

SHORT STORY

Weapon

JAHANARA IMAM
(translated by Sheikh Jamil Hyder)

With hunger gnawing at his stomach Mafiz was walking very fast, and his three companions walking behind and beside him were having trouble keeping up with him. Rashid said, "Why are you racing like a horse? Go a little more slowly."

Munir also agreed, "The whole day without food, now this running, my legs don't want to move at all."

Mafiz screamed, "That's exactly why we should hurry home. If we stop you won't be able to start again. The thing is to get home on the verandah--then just drop there! No more worries. Hot rice, curried fish. Or maybe mashed potatoes with brinjal..."

Even before Mafiz had finished Ashek laughed out loud, "This Mafiz, his only thoughts are of food."

"And why not? If an engine doesn't get coal at the right time, will it run?"

It was amidst such joking and leg-pulling that they reached home. But what was this? Why was the house so dark? The main door was wide open. There was no light inside; there was no sound from inside. Their chests began to thump with fear. Mafiz began to walk towards the house, saying, his voice breaking, "Oh my God, what's happened? Is my sister alive?" Munir tugged at his shirt and said, "Stop. Who knows, somebody could be hiding inside for an ambush. Take up positions."

The four of them aimed their rifles and stood. Munir fired a shot. Not a sound. After they stood in silence for a minute, Mafiz shouted out, "Chobi, Chobiron, Kala's mother--where have you all gone?"

Still there was no sound. Then Ashek and Rashid with their rifles cocked began to creep around each side of the house. Mafiz began to advance towards the main door, and Munir stood behind him with his rifle on his shoulder in order to give covering fire if needed. But there was no sign of any foe lying in ambush, nor of the goddess of hot rice Chobiron. The four of them stepped into the inner courtyard and began to shout out the names of Chobiron and Kala's Ma. After some time from behind the house came a noise: the sound of footfalls accompanied by a wet swish. Mafiz again cried out, "Chobi, Kala's mother, where have you all gone?" Now they heard Chobi's voice, "Brothers, here we are. There's a lamp in the kitchen, light it."

Mafiz entered the kitchen, and drawing a matchbox out of his pocket, lit a matchstick in order to see where the lamp was. What he saw was chaos. Pots and pans were lying scattered all around. It was impossible to see where the lamp was. He came out, lit another matchstick, and said, "What happened? Did a bull run through the house? I can't find the lamp. You go and find it."

Wrapping the wet cloth securely over her



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body and with her head bowed, Chobiron crossed the yard to enter the kitchen. Now they knew the source of that wet swishing sound. Someone must have entered the house. Either the army or Razakars--and these two had hidden themselves in the pond behind the house. They had emerged from the water on hearing their voices. But this village didn't have any army or Razakars. So what had happened?

Mafiz kept lighting one match after other until Chobiron managed to find the lamp. While lighting it she said, "Let me change my clothes. By the time you fellows have finished washing up I'll have the lentil-rice *kichuri* all done. You'll get to hear it all after you've finished eating."

The kitchen was also the place where Chobi slept. It was a large room. On one side was the space reserved for cooking, and on the other was a cot. On the cot was a mat and pillow, while above it on a string on the wall hung some clothes. There were a few clay pots lined up on the floor. Stored inside them were her few personal possessions.

Mafiz went outside. Chobi went to a corner of the room, and after changing from her wet clothes, began to shout "Kala's Ma, Kala's ma..."

Kala's mother lived in the hut directly behind the house. She could hear if somebody called out to her. She too in the meantime had changed from her wet clothes. Entering the kitchen she said, "What shall we cook?"

"You chop some onions and potatoes quickly. Let me put the lentil-rice on the stove. There's two eggs, right? We'll put in the onions, potatoes and eggs in the *kichuri*. They've to eat soon. My brother has a hunger like an ogre," and saying this Chobi burst into

giggles. After eating they heard it all. Chobi and Kala's mother had gone to bathe in the afternoon in the pond, when suddenly they heard unknown voices from inside their house. They had immediately gone into the water and crossed over to the other side of the pond, where they had submerged themselves in the dark shallows under overhanging branches and leaves with just their noses above the water.

