf, “Give me your ball.”

Ashraf handed me the ball. I said, “See you at the battlefield.”

Fazlu tried to smile, Ashraf didn’t say anything.

I walked along the road to the hospital with my books and Ashraf’s ball. The big road passed in front of the hospital, on the other side of it was the lake. Next to the lake was a graveyard. It wasn’t the smartest of ideas to keep a graveyard so close to a hospital, it probably had some kind of an effect on the patients, but it out worked very nicely in our plan. The graveyard was very old, the wall had broken down in places and was covered by trees and leaves, it was creepy even in the daytime. There were slums on the other side of the graveyard, a few day laborers lived there in small huts. On the other side of that was a road leading to the river. I leaned against the graveyard wall, and when I was sure nobody was there and no one was noticing me, I dropped the ball and the books. This was part of our plan.

With my work at the graveyard finished, I went back to the hospital. There was no point in coming early so I wandered around and at exactly ten minutes to six I went into the hospital. Instead of going in alone, I went in with a group of people, so it would look like I had come with them. Inside the hospital I found a listless patient in a large ward and sat down next to him. As if I had come to visit him. I saw Doctor Shahib while sitting there, he was checking the patients. He saw me, but it didn’t look as if he had recognized me. After awhile I saw Fazlu in a corner, he had come in with another group of people. I saw Ashraf as well, walking along the corridor. He must be waiting somewhere downstairs. I didn’t see Rashed. He had the stengun, he was the most important person. If for any reason he didn’t come, then the whole plan would be ruined. I sat there and waited. People were coming and going but neither of them noticed Fazlu or me. A little later when catastrophe would break out then everyone would watch wide-eyed!

Finally I saw Rashed come in. He was holding a bag with some bananas in it. Surely the stengun was underneath them. Rashed came in and walked away, not looking as if he knew us.

I sat there, hardly able to breathe. A few more minutes and then would come the terrifying moment. What would happen then? Would we really be able to save Shafiq Bhai? Would everything really work out as planned? Would there be any fighting? Would anybody die today? Would we? Would the rajakars? Now there was no point in wondering about it. What would happen, would happen, and we would just do what we had to.

I couldn’t breathe. I felt like I would suffocate. I was sitting there with my ears cocked, and right then the clock struck six on the gong.

I carefully stood up. I saw Fazlu stand up as well. I didn’t know where Ashraf and Fazlu were, but wherever they were they must be standing up too. I said to myself, ‘Oh God please let everything end well.’

I calmly walked out of the room. Now we had to walk down the corridor and reach Shafiq Bhai's room in ten seconds. There was no need to rush, ten seconds was plenty. I counted mentally, one thousand one, one thousand two, one thousand three-

Without looking I could tell Fazlu was walking next to me. As we turned the corridor we immediately saw Shafiq Bhai's room. In front of the room the rajakar's back was to us. There was nobody with him, at this time the two police left and came back a little later at night. That was why we had chosen this time. The rajakar's back was to us, which meant me and Fazlu had to jump on him first. Blood rushed to my chest in excitement.

Up ahead I suddenly saw Rashed and Ashraf. Rashed's hand was inside the bag, which meant he must be holding the stengun.

Fazlu and I went forward a little. Rashed and Ashraf went forward a little. I looked at Fazlu, Fazlu looked at me, then the two of us ran forward and leaped on top of the rajakar. He tumbled off his chair onto the ground. He was still holding the rifle, Fazlu snatched it away from him. I kicked him with all my might in his head, before I could kick him again Rashed had taken out his stengun and was saying viciously, "Close your eyes you son of a pig."

The rajakar closed his eyes.

"Get inside the room- don't you dare get up. If you try to do anything funny I'll shoot."

Rashed looked like he would really shoot if he needed to. The rajakar crawled with his eyes closed into Shafiq Bhai's room. He was shaking with fear.

Rashed put on his mask and stood by the door, then shot at the window glass a couple of times. The glass shattered with a tremendous noise, with the noise of the bullets and the smoke the place became somehow frightening. Rashed shouted out, "This is a commando attack, don't come close. There's one platoon of freedom fighters here to save an injured freedom fighter and finish off the rajakars. Nobody come close."

