

1992

RABITA SALEH

"It was the summer of 1992. I had arrived in Dhaka city from the outskirts in search for a living. Despite having no clue of what to do, I was hopeful. You won't understand. It was a different time; a different city.

"It was a cousin of mine, Jashim bhai, who taught me how to drive. He put me behind the wheel of a beat up Toyota Publica upon the first day without any instructions, and made me drive around a field for a couple hours. The next day we did the same on an empty road. By the third day, I was driving on the main roads of Dhaka. Driving isn't complicated. But you need courage.

"Well, I knew how to drive now. I somehow managed myself a job as an auto-rickshaw driver. Those were popular back then; similar to the CNGs you see these days, just in yellow and black. I had a wife and son back home for whom I was now providing a good living. Life was good.

"The incident happened one night while I was driving in Malibagh. Two men hailed my auto. They were both quite tall. One was rather lanky, but his veins were popping out of his arms. The other was buff like a bull, and menacing too. I approached them and asked where they wanted to go. They got into the rickshaw before answering.

"*'Rampura TV Bhoboner dike jabo,'* said the thin man. I noticed his eyes had a shrewd spark about them. Something didn't feel quite right to me. I had not survived the last six

months in this city without learning a thing or two. For now though, I set aside my worries and started towards their destination.

"It was nearing 11 am at night, and there were very few vehicles on the streets. The men didn't talk to each other as we glided through the quiet city roads, opting to stare outside with the wind whipping across their faces. The thin man kept rubbing his hands across something sticking out of his pant pocket. I tried to see what it was in my rear view mirrors, but I couldn't because of the darkness. About half way to our destination, we passed under some streetlights, and in their wake, I finally saw the object. A holster was poking out of his pocket!

"For a minute, I was dumbstruck. If there were any other vehicles around mine, I would surely have run into one. After I had calmed down a bit, I regained control of my steering wheel. It wasn't a long drive after that, and soon we reached Rampura. They directed me to park beside an old garment's factory, right behind a huge truck that was being unloaded. However, they didn't exit my auto. For some reason they were craning their necks out to observe the unloading.

"From my seat, I could see a manager ahead who was calling out instructions, while some young boys were unloading the truck. The man looked to be in his forties, with a pot belly, a thin moustache and a shiny bald patch on his head. Nothing out of the ordinary. However, my passengers were keenly

observing him. Suddenly, by some signal I must have missed, the buff man got out of the auto, and approached the manager. The thin man, who by now I had discerned was the brains of the operation, remained seated. Right in front of my eyes, the man put his arm around the neck of the manager and steered him forcefully towards my auto. He shoved the manager into the vehicle, got on himself, and told me to drive. At this point, I was frightened for my life and his words sent me into a flurry of action, turning on the engine and driving off. I had no idea where I was going, when the thin man said, in a voice which was so calm it seemed completely out of place in the current situation, *"Khilkheter dike jaan"*.

"Now Khilkhet was almost all the way at the other side of Dhaka, and unlike these days, it was a very secluded area back then with a lot of swamps. It didn't slip my mind that perhaps that was why we were driving there in the first place. As I drove on I could clearly hear what was going on in the back. The manager was yelling out for someone to save him, his futile screams falling upon a sleep-deafened city. The ruffian still had him in a choke-hold, and kept yelling the same thing over and over again.

'Rafiq bhai re chinish?'

'Chinish na? Rafiq bhai re chinish na? Ekhon e chinaitesi!'

"This routine went on till we reached their desired spot in Khilkhet. And then, yet again, only the buff man and the manager exited

the auto. I witnessed the ruffian thoroughly beating up the man, then taking all his belongings — he seemed to have some rather large wads of cash — and dumping him into a swamp off the road. He'd be in a lot of pain until someone heard his groans and came to save him the next morning.

"The buff man got back into the auto, and told me to drive back towards Banani. I didn't think twice before doing as told. Again, the two men sat silently as we reached Kakoli. This time though, the absence of their anxiety was apparent. Their assignment had gone off without a hitch. They were relaxed. Just at the Kakoli signal, as I slowed down, they got off and told me to go towards the bus stand ahead, where they would pay my fare. So I went towards the bus stand once the signal turned green, and —"

"Wait a minute! You actually went towards the bus stand?! To get your fare from two goons! Two goons, I might add, who just hijacked a dude not ten feet away from you?!" I ask, incredulous.

"Well, of course," he says, with a casual shrug. "I'd driven them all over the city. That was a lot of fuel lost. But it was pointless. They weren't there. I looked for them for a while, but ultimately I had to give up and go home."

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