Rashid queried, "Who were they, did you get to know?" "No, we didn't see them, the moment we heard them we jumped into the water. But we did hear talk in Urdu."

Ashek said in a thoughtful voice, "I don't understand it. There are no Razakars in this village. No army either. So...?" "Let's go to Moti Bhai. He should be able to explain this."

Motiur Rahman was the Union Council chairman. In truth, his house was the Mukti Bahini camp. This village was yet to be attacked by the army, and it also didn't have any Razakars. The Mukti guerrillas, rifles and grenades in their hands, would march out for their distant operations without fear. Motiur Rahman was in his sitting room, surrounded by a lot of people. When the four led by Mafiz went inside he said, "O Mafiz Miah, you fellows can't go on operations from this village. The army's encamped near the Betal Dighi. That portion of the bridge you fellows destroyed this past month, they are now repairing it. Going to build bunkers too. All this work means labourers. All of us chairmen have been given notices to provide them with labourers. All nine villages in my union have to provide ten men each. Just imagine the trouble it's going to cause!"

"Betal Dighi is five kilometers from here. We hear the army came all the way from there to the village?" "Yes. To serve that notice. One captain and ten soldiers, along with some Razakars from Betal Dighi. They came to my office to talk about labourers and then left."

"No, Moti Bhai, they didn't go straight back to the camp. They entered my house." Motiur Rahman was surprised, "What are

you saying? I haven't heard of any such thing. Tell me everything that happened."

Mafiz related everything he had heard from Chobiron. Motiur Rahman replied after sitting silently for some time, "They'll come again. You Mukti Bahini fellows should leave this village and set up camp somewhere else. This place isn't safe for you any more."

While they were talking, a few more villagers came by to say that when leaving, the soldiers had entered their houses, taking with them chickens, pumpkins, brinjals, bananas, etc.

Motiur Rahman let out a long sigh, "Hide all the women of your households deep behind their purdahs. Those soldiers have nasty habits. The tales I've been hearing--hope to God nothing like that happens in this village."

Upon returning home Mafiz told Chobiron and Kala's mother all that had been said.

Chobi on hearing that Mafiz and his companions were going to leave the village started to cry. Mafiz got angry, "What's there to cry about? We won't go far, just a few villages away. Kala's mother will sleep in your room, and Kala will sleep on the verandah. There's nothing to fear."

"No, take me along with you." "What are you talking about? You're a woman, where can we take you?"

"Why not? I'll stay wherever you stay. I'll cook for you, wash your clothes, keep your house clean."

"Oh, you madwoman! Do you think we know in advance where we're going to stay, in a house or underneath a tree? Listen, you have nothing to fear. I'm going to tell Moti Bhai, Baset Uncle and some others to look after you."

But Chobi does not stop sobbing. At last she said, "At least give me a weapon."

Startled out of his wits, Mafiz exclaimed, "Weapon? What will you do with that?" "Why, I'll kill the army when they come here."

Mafiz laughed sadly, "My dear ignorant little sister! With this old worn-out rifle you're going to kill Pakistani army men? Don't you know that one brush fire with a stungun can kill twenty men in a minute? Leave aside such mad talk, stay here quietly, don't step outside the house. I'll come around, check on you from time to time."

"A weapon! I want one. I couldn't say it openly to you. I didn't need a weapon to kill the army. I needed one to save my honour from the army's clutches. I could have taken my life before they got me. What am I to do now?"

Chobiron was swimming in circles in the pond and talking to herself. Kala's mother, having gone out in search for her, now sat down by the pond with her face in her hands,

"O my girl, why are you in the water? Do you want to die?"

Chobiron climbed out of the water, saying in an unnatural voice, "No, Kala's Ma, I'm not going to die before I've killed some of those military men."