People peeked at us from places in the hospital, but nobody came near us. It sounded like a few people were rushing to hide in the next ward. We knew there were a few wounded rajakars in the hospital as well.

We had our jobs divided, and we quickly began to work. Fazlu tied the rajakars hands firmly behind his back. He covered his eyes with a handkerchief and held the rifle against his back. Ashraf covered his face with his handkerchief and went to get the stretcher. Rashed stood on guard with the stengun.

Wearing my mask, I ran to Shafiq Bhai's bed. He had a long beard and long hair, and he looked sort of like a young version of Rabindranath. Shafiq Bhai stared at me in surprise, disbelief on his face. I said in a heavy voice, "Comrade Shafiq! A special commando team of the freedom fighters has come to save you."

"Me?"

"Yes. Outside there are two motorcycles, at the river there is a speedboat-" I suddenly lowered my voice and said, "I'll explain everything later, just come on now!"

Ashraf brought the stretcher and we lay Shafiq Bhai down on it and covered him with a sheet. The four of us grabbed the four ends of it and went out. Shafiq Bhai had never been fat and now he had lost even more weight.

The hospital's patients, nurses, and doctors were coming to see. If we had been military then they would have been scared but freedom fighters were their own people, so

what was there to fear? Rashed threatened, “Nobody come close. We have to go to the second team right now.”

People still came close to see. Curiosity was a powerful thing.

We continued to run. Up ahead was small corridor, we went there and put down the stretcher. Rashed ran ahead. People were still crowding around. We needed some time to explain everything to Shafiq Bhai, if there were a crowd like this then it would be difficult. Rashed leaped forward with a terrifying scream, lifted the stengun and began to shoot. Something shattered and with all the smoke and shooting and people running around, the situation turned terrifying in a moment. Curious people got frightened and moved away, and we immediately began our work. Before anyone could see we pulled Shafiq Bhai into a small room full of junk, which we had decided on before. I handed him a shirt and a small packet and whispered, “Put on the shirt. There’s scissors in the packet, cut off your beard and go and lie down in the third bed in the ward. The bed is empty for you.”

Shafiq Bhai didn’t understand anything. He said in surprise, “I thought you were going to rescue me—”

“Everyone will think that we rescued you and took you away! But actually you’ll stay here. You are wounded rajakar Salamat Ali. There are a few letters from villagers in your pocket. If you have the time then tie a bandage to your arm, like you were shot in the arm.”

A sudden smile lit up Shafiq Bhai’s face. He clapped me on the back and said, “You little rascals!”

I smiled with all my teeth showing, but Shafiq Bhai didn’t see it since my face was covered with the mask. Besides, my heart was pounding in excitement, until I could cover the stretcher in a sheet and get out of there, neither Shafiq Bhai nor us were safe. As soon as I came out of the small room Fazlu said, “I checked everything out up ahead, it’s all okay.”

“Then let’s go.”

We ran with the stretcher covered in a sheet. Shafiq Bhai’s pillow and the rajakar’s rifle were on the stretcher. If anyone noticed carefully, then they might be able to tell that nobody was there, but nobody would get the chance to look at us carefully. By now it was dark outside. We would run and hide in the graveyard now.

Outside the hospital we carefully descended the steps. On the road we looked back once, then turned and kept running. To make it believable, we put the stretcher down once and changed hands. Some people had come very close to us, so Rashed suddenly aimed at the sky and let off a few rounds from the stengun. The people backed away immediately. No one dared to come near us then, they just watched us from a distance.

We kept running as fast as we could. Just a little further and we would reach the graveyard.

Suddenly something whistled past my ear and almost immediately I heard the sound of shooting.

“They’re shooting at us!”

“Don’t stop. Nobody stop.”

We kept running as fast as we could. A few more steps and we would enter the graveyard. A few more bullets whistled by around us and in the midst of that we went

into the graveyard. Rashed put the stretcher down and asked, panting, "Is everyone okay?"

"Yes."

"Very good. Everyone change and get ready to go." We took off the masks. We opened our top shirts to reveal the bottom ones. Then we picked up the books and the ball we had left behind and divided them out among us then ran to the other side of the graveyard. It was very dark and eerie, but for the first time none of us worried about ghosts.

On the other side of the graveyard were slums. When they saw us coming out of the darkness, a few people came towards us. They asked, "What is it?"

