

Remembering the year of war

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A week ago, the stone had come loose from its setting and he couldn't find it. When he did find it a couple of days later, Ma told him to get rid of it! But he told Ma he wasn't wearing it for luck, he just liked the stone, and had it reset and it was back on his finger the following day.

We remained in the house, the four of us. Around noon, the soldiers were back. "Altaf Mahmud has confessed that there's a pistol in one of the steel almirahs!" they announced. We let them go through all the almirahs but no pistol turned up. It looked like they had come for loot. There was little cash and Ma had removed all the jewellery and hid them in the overhead flush tank in the bathroom. (And there they remained until we retrieved them after the war).

The following day, Naser and Rasul were released. On September 1, around 4:00 in the afternoon, Uncle Alvi and my brothers came out crawling from the Drum Factory military camp.

They were in bad shape. When Ma took off my brother Linu's filthy, bloodstained *lungi*, shreds of his skin came off with the garment. My elder brother had blood clots all over his hands. He had also been hit repeatedly on the spine with rifle butts. Another brother had been hit on the head and had grievous wounds there. We couldn't move them because none of them could stand up on their feet.

For days, I would listen to the accounts, although my brothers didn't want to talk about it, didn't want to remember the screams at all hours of the day. When they last saw Altaf bhai, he was sitting on a chair, legs splayed out, staring at nothing; all his limbs looked broken. "Take care of Jhunu and Shaon," he had whispered painfully as he handed them his engagement ring.

This is what they told us over the next few days. Rumi, Jewel, Bodi, Hafiz and many others had been picked up around the same time and brought to Ramna Police Station. There were other prisoners there for the same crime--waging war against Pakistan--and some of them knew Altaf bhai. My brothers saw someone offer him some Paracetamol tablets. Allah knows where they got them from or how, but the Bengalis locked up there together were helping each other in any way they could. Azad was an only son of his widowed mother; she had been to the Ramna Police Station to see him. He asked her to bring him some cooked rice the following day. But when she went there with the



A family picture of Altaf Mahmud

food, Azad was not there and he was never seen again. (His mother survived eighteen more years but she never touched rice again). When the soldiers found out Uncle Alvi ("Abul Barq" to them) was an artist, they hit his so badly that he couldn't close his fists.

Thirty-two prisoners were packed into a six feet by four feet room at the infamous Drum Factory army camp. They ate, drank and slept, standing. One by one, they would be taken out and tortured at a place just outside their cell, so that the other prisoners could have a clear view. The victims were tied to the overhead ceiling fans and beaten, kicked, poked with bayonets or stabbed with burning cigarettes. The day before their release, they had been lined up to be shot when someone stopped it. "We're not going to waste bullets on these *kafirs*! We'll just weigh the bastards down with bricks and drown them. I'll speak to the Captain."

For days, I would listen to the accounts, although my brothers didn't want to talk about it, didn't want to remember the screams at all hours of the day. When they last saw Altaf bhai, he was sitting on a chair, legs splayed out, staring at nothing; all his limbs looked broken. "Take care of Jhunu and Shaon," he had whispered painfully as he handed them his engagement ring. "There is no one else to look after them now." His face was swollen, a mass of wounds. One eyeball of Hafiz was hanging out from a bloodied socket. Rumi had been beaten terribly. Jewel had earlier lost four of his fingers during an operation in Farashganj Power Sub-Station. The torturers would trample on the stubs of his mutilated fingers and stub burning cigarettes on them. Zaki and Bodi were in equally terrible condition.

After that, almost every day, my mother went and kept vigil at the Drum Factory gate, from morning till sundown, waiting for the release of Altaf bhai. She was expecting that like her sons, he too would come crawling out of the place, alive. But one day, they told her that Altaf Mahmud had been transferred to Dhaka Cantonment. So, she shifted her place of vigil to the Cantonment Gate. She would ask permission to see Altaf Mahmud. They would refuse and she would persist.

Perhaps to get rid of her, the soldiers there told her that Altaf Mahmud had been sent to Dhaka Central Jail. And day after day, Ma went and waited at the jail gate. She even told us that some of the released prisoners had seen Altaf bhai in the jail hospital, in a terrible state, more dead than alive. She believed she would see him, sooner or later. She also went to the holy man called Pagla Pir, where Jahanara Imam was also a devotee. Jahanara Imam's son Rumi was among those who had been taken away. The holy man told them that he could 'see' their wards, the arrested persons, sitting in a room and that they were alright.

We remained in our Rajarbagh house for a month, waiting for Altaf bhai to turn up. But people cautioned us that it was not safe. If the soldiers came and picked up my brothers a second time, it could mean the end for them.

So one day, we just grabbed some clothes and went to a house close to the Pagla Pir's abode. It was good for Ma. We lived there through October and November. Ma went regularly to our Rajarbagh house. "What if Altaf returned?" she would reason. And whenever she saw any dishevelled beggar or deranged man, she would go up close and peer at their

faces to see if the man was her son-in-law.

We re-established contact with the freedom fighters. Atiq bhai used to visit us. Winter was approaching; so they asked for warm clothes, blankets, shoes, etc. Ma used to collect them from different places. Medicine came from a friend whose father owned a pharmacy.

On December 16, Ma took out the Bangladesh flag and sent someone to put it up on the roof. People in the house were crying. My brothers rushed to the Central Jail. But they didn't find Altaf bhai. From there, they went to the *Baddhyabumi* (killing ground) of Mirpur and Rayerbazar Itkhola, and saw terrible scenes. Hundreds of bereaved people were looking for their loved ones in those two places, and there were dozens of dead bodies. But they didn't find any trace of Altaf bhai or his comrades. The hospital morgues were checked. Again, nothing. I went to Rajarbagh Police Lines and saw the place where they had tortured women. The victims hardly resembled human beings, so badly were they disfigured.

Around 4:30 pm, Shahadat Chowdhury, Habibul Alam, Fateh Ali and a Bengali army officer, Maj Haider, arrived in a jeep. They fired a few times in the air. Then they came in and spoke to my mother and Jhunu apa. They were very emotional. They couldn't say much and left shortly afterwards.

The following day, I participated in a programme on TV. I was to sing, "*Kando, Banglar Manush...*" (Cry, O people of Bangladesh), but I couldn't finish the song. Tears rolled down my cheeks as I ran out of the studio.

The writer is an actor and director of Dhaka Theater. Reprinted by permission of the author Ishrat Firdousi and first appeared in his book *The Year That Was* (1996).