Looking at her red eyes, Kala's mother shivered. Two nights back, three soldiers accompanied by a Razakar had come to the house and did whatever they could to this girl. From then on Chobiron had seemed somewhat demented. Since then, from bathing six or seven times a day, the girl had caught a high fever. Even then she would refuse to lie down. After the incident Kala's mother had wanted to flee with Chobiron and Kala. But the girl refused to go. She wouldn't go, she wanted to kill a few of those Pakistani army men. Kala's mother had gone to the chairman's house and told him everything. He had told her to bring Chobi to his house for shelter. But Chobi refused to go there too. Kala's mother was in a dilemma: she couldn't leave Chobi behind, yet was afraid of living in this house.

Last night the men hadn't returned, but Kala's mother had stayed awake the whole night in order to bolt out of the back door if she heard anything untoward. But who knew if they wouldn't come tonight?

In response to Chobi's words Kala's mother said, "I don't know what you're talking about--what are you going to kill them with?"

"I have something, a big and sharp weapon. I didn't know about it before, but now I can finish off a few of them with it. Come in, there's work to be done."

Kala's mother was surprised, "What work, where?"

"Go to the village where our brothers have gone. Tell them that the night after next some Pakistani soldiers and Razakars are coming for supper at my house. They should come here and kill them all."

Kala's mother thought Chobi was now stark raving mad. She led Chobi inside the house, and changed the wet sari for a dry one. She gently stroked Chobi's head and murmured, "Get well. This was your fate. Pray to Allah, He will grant you peace."

Chobi angrily drew her head away, "Stop all this nonsense talk. Kala's mother. My brothers are fighting the enemy sleepless and hungry, and I should live quietly? I now have found my weapon. They fight with rifles and grenades, I'll fight with my weapon, kill a few of the bastards. You go now, Kala's mother, there is no time to lose. If you delay the war will be lost."

Jahanara Imam is best known for her memoir of 1971 titled *Ekkattur: Shaheed Gulo*. Sheikh Jamil Hyder is a resident of Columbus, Ohio.

Letter from TORONTO

Winter Blues

REBECCA SULTANA

It is the season to be jolly, or so it was supposed to be until recession, or human greed (however one sees it), hit. Around this time of the year shopping malls are usually teeming with serious shoppers on the lookout for bargains. This year, though, the crowds have thinned out considerably. TV show hosts from Oprah to Martha to Steven and Chris are going cheap by brainstorming craft ideas that one can make at home and save that shopping trip to the gift store or avoid dipping into the pockets. Gifts are advertised every day that cost from ten dollars to a hundred. But then again, the spirit of giving can't be denied, so presents have to be bought, sales to be sought and a trip to the shopping malls made.

Sales, however, have become events, especially in these economically fraught times, that can tear away the thin veneer of civilization and reverse the entire theory of evolution. People can literally claw and climb one over the other to get the last of the items on the rack. This all makes shopping a nightmare for the less inclined. Even grocery shopping has become a chore as parking spaces become scarce and lines at the counter become half a mile long.

The season of giving has already been tainted dirty. The biggest sale event in the U.S. is the after-Thanksgiving Day sale known as Black Friday. Tragedy struck this year at Wal-Mart at Long Island. As a store employee attempted to open doors at the designated time, impatient shoppers shoved in and literally took the door off its hinges while stampeding over the hapless man. As other employees rushed in to revive their fallen colleague, they too were stomped and trodden over and were barely able to save their own lives. As management rushed in and wanted to close shop in respect to the now dead man, they were faced with angry shoppers unwilling to let their early morning excursion go to waste. That a man lay dead amongst them, killed by their own feet, did nothing to deter the determined shoppers. Honestly, how do these people sleep at night?

knowing their bodies were murder weapons? How do their consciences keep them sane--if they have one, that is.