We had come out separately. I was with Ashraf, and when I couldn't think of anything to say I just said the truth. Lies were always supposed to be close to the truth. I said, "Freedom fighters!"

"Freedom fighters?"

"Yes, they're scary. So many weapons."

The people said to one another, "Have the freedom fighters come then?" One of them looked at me and said, "There's nothing to fear from the freedom fighters. Freedom fighters are our own people! It's the military you should be scared of."

The others nodded. "Yes. The military and the rajakars."

Ashraf said, "What if a fight starts? I'm scared."

"Don't be scared. Keep your head down and lie on the ground."

I said, "Let's go home." They nodded their heads. "Yes, go home. It's not a good idea to stay out after dark."

Ashraf and I quickly left. It wouldn't be a good idea to stay here when the people who had been shooting at us started to search.

We reached home in ten minutes. While we were going by rickshaw we saw Rashed and Fazlu in another rickshaw, flying by with a young, strong rickshaw-puller. That meant all of us had come back safely. That meant we had saved Shafiq Bhai. He would go around perfectly healthy right under the hospital military's noses.

At night at the dinner table Father said to Mother, "The freedom fighters have done another operation."

"Is that so?"

"Yes. It's unbelievable. The hospital was full of rajakars and military police, and in the middle of that a commando team of the freedom fighters appeared."

"Really?"

"Yes. There was tremendous fighting. Six or seven military killed. Then do you know what happened?"

"What?"

Father said wide-eyed, "They rescued Shafiq!"

"Really?" Mother looked at me and said, "Did you hear that Ibu? Your Shafiq Bhai has been saved!"

I pretended to be shocked and delighted. Mother asked, "How did they do it? Where did they take him?"

Father shook his head and said, "Nobody knows. They vanished like magic."

Mother shook her head in disbelief. "Oh! How brave they are."

Father continued seriously, "Very organized. Apparently they even have little kids on their team. Ibu's size."

"Really?"

"Yes. First they threw in a grenade and ran away. They pull the pin out with their teeth and throw it like this—" Father showed with his hands how to throw a grenade.

Mother shook her head and murmured, "Oh how brave."

Father said, "Now if only they can get away. A huge military team is out. They're searching the place very thoroughly. After all, their prestige is at stake. Just pray that they can get out of there in time."

"I am always praying."

Father looked at me and asked, "Do you know anything Ibu?"

I choked on my food and sputtered, "No."

"Your friend Rashed must know. He's a mobile newspaper—" Father laughed out loud. He was in a very good mood that day.

I nodded. "When he comes tomorrow I'll ask him."

18.

A few days later we left town. First Fazlu and all left. He left very suddenly, he didn't even have the chance to meet us before he left. Then Ashraf left. His father took everyone to Dhaka. Apparently Dhaka City was the safest place to be then. Then came the day for us to go. Two boats had been arranged, and we would go with Aru Apa and all into the village. Before we left I went through a lot of trouble to go and visit Rashed. News had spread in town that the freedom fighters had little kids on their team, so Father wouldn't let me leave the house.

When Rashed heard that I was also leaving he got very upset. He asked me, "You're really leaving?"

"Yes. Father doesn't want to stay any more. Staying so close to the military camp is frightening."

Rashed sighed and said, "Then I have to do everything alone!"

"What are you going to go alone?"

"I don't have the permission—" Rashed laughed. He said, "There's no problem with telling you! You and me are the same." Then he lowered his voice. "We're going to blow up the bridge on the river. Frogmen are here, with limpet mines."

"Frogmen?"

"Yes, people who swim in the water with flippers like frogs on their feet."

"Really?"

"Yes. The day and date have been decided too, but nobody knows what they are. There's going to be a big fight in Kamalganj. Then they're going to open a permanent front here. They want to make sure that no supplies can go before then."

"Really?"

"Yes. You know what I said to do?"

"What?"

"Not to blow up the bridge yet. When there's a military train on the bridge, then it'll go 'boom!'" Rashed showed me how the bridge would blow with his hands.

I lowered my voice and said, "But how will you know it's a military train? IF you blow up a passenger train by mistake—"

"No no we definitely can't do that." Rashed shook his head. "Suppose a battle begins in Kamalganj. Then a train with military and arms will definitely go there. Then suppose one of us is at the station and we see the train leave and we send news, then when it's on the bridge, 'boom!'" Rashed blew the bridge up with his hands again.

