

## SHORT STORY

# The Body

AFSAN CHOWDHURY  
(Translated by Sabreena Ahmed)

Maaloti did not notice the shadow of the man standing in the dark. She did not know how long he had been standing beneath the *Kulboi* tree to protect himself from the untimely rain. She had never seen such rain in the month of Boishakh--she had felt sad watching the very first heavy drop of rain fall on the ground and dissolve into the dust.

"Beware, beware"--the night guard's warning cry had not been heard in the lanes these last two days. Maaloti had been up all night with the household chores and feeding the children. They were never very hungry, and Maaloti did not force them to finish their meals.

The shadow moved towards her. The pale and wet man trembled as he spoke: "The Pakistanis have killed Shankar Da. We have to collect the body. Old Moslem told me that there are corpses stacked by the side of the PTI building. It looks like a market for dead bodies--so many people are going there to claim the bodies of their relatives. You can also find his body if you go there in time."

Maaloti kept silent for a few moments--she was listening for any howling within herself; would a storm of grief rise inside her?

Kanai was drenched all over. He kept blinking his eyes while he trembled in the rain."How long have you been standing here? Why didn't you call me? Were you afraid?" asked Maaloti.

Kanai paused to stare at the conch-shell bangle on Maaloti's hands. "Yes, I was afraid. I wasn't sure how to break the news to you."

Maaloti looked absentminded and was silent for a moment. She ran her fingers through her hair. The bangle touched her forehead; she had not put on sindoor for days. "Come and sit inside. Change your clothes; I'll get you some rice to eat."

"I can't stay. We're leaving tonight. We'll be refugees like our uncles. Aren't you going to go?"

It was difficult to guess if Maaloti paid any attention to these words. She gazed for a long time at the wet dark, then said: "Won't we have to cremate his body? Where do I have to go? You said the PTI building, right?"

Kanai did not answer and instead looked at her, confused.

"I've to go now, Boudi. I've been standing here for two hours, I couldn't find the strength to tell you. Our entire household is leaving; will you go with us?" Kanai asked

this time in a pleading voice.

"It must have been very hard for you standing out there in this untimely rain. You're a very good boy, Kanai. Your brother always used to tell me that."

"Boudi, won't you cry?" Kanai asked in a bemused tone.

Maaloti did not reply. Her mind seemed to be lost in the sound of rain. The rain these past two days should have quenched the parched earth's thirst to some extent. So many creatures were craving the rain! The month of Boishakh was a thieving month, it stole all the water from ponds and marshes. Once the month of Ashar arrived everyone would be able to drink as much as they wanted. These two days, however, the sky had provided some relief; everywhere there was the incessant sound of rain.

The children were sleeping soundly, covering themselves with the winter quilt. Not once, at any time, had they asked, "When will Father come home?" They were very good children.

Maaloti snapped out of her reverie. Kanai was not there anymore; he had disappeared in the darkness of the lowering afternoon. She could not hear the sound of his retreating footsteps. "Go home Kanai. Go home." Maaloti went inside to wake the children up. "Komol, Bimola, wake up quickly. We have to go. Someone has killed your father. We have to bring him home. Wake up! Wake up! The father of these children is no more. Sleep no more, you should not sleep anymore."

2. "I'm Kamal. I'm Muslim, I am a good boy." He whispers these words to himself all the way. Maaloti has taught him the words. He has memorised them well. He is a boy; he may face danger. And if anyone asks Bimola, she is to say that her name is Moyna. Sometimes Shankar used to call her by this name. Maaloti was leading the way, a gunnysack under her arm. This year she had leased a little land, the crop had been good--at least two maunds. The brand-new sack fat with rice had become leaner day by



day. Maaloti had dumped its remaining contents on the floor, and. Komol and Bimola had gathered the scattered rice and piled it up in the corner of the room. The gunnysack smelled different now--neither of jute hessian nor of rice. Who knew how it was going smell like later?