Fortunately, Canada has not been hit with such a shopping craze. Canada's biggest sales day comes after Christmas, which really does not serve the same purpose. Nevertheless, shops are more crowded than usual. The innocuous parking lots have become danger zones as sales-crazed drivers bent on finding spaces to park their cars flout the basic rules of driving. As shoppers come out of the stores they are seen to be menacingly followed by two or more cars competing to grab their empty spaces.

For me, there are now more pressing issues to deal with--how to make it in one piece while walking to a destination. I have managed not to yet have slipped and fallen and hence still have held on to whatever shreds of my dignity I have left. Everyone else I know has gone through this winter rite of passage. This year's winter has been forecasted with lot less snow than usual. Even though snow did have a late start, things are not for the better. We have already been dumped with 26 inches of the white stuff with more promised. Looking out the window, first thing in the morning, the pristine untrodden snow is a thing of breathtaking beauty. That is, until it hits you that you have to waddle over the white powder and must dig out the car frozen stiff under a mound of snow. Cleaning snow is a strenuous job and there have been cases of heart attacks when men have not warmed up sufficiently enough before taking on the shovel. Added to this, of course, is the further stress of having to make it to work on time or to get the kids to school before the bell rings. To make things even worse it has started raining, which, in freezing temperatures, can be deadly. Try walking on slabs of wet glass.

Years and years and years ago, listening to Jim Reeves rhapsodizing about snowflakes and the winter wonderland, I would visualize Christmas card sceneries in my mind. Now, it's more like: of all the places in the world, how did I end up here?

But winter has a more sobering aspect to it which can be heavy on the nerves. With a little over eight hours of sunlight, even that not at its brightest, winter days can be rather gloomy. Statistics have shown increased rates of depression and, scariest of all, suicide. I had my own dose of reality when I had to deal with four of my students having experienced suicides of friends and relatives.

One asked to be excused from an up-coming class. Why, I asked. Very matter-of-factly she replied that her cousin has hung herself and she has to go to her funeral. I was so visibly shocked that I took a step back. I just nodded my head, barely able to find my voice. How she could even tell me this without even batting an eye, I could only wonder. Only days later could I have a conversation with her as I asked her how she was feeling. Mostly bewildered, I found out. Another talked about a botched suicide attempt of her boyfriend. As tears welled up in her eyes, I quickly changed the subject more to control my own emotions than hers. The most affected was a male student whose friend lay in a coma, again after a botched attempt. He would slump into class listless, was behind his assignments and would not participate in anything. I talked to him and gave him extensions so that, at least, he could pass the course. I had not realized that, as I acted as counselor to these young people, it was taking a heavy toll on my own state of mind. In turn, as I talked to my colleagues, I learned that going through such an experience seems to be a regular feature with kids of this age and particularly in this season. Quebec, it turns out, has a higher rate of suicide compared to other provinces. A sobering thought.

But still, I cannot fathom kids this age wanting to end their lives. They have so much to look forward to. I have restrained myself often from telling these kids, "wait till you are my age and then know what life is really like." But, of course, I couldn't bring myself to be so self-righteous. Not after having seen the pain in their eyes.

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Playing Football for Swadhin Bangla*

(Oral account of Amalesh Sen, 23 years old in 1971, footballer from Bogra)

Late in March (1971), I took a train to the border town of Darsana. Other members of our family had left Bogra earlier. I knew a boy called Raju from Bogra whose father was a Customs officer at Darsana...I had to change trains a couple of times before I finally reached Calcutta. I took (a taxi) and arrived at my brother's rented house in Behala. Everyone was surprised and relieved...

Then one day I read an announcement in a local newspaper asking Bangladeshi footballers among the exiles to report to the 'Bangladeshi Mission' at the given address. The place used to be the Pakistani Deputy High Commissioner's Chancery at Park Circus.