"How will you send the news?"

"Haven't decided that yet. If it's day time then with a mirror—"

"If it's a cloudy day?"

Rashed laughed a little and said, "We'll think about it and figure out something! Don't you remember how we saved Shafiq Bhai?"

Both of started laughing and pushing each other around as we remembered the incident. I lowered my voice and asked, "How is Shafiq Bhai now?"

"Good. He's reached the border by know. He didn't have the courage to stay in the hospital. The next morning he left on a rickshaw, right in front of everybody!"

Rashed and I laughed again in delight. Rashed stopped laughing and said, "It would be good if you were here. Everyone's leaving, now I'm alone."

Rashed sighed and looked at me sadly. I said, "I don't want to go either. But what can I do? It's a big problem being young, we always have to listen to the grown-ups."

"That's true."

Rashed and I talked for a long time. We walked along the road then turned back again. Then Rashed took me to a teashop and treated me to tea with heavy cream. On the way back Rashed grabbed my hand and said a little hesitantly, "Will you be my friend?"

A little surprised, I replied, "Why? Aren't I your friend already?"

"No I mean my best friend. Friends forever. A friend who's there even if you die. Will you?"

I nodded. "I will."

Rashed smiled happily then. He whispered, "I don't have any best friends. I mean I didn't before. I really need a friend I can tell everything to."

"Everything like?"

"There's so much to say! Do you know anything about me? Who I am? What my father is? What he does? Do you know anything?"

I shook my head. "No I don't."

Sometimes I had been curious but I had never asked Rashed. Rashed laughed a little and said, "Now since you're my best friend I'll tell you everything some day. These days I'm just scared that one of us will die."

"That's true."

Rashed suddenly looked at my face and asked, "If I ever die, thn will you remember me?"

I don't know why Rashed said that. But I felt a sudden lurch in my chest. I grabbed his hand and said, "Oof silly! Why should you die?"

Rashed nodded and said, "Yes it's not right to talk about dying."

We were so small but we still had to worry about staying alive and dying!

We set out early in the morning, Aru Apa and all and us divided among the two boats. The two boats went along almost touching the riverbank. Sometimes a military

gunboat would appear then and we would have to hide by going into a nearby gully. The two boats went along very close together. In the afternoon the boats stopped and food was cooked. Strange food, eggs broken into lentils, but not bad to eat. But then again when you're hungry anything tastes good. We had just been sitting there in the boats all day but still I was starving.

In the afternoon the boats left again after waiting for two hours or so. Afternoon became evening, evening became night. I sat on the boat's roof and watched the sky. There was a strangely calm silence all around. The sound of the water splashing was there, but after awhile I stopped hearing it. It was as if there wasn't any sound anywhere. The stars had come out. Thousands of thousands of stars. I gazed at them with surprise. Each star was millions and millions of miles away from the earth. The universe was so huge, and in it the earth was so tiny. In this tiny little world we could not live in our own home in our own country. They would chase us from one place to the other like we were animals.

The two boats left the big river and went into a smaller one. The boatman said lightly, "Nothing to fear now!"

Aru Apa asked from inside the boat, "What isn't there to fear?"

"It's Joy Bangla here. This is *Nil Gang*⁴⁷. Gunboats don't come to *Nil Gang*."

"Why not?"

"This place is Joy Bangla. Ha ha ha—" The boatman laughed.

"How much longer will it take?"

"Quite awhile dear. Not before early morning."

Aru Apa came out from inside the boat and said, "Oh! How lovely." When she saw me on the roof she said, "Well! You're sitting there like a stork. Move, give me some room. I want to sit there too."

I made her room. Aru Apa sat down next to me and said, "Careful, don't fall!"

"Why would I fall? Are you falling?"

"I'm an old girl why should I fall? I'm telling you since you're a kid."

"You think we can't do anything because we're kids?"

Aru Apa understood the indigence in my voice and hugged me. "All right I won't say it anymore. You're not kids anymore. You're grown up." Aru Apa pretended to make a speech. "In the year of nineteen seventy-one in the battle for liberation these children's innocence was snatched away from them."