The three of them walked on the slushy mud, with Maaloti sometimes tugging Bimola closer to her so that she did not delay them by lagging behind. Bimola tried to walk faster, her hand brushing Komol's. It was so wet! So cold! It was raining in torrents. It didn't rain on days like this. Mother had told them that Father was gone, that he was dead. No one went to school after the death of a father; she was going to get married to Horen Das after two years. Two years back Horen's wife had died, unable to stop coughing. He had a shop, he owned land, and wanted to marry her. Shankar had had no objection to it. How many Untouchables were there like this--Bimola was lucky, but she had to finish school first.

Maaloti has also agreed to it. The sooner girls were married off the better. Where would you get a good bridegroom? What better lot could a peon's daughter aspire to? Now, like others whose fathers have died,

Bimola would not be able to finish her studies; in a few days she would have to set up house with Horen. His two sons were a little younger than Bimola. They keep crying "Mother, Mother" all day. Bimola felt very cold.

They heard the growls of dogs when they reached the field behind the PTI building. Maaloti ran forward upon hearing it.

"Hurry up, or they will take your father away to eat..." She did not wait to finish her sentence and reached the pumphouse shouting "Hoi, Hoi". She saw a man bent down searching for something by the light of the lantern in his hand. In his other hand he held an umbrella.

"Who's there?"

"I'm Maaloti, Shankar the peon's wife. Kanai told me that he was killed. His dead body may be here."

"Where have you been all this while?"

"I got the news late. Don't I have to bring my children with me? How can a woman carry away the dead body of their father?"

"Will you be able to recognize the body in the dark? All the heads have been separated from the bodies. They are scattered all over. I've been picking them up since noon. I'm holding up the light so that people can recognise the bodies. So many people have come to take the bodies. Nobody mourned except for the dogs. They are angry with me for not letting them eat human beings."

Moslem went on muttering in the incessant rain; Bimola and Komol were his audience. It was hard to tell whether they understood any of the words the old man uttered. Their faces were wet, tears mixing with the raindrops.

The people who had ruled the country till now, the ones that started the war, they had killed many men. They caught Hindus and slit their throats in the PTI building. Even Muslims had not been spared; the men need not be criminals in order to be killed. Moslem had gathered the dead bodies in a pile the whole day. All of them must return home, all of the dead bodies had to go home, all of them must had to go to either a funeral pyre or to a grave.

"Who'll look after them if I go away? I'm the guard at this place; everyone has been calling me 'Old Moslem' for the last forty years. Don't I have a responsibility on my shoulders? So many men have been killed and I am still alive. Why? Because I have work to do. Moslem will go home when they are all gone; do you hear me?"

3. They were breathless from dragging the sack--they could not understand why the corpse was so heavy, why Shankar had to

return in a sack after his death--when suddenly some men blocked their way. The rain had lessened and they were crossing the small garden of *jamrul* trees beyond Ukipara. This was not their usual path; they lived on the other side of the small town. Still, they had chosen it thinking that it would be easier to return this way. The men had torches and sticks in their hands. A man holding a rifle called out. They laid the sack on the ground.

"Who's going there? Can't you say your name? What is in the sack? Started looting already? And a woman too--got down to business with your kids, huh?"

"We are not thieves. Someone killed my husband. We are carrying the dead body in this sack."

"Are you Jogi Bangla people? You want to break up Pakistan?"

"We are poor, we want to go home. We don't know Jogi Bangla."

"What's your name?" the leader of the men asked, taking Komol by the hand and drawing him close.

"My name is Kamal, I'm Kamal. Kamal is a good boy."

"Only saying it won't do. We want proof. Whose dead body are you carrying?"

"My father's."

"What's his name?"

"Baba..." Bimola broke into tears. Komol stood silently. On hearing Bimola's words the men snickered. Maaloti sat down on the ground. She now left it to her children to deal with the men and did not have any strength of her own.

"Many Hindus have died. How do we know if you are Hindus or not?"