When I went there in the morning I met 'Pratap Da', Kaikobad, Turjo (nickname of Kazi Salahuddin, currently president of the Bangladesh Football Federation), and some others. They told me that the Karnain Estate near Dharmatala Street had been allocated for us. "We are going to organize matches, make people aware of the situation in Bangladesh, collect funds, etc." The following day I moved to Karnain Estate. About a dozen players had already arrived. Later, many others turned up...about thirty were finally selected. The rest left for different freedom fighter camps.

We began practicing. Clubs like East Bengal and Mohun Bagan let us use their grounds. We also rented a house and about twenty-five to thirty of us shared a single room, our bedding laid out on the carpet. It was a tight fit but we managed somehow. Later, we got beds, but even that we had to share. We had not brought along any equipment, like boots, etc., with us from Bangladesh, so we had to buy them. We also hired a couple of ball boys to assist us.

(The) Indian government organized our food and board. We also received some clothes, and Rs 21.00 per week as pocket money. During breaks in practice some of us would go out see movies or whatever. I would visit my folks at my brother's place.

The invitations to play began arriving--until we had problems accepting them all. After we had a fair amount of practice we played our first match. Our opponents were the



artwork by aminia

Krishnagar XI at their home ground. The Bangladesh flag was flying high that day. No country had yet recognized us, not even India, but it was a matter of great pride that we could put up our national standard on foreign soil (with the result that the local Deputy Commissioner was suspended). Many had tears in their eyes. We sang patriotic songs and the national anthem. Everyone in the stands stood up to pay their respects--it was spontaneous. After the match some of our players ran around the field with the Bangladesh flag. The match ended in a draw; one goal each. It was a border district, and many refugees from the nearby camps had come over. We were also told that scores had also slipped across the border to watch the match! I don't know if they went back to Bangladesh. By then the Pakistanis were on a killing spree.

Mohun Bagan played a major role in our support. We practiced with their senior players, including veterans. They organized our next match with Gostopal XI. Gostopal was a legendary player of a past era. Football star Chuni Goswami, who had retired from the game a few years earlier, played for Gostopal XI, and played well, even scoring a goal. Bolai, the star goalie of Mohun Bagan, also made their team. He had played for Mohammedan Sporting Club, Dhaka, before immigrating. He supported us a lot...

We also played at Benares. There were lots of Bengalis there and many came to see the match. We lost the

game by one goal and lady, an Indian, started crying. Hindus who had come over to India after Partition were very enthusiastic for us. Bus and tram conductors refused to charge when they found out about us...

Salil Chowdhury, sports journalist, organized a match for us at Bombay. We missed our train so we took another one to Allahabad. We slept on the platform until the next one turned up. A number of celebrities and important people turned up at the stadium. The great Sachin Dev Burman, music maestro, was there. He was very old then. The Nawab of Patauli played until half-time. His wife Sharmila Thakur also witnessed the game. The couple donated around Rs. 20,000 to our fund. Six players from the Indian national squad played against us and at one point we were down 1-2. But we leveled the score and finally won it, 3-2.

Almost everyone suffered from conjunctivitis and scabies. Bangladeshi doctors came to treat us.

We were invited to play at Burdwan. We reached a little after 12:00 noon and the game was at 5:00. We had lunch, then went to the Burdwan University. It was a grand building, probably a former zamindar's palace...We were given good receptions wherever we played. Although the arrangements were not always great there was no lacking in sympathy...We played at the Ram Krishna Mission ground at Narendrapur. We won by a few goals against the college XI. It was a good arrangement and the place was idyllic. On Eid day our Muslim players went to pray in a mosque in Dharmatala. I visited my family and other Muslim friends and celebrated just like we used to in Bogra. People who left behind their loved ones in Bangladesh became very emotional. We also organized an Eid feast.

After 16 December half of our people started for Bangladesh almost immediately, getting up on trucks or buses that were going to Bangladesh. I stayed back for a while at my brother's house.

Reprinted from Ishrat Ferdousi's *The Year That Was* (Dhaka: Bastu Prakashan, 1996) a book of oral interviews of a diverse group of people about their experiences during the 1971 War of Liberation.