Aru Apa was joking but I thought there was some truth in what she was saying. It was true for me. It was true for Rashed and me. It was true for Fazlu and Ashraf.

The two of us sat there quietly for awhile. At some point Aru Apa lowered her voice and asked, "Do you know any news of your Shafiq Bhai? Where is he now?"

I didn't say anything.

Aru Apa looked at me. "You know something, don't you?"

I stayed quiet.

Aru Apa said again, "Tell me where he is. How he is. Who rescued him, where they took him. Tell me."

"Top secret. I don't have the permission to say."

"Please tell me. I won't tell anybody. Here, I'm touching you and saying it."

"What happens if you touch me and say it?"

"I think you start to itch."

“Quit it! Say you swear on God.”

“I swear on God.”

“You won’t tell anyone?”

“I won’t tell anyone.”

I hid a laugh and said, “First tell me who rescued Shafiq Bhai from the hospital?”

“A suicide squad of the freedom fighters. A specially trained commando unit.”

“How many of them were there?”

“Sixteen or seventeen.”

“How did they take Shafiq Bhai away?”

“First on motorcycle then by speedboat.”

“Was there a fight at the hospital?”

“Yes, a small one.”

“Did anybody die?”

“Four rajakars and two military.”

I began to giggle. Aru Apa asked, “What are you laughing about?”

“You won’t tell anybody will you?”

“No, I won’t.”

I lowered my voice and said, “We rescued Shafiq Bhai.”

Aru Apa didn’t quite understand what I was saying. “What did you say?”

“We rescued Shafiq Bhai. Me, Rashed, Fazlu and Ashraf.”

“What? What?” Aru Apa still didn’t understand.

“Suicide squad, commando, that’s all made up. We spread that around. Actually it was just the four of us.”

“The four of you? You?”

“Yes.”

“Where did you take Shafiq? How did you do it?”

“We didn’t take him anywhere. We just pretended that we took him away. We ran away with an empty stretcher covered with a sheet. Shafiq Bhai hid in a small room and cut off his beard and changed his shirt and managed to lie down in an empty bed among all the shouting and people and everything. We had arranged with Doctor Shahib to have an empty bed ready. No one noticed.”

“You? You?” Aru Apa couldn’t say anything else. I laughed again and said, “Rashed had a stengun—”

“Stengun? Rashed? Such a little kid—”

“The freedom fighters had given it to him to keep, so we used it. No harm done. He just used it a couple of times to scare people. And we couldn’t do an operation like that empty-handed! When the rajakar fell on the ground—”

“You fought with rajakars?”

“Yes, me and Fazlu pushed the rajakar to the ground—”

I explained it all to Aru Apa. She listened to everything and put her hand to her head and said, “You? You? Such little kids did such a big thing? Such little kids?”

I said, “Aru Apa, a time like this has never come before. No one knows what to do. The grown ups don’t know and neither do the kids. So then we did what we thought was should do.”

Aru Apa looked at me and said, “Wow you’ve learnt to talk like a grown-up.”

I got a little embarrassed. “Actually Rashed said that. Rashed always talks like grown-ups. The idea for this operation of ours was Rashed’s too.”

“Really?”

“Yes. We worked out the details but the real idea was Rashed’s. We would pretend to take Shafiq Bhai away but actually we wouldn’t. Awesome idea!”

“Yes, it’s awedome.”

“The next day Shafiq Bhai left on a rickshaw right in front of everybody. The first night he was in town. After that he went to a hospital near the border by boat.”

Aru Apa looked at me for awhile then hugged me tightly. She whispered, “Do you know what a country is Ibu? A country is its people. With people like you who can hold the country back? Who? Who?”

Aru Apa was right. No one could hold the country back. The war that was supposed to last for years finished in nine months. Ten million people like Dilip became refugees and went to India. On the streets, in forests, in swamps, they were living like animals. Not one, not two, but ten million. Most countries in the world didn’t have that many people! India was feeding them and educating them, but how long could they do that? Finally India declared war on Pakistan and came forward. The Indian military came on the freedom fighters’ side. We thought there would be fierce fighting then. But nothing doing, there wasn’t a trace of any fighting. One hundred thousand Pakistani military surrendered like cowardly dogs in two weeks’ time.