"Do we show you the head?"

They laughed again. "No, you'll have to show the penis. Was his circumcision done?"

Two of the men had already started to take out the body out of the sack. Shankar's head rolled out the sack and fell near Maaloti's feet, out of the torch's circle of light. Maaloti, still sitting down, held the head with her feet so that it did not roll away, did not get lost. The men stood as brother and sister hauled out their father's body from the sack.

"That'll be enough. Take a look, which caste."

Someone in the group came forward and with his stick lifted the covers off the body.

"Sir, it's Muslim. It's circumcised. Only a Muslim can have such dick," he announced proudly.

"But look what's happened to it now! Born into a Muslim family, and why did he have to die like this?"

"What'll we do with them now?"

"Let them go, what else can we do?"

They've had enough punishment. Hey, you kids, take your mother home. Go, shoo!"

The men walked away into the dark, the mud squelching behind them. Without saying one more word.

Maaloti stood up. The two children also stood with the sack in their hands. The trance was broken at the voice of their mother and they dropped the sack to run to her.

"The Muslim man has saved us today. They would've killed us all if I had to take off my clothes." She was relieved now. She held the head against her bosom, wouldn't let it go.

"Your father was rolling away; I got hold of him quickly. We have to keep an eye on him all the time. Whose body and whose head. Old Moslem has given someone else's body to us. If it hadn't been a Muslim body, they would've buried us in the ground." Maaloti caressed the children with one hand.

"Will you let me hold Baba?"

"Why not? But be careful, don't drop him."

"I'll be careful." Komol took the slippery head in his hands; he pressed Shankar's ears, hair and chin. It felt like ice. Last year, an ice-cream shop was built in their school. Ice used to be one of the items on sale. He knew how cold ice could be.

"Bimola, open up the sack and let me put the man inside. We've dragged him all night; it must have been painful for him."

"Where'll we go now, Ma?"

"Won't we have to give the man back?"

"He's saved us all, shouldn't we return him?"

"Shall we go back to PTI?"

"Where else can we go? We'll have to drag the sack there. I'm sure his head is lying there somewhere. We'll have to find it."

"Where'll you find a pyre mat for Father?"

"I don't know. If we can't find a mat, then we'll dig a hole and bury him. It'll be better if we find one, though. Perhaps we won't need any since we've only his head, what do you think?"

Komol nodded. They put Shankar Das's head in the sack and walked to the field where Old Moslem was sitting with the pile of dead bodies, straw and heads. Many people will come to claim the bodies while others may not. The earth craved human flesh and bones. He dug deep into the earth to widen its starving mouth. Or else, it would not be able to swallow its food.

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## Books on 1971

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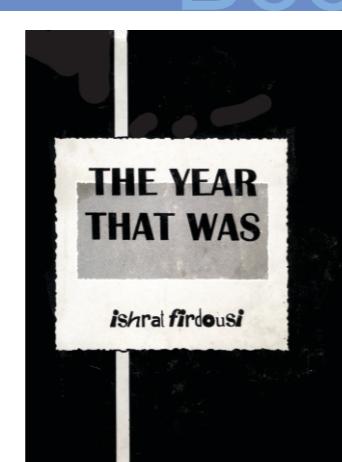
## Book

KAHDEMUL ISLAM

*The Year That Was* by Ishrat Ferdousi; Dhaka: Bastu Prakashan; 1996.

*The Year That Was* is the end product of a personal and idiosyncratic campaign to document the experiences during 1971 of a number of people--a most symmetrical 71 voices, to be exact. Reportedly the author Ishrat Ferdousi nagged friends, acquaintances, and strangers for interviews, walked everywhere, took rickshaws, was often broke, bummed cigarettes, bought and lost tape recorders in dogged pursuit of his objective. In the execution the project took on a life of its own. As the editor recounts in his disarming and insouciantly hip note, "Originally I did not plan to speak to so many people...At one point I even had serious doubts whether I would be able to make up my mind about how to wrap up the project. But it was no big deal, just took five years."

