

A MAN LIKE NO OTHER

RUDAINA MUSTANSIR

Smoke clouded his vision,
The roads were broken,
As demolished cars and clusters of branches
Blocked the road.

Ghosts of the past wandered amongst
The barely-clothed victims of war.
The moon hung low but shone brighter
Than it had for months
Illuminating the man walking around
Who made it possible.
Wearing a white traditional outfit,
There he was.

An extraordinary man being ordinary —
His glasses rested peacefully
On the bridge of his nose
And the corners of his mouth were relaxed.
The lone short strands of his hair rustled
As the breeze blew like a goddess
Signifying a fresh new era.

The people looked at him and smiled,
Blood and dirt did not stop them
From feeling the peace.
Loss and hurt did not stop them from rejoicing
In the midst of destruction and scarcity.

They knew he was the one
Who would give them nourishment,

They knew he was the one
Who would help them change and grow.

The newly formed country was a people's republic
But he was the leader of the people's hearts.

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ILLUSTRATION: RIDWAN NOOR NAFIS

NABIHA NUSAIBA

April 11, 1971

I was at Shamsu Miah's tea stall when it happened. First came the noise. Booming sounds of fighter planes flying past, followed by deafening roars of bombs hitting the ground. And then, people. People- screaming, as they fled to escape a fiery death. I could feel my blood run cold as I thought of *Amma* and Iqbal alone at home. Were they safe? Had something happened to them? Will I see their beloved faces again? Paralysed with shock, I would've died on spot if *Kashem Bhai*, the Ansar soldier who escaped from Dacca on the night of the massacre, hadn't pulled me by the sleeve and navigated our way back home through the thick, grey smoke and chaos. By the time we got home, *Amma* and Iqbal had already taken to leave with bags we had prepared for in case of emergencies, waiting only for news of me.

It took us four days to travel to Sylhet. We fed on stale rice and vegetables, rationing even that to last us as long as possible, shared one threadbare shawl among the three of us. *Amma* cried for most of the first two nights as Iqbal slept on her lap and I stood guard. By the third day, I was so fatigued that even the fear of my life couldn't keep me awake. I dreamt of our courtyard and stealing pickled mango as I drifted into sleep during the waking hours of the third day. Later that day, we found a road where I stood and waited for transportation after hiding *Amma* and Iqbal a little further into the forest. After what felt like a lifetime, a gracious old man with a bullock cart agreed to help us. We stayed at his house before he dropped us off at Kamalpur this morning.

April 12, 1971

Afra Khala has two sons, *Bodrul* and *Tareq*, and a daughter, *Mishti*. Tomorrow, *Amma*, *Khala*, *Tareq*, *Mishti* and *Iqbal* will travel to India, where they will stay until the situation improves. *Majed Khalu*, *Bodrul* and I will go to Sylhet *Sadar* to train for the war. *Iqbal* threw a tantrum asking to join us. He didn't have dinner last night because we refused him. He's thirteen and if anything happens to me, he's all *Amma* will have left. I now see who inherited *Amma's* adamant mindset. I will give him this journal when we part, with the promise of taking it back when we meet again after the war.

April 12, 1971

Dearest *Iqbal*,
If you're reading this and the war rages on, know that I am doing everything in my capability to protect and win. I pray you sleep a little better knowing that you have

Amma's warm hands on your head. If you're reading this and the war has passed, taking me along with it, know that I will always love you two. I hope my death will not be vain and you can breathe in the fresh air of freedom. Give your all to a free Bangladesh. Be the reason nothing like this ever happens to our people. Take care of *Amma*, but most of all, be happy.

Your *Bhaiyo*.

January 15, 1972

The war has ended and I have survived. *Majed Khalu* and *Bodrul* have not been as lucky, neither has been *Kashem Bhai*. Our family arrived from India just a few hours ago. Not one day had passed when I didn't think of them. *Iqbal* jumped into my arms and handed me my diary. He was crying all the way. He is quite light for a boy of age thirteen. *Afra Khala* has been crying in between periods of unconsciousness. *Mishti* doesn't quite understand what she has lost.

February 4, 1972

We returned to our home in Narshingdi today. All that is left of my ancestral home is soot and charred metal. The Pakistanis burned our village during the last few weeks of the war. They didn't even leave the crops. The only standing establishment is the mosque where some of us are stayi...

February 11, 1972

Time doesn't flow properly anymore. Staying up is a torture but so is sleeping. I find it hard to fall asleep and when I do, I have nightmares. There's a knot in my chest so tight that I fear I can never undo it. Oh, my sweet *Iqbal*. What have you done? How will I survive knowing you are no more? How will we deal with this gaping hole in our lives? How will we stay in our home knowing that this is where you died? Why did you have to pick up that green ball of death?

March 23, 1972

I woke up screaming in the middle of last night thinking someone was shooting at us. It was the first rain of the year. Today marks forty days of *Iqbal's* passing. Out of all those days, I've been to what used to be our home twice. I can't seem to stop replaying his dying moments in my head. I went today, at the crack of dawn. I couldn't sleep, so when the rain came to a halt, I went to our home. Everything had changed overnight. All the soot had washed away, mixing with the soil, turning the mud a dark grey. The sunrise looked a little more vivid. For the first time in forty days, I saw our courtyard and saw a happy *Iqbal*. A happy *Iqbal* as I chased after him. A content *Iqbal* as *Amma* fed us out on the patio. My eyes filled up with tears as I fell on the floor. My baby brother was not with me but he was all around me. For the first time in forty days, I found peace.