I hadn’t understood then, but I did later. It was very easy to shoot innocent people. The Pakistani military was very good at that, it killed three million people in nine months. But real war was not so easy. Three different things were needed for war. One was a government to plan the war. Another was military, who fought with arms and ammunition. And third were the people of the country, who would support the country in the war. These three things were needed for any war, if any one was missing you would not be able to win in the war. The Pakistani military had the first two but not the third. All the people in the country were against the Pakistani military, so when the Indian military sided with the freedom fighters, the Pakistani backed away and surrendered like real cowards. That was only possible because of the people of the country. It did not matter whether they fought with arms or not. All the people were united and they were the freedom fighters!

The country was liberated on the sixteenth of December. We went back to our town from the village at the end of January. There were no roads or bridges or anything. When the Pakistani military saw that they didn’t have a chance, they destroyed everything, roads, bridges, factories, everything. No one could beat them at cowardice.

The day we reached the town on a launch was the twenty-ninth of January in the afternoon. When we got to our house we were shocked. There were doors and windows but there was nothing inside, everything had been ransacked. Everything that was inside had been looted and broken up. Mother wrapped her sari around her waist and started pulling things around, and I ran outside to check things out. First I went to Fazlu’s house and found Ashraf there as well. When they saw me they ran towards me screaming, “Ibu’s here! Ibu’s here!”

After we were done hugging each other and everything I asked, “Were you guys okay?”

“Yes. Staying alive means we’re okay.”

“Rashed, where’s Rashed?”

Ashraf and Fazlu kind of jumped.

They looked at one another, and I saw their faces had become deathly pale.

Ashraf grabbed me with both hands and said, “Oh God. You don’t know yet?”

“I don’t know what?”

Neither of them said anything, they just looked at me fearfully.

“What is it? Why aren’t you saying anything?”

Still neither of them spoke.

“What happened to Rashed?”

Ashraf swallowed and said, “On the second of December he got caught near the market. There were six grenades in his bag. Ashraf Ali and some of the rajakars took him to the riverbank and stood him up – stood him up–”

Ashraf suddenly began to sob.

I wanted to scream and shatter the whole world apart.

Oh God! What have you done? What have you done? What?

Epilogue

A long time passed after that. A long time. A long long time. No, I never forgot Rashed. I never will forget him. I had promised him that I wouldn’t – even if I hadn’t promised I wouldn’t. Was it so easy to forget a person like Rashed?

When I am upset about anything then I talk to Rashed. If I close my eyes he comes and stands in front of me. I have grown up but Rashed hasn’t. He’s still a little kid. When Rashed comes in front of me I also become a kid again. I say, “Hey Rashed.”

“What is it?”

“How are you?”

“Good.”

“What’s wrong with your hair? Looks like a bird’s nest.”

Rashed laughs and tries to fix his hair with his fingers. No use. It just gets even messier! I say, “Shafiq Bhai’s wedding, you know that?”

“I know.”

“How do you know?”

Rashed laughs, “I know everything! I get all the news.”

“Do you know who he’s marrying?”

“Hee hee hee! Who else, Aru Apa!”

“Yes,” I nodd, “When I was little then do you know how Aru Apa used to tease me?”

“How?”

“She’d always say that she’d marry me!”

Rashed chuckles again. “Go and ask her now! Hee hee hee-”

“Rashed, do you know what Aru Apa said?”

“What?”

“After she’s married and has children, if she has a boy she’ll name him Rashed. Rashed Hasan.”

“Really?” Rashed suddenly becomes very happy. He asks again, “Really?”

“Yes, really. I thought I would do the same thing.”

“What will you do?”

“When I grow old and get married and have kids, I’ll name my son Rashed. What do you say?”

Rashed laughs mischievously, “You do something else.”

“What?”

“Name your kid Laddu!”

Then Rashed rolls around in laughter.

A little later I say again, “Hey Rashed.”

“What?”

“Can I ask you something?”

“What?”

“Wh-when they shot you, did it hurt?”

Rashed becomes a little quiet. He begins to look sad. He puts his head down and says, “Yes.”

“Did it hurt a lot? A lot?”

He nods again. Then he says slowly, “You know what was worse than the pain?”

“What?”