It is a compulsively readable book. By not having a set plan, by generously, and wisely, letting the book go where it naturally led itself, by doing it in oral interview form and letting each voice be, by refusing to think that it represented 'official history' in any way, Ishrat Ferdousi produced a book that captures a huge slice of the impossibly wide range of human experiences during a time of stark terror. The tales range from the mordantly funny to the utterly grotesque, often within a single narrative, but the genius of the oral interview form is that it allows considerable latitude within the same frame so that while the interviews knit together to form a whole, yet one can open the book on any page and begin reading. There is nothing quite like it in the English-language books on 1971, which tend to be descriptions of military operations in a stiffly buckrammed prose. Here the book's English (translations of the Bengali interviews actually), a freewheeling khichuri of unselfconscious American slang



### VOICES FROM THE BOOK

"After completion of our (Mukt Bahini) training they took us to Shaalban for rest. Over two thousand fighters were camped there. The first night, they organized a grand feast for us and the menu was boiled eggs and khichuri. I was put in a team responsible for shelling the eggs. Most of us sampled two or three from the twenty or so we cleaned. But there was a *rakkhosh* in our group and he swallowed all eighteen he had shelled! After the feast we turned in. Wild boars infested the area and came out at night to forage so the doors of the makeshift huts were bolted tight from within. Around midnight the gluton tried to convince some of us to go out with him to the bushes. He pleaded and cajoled but nobody moved...The pigs were out there; we could hear them. Shortly afterwards a foul stench knifed through our sleeping ranks and woke people up. Then someone shrieked, 'Eesh! Halai kabor sabor maira disay!' Oaths and curses were followed by empty boots. In the end, the offender was forced to throw out all his soiled bedding, clothes, the lot, and the rest of the night almost naked, shivering in a corner, cursing us, the boars, and the eggs--naturally!"

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"But as soon as Nadeem fired a 2" mortar all hell broke loose. The Pakistani defences opened up and it looked like we were up against two companies or 3-400 men! Then the guide disappeared; the son of a bitch was probably a collaborator. We exchanged fire with the enemy for a few minutes then ran back to base. One freedom fighter was missing. (We later heard that he was captured and skinned alive..."

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"We remained marooned indoors for the next three days and nights. We slept under our beds. I made it through the first night with a glass of milk and a half-boiled egg. Once, I was crying and asked my father, 'Abba, will this never stop?' He told me gently that it would probably subside by morning. I would lose track of time. Once there was a crackling sound in the distance. Father said they were bamboo bursting in the fire. It was the slum area. I could differentiate the sound from those made by guns..."

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"One day I came up to the marketplace for a haircut and saw a *pagla*. I was certain watching his gait that he was a non-Bengali. I had a feeling that he was just masquerading as a madman--long hair, beard, and dirty clothes. I came home and informed my father. He went out to check and when he returned, he seemed sure that the *pagla* was sly. This frightened us. So that afternoon we took a boat and went to another village, closer to Narail...the following morning Pakistanis attacked Laxmipasha...three persons were killed, the rest managed to flee...the soldiers torched the village. The place we had stayed had an image of the Hindu goddess Kali and received special attention. It was totally gutted..."

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"A group of Bengali naval commandos arrived for an operation. The commandos were going to plant limpet mines on the body of the...three ships at Chittagong ghat, with one flying the Chinese flag...In the evening we dropped the naval commandos on the bank opposite Chandmari. We waited at the pick up spot. By 8:00 p.m. they were back. They had done the job! We were halfway to our hideout when we heard the explosions. Even in the semi-darkness you could see our malicious grins..."

AZFAR AZIZ

*Mukti Juddho*  
*Rachanasangraha* by Hasan Azizul Huq, edited with a preface by Abu Hasnat; Dhaka: Charulipi Prokashan; February 2007; pp. 215; Tk 200</