“The time that I realized that I was going to die. The rajakars were standing in front of me with their rifles raised. Azraf Ali was behind them. One of them said, ‘Sir let him go, he’s only a child.’ Azraf Ali screamed, ‘A snake’s baby grows up to be a snake.’ Then he looked at me and said, ‘Recite the kalmas’ then suddenly I got an empty feeling in my chest, that was the feeling. I thought, oh! The world, the sky the river the trees, I won’t see any of it ever again. Never again. Never-”

“Rashed,” my voice catches, “Don’t say anymore. It hurts.”

“All right I won’t.” Rashed is quiet for awhile before he says, “But make sure it never happens again. Never.”

I say slowly, “It won’t.”

Rashed slowly walks away then. His face is hidden from me but I know there are tears in his eyes. Tears of sadness. Sadness because of the world. Sadness because of the people of the world.

Rashed, don’t cry. Please.

Glossary

- 1 Laddu : A Bengali round-shaped sweet.
- 2 Chomchom : A Bengali sweet made from dairy products.
- 3 Rabindranath Tagore : Famous Bengali poet. Nobel Laureate, writer/composer of Bangladesh national anthem.
- 4 Kazi Nazrul Islam : National poet of Bangladesh.
- 5 Garo : Hilly range at Northern Bangladesh.
- 6 Bhai : Brother. Used for addressing older males.
- 7 NSF : National Student federation. Pro-government student organization.
- 8 Shala : Brother-in-law. Widely used as a curse.
- 9 Malaun : Derogatory communal slur used towards Hindus.
- 10 Apa : Sister. Used for addressing older females.
- 11 Yahiya Khan : Pakistani general. Army president during 1971.
- 12 Sheikh Mujib : Father of the Nation of Bangladesh. Leader of East Pakistan during 1971.
- 13 Desh : country.
- 14 Ek kutta mati mai lata hai : Urdu of 'a dog lies on the ground.'
- 15 Bhutto : Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, leader of West Pakistan.
- 16 Bangabandhu : Friend of Bengal.
- 17 Maulana Bhashani : Senior political leader of Bangladesh.
- 18 Jamate Islamis : Rightist Islamic political party which opposed liberation of Bangladesh.
- 19 Nejami Islamis : Rightist Islamic political party which opposed liberation of Bangladesh.
- 20 Akashbani : Indian radio station.
- 21 Amar Shonar Bangla : First line of national anthem of Bangladesh meaning, my golden bengal.
- 22 Ziaur Rahman : Sector commander during Liberation war. Later president of Bangladesh.
- 23 Siraj-ud-dullah : Historical king of the region.
- 24 Chira : Cereal made from flattened dried rice.
- 25 Da : Elder brother. Usually used by Hindu community.
- 26 Dee : Elder sister. Usually used by Hindu community.
- 27 Shidur : Red mark on forehead and on the parting of the hair, worn by Hindu women signifying that she is married and her husband is alive.
- 28 Zindabad : Urdu word for 'long live'.
- 29 Ganimot : Arabic word for 'public property'.
- 30 Rajakar : Arabic word for 'helper' but used to refer to traitors in Bangladesh.
- 31 Kalmas : Fundamental scripture for Muslim faith.
- 32 Bihari : Emigrants of Bihar from India.
- 33 Madrasah : Religious Islamic school.
- 34 Islami Chatro Shongho : Student front of Jamate Islamis Against the liberation of Bangladesh. Instrumental in the killing of Bengali intellectuals.

- 35 Jamrul : A small, juicy white fruit found in Bangladesh.
- 36 Paisa : One hundred paisa is one taka. Taka is the currency of Bangladesh.
- 37 Mir Jafar : The General of Siraj-ud-dullah. A symbol of treachery.
- 38 Awami League : Political party under Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib.
- 39 Korma Polao : a rich Bengali dish.
- 40 Gamcha : Long, thin towel carried by rural people.
- 41 Lungi : Long skirt-like item of clothing worn by males.
- 42 Hazi Shahib : Person returning after pilgrimage to Mecca.
- 43 Eid-gah : Field where eid-ul-fitr, the most important Muslim festival, prayers are performed.
- 44 Nasiruddin Hojja : A Persian humorist.
- 45 Rakhats : units.
- 46 Nofol : voluntary.
- 47 Gang : River