



The guerrillas of Crack Platoon (Sector 2), Dhaka, Bangladesh, 1971.

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The war we fought from home

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We said goodbye, I made him eat the cake I had baked for Rizwan but was gripped with fear as I silently prayed for his safety.

August 30, 1971. It was 7 am, I heard some strange noises and opened my eyes to see two men in army uniform in my room holding guns to my face and asking me to get up. I closed my eyes thinking this must be one of my nightmares which I experienced every time an army truck crossed our road, thinking it might stop at our gate. By then we knew the consequence of the Pakistani Army entering anyone's home. But this was no nightmare, they were actually in our house, they were everywhere, ransacking and searching for something. All hell had broken loose, our domestic helps started to scream and cry, as I calmly asked the army *jawans* to go out while I got dressed. I was escorted to our living room where Rizwan in his red sleeping suit and my mother were being held. I noticed the room was dark, as all the curtains had been drawn as if to prevent us from seeing something, the environment was grim and menacing. My first thought was of relief that Wasif was away, he had crossed over just a few days ago. A young Major started to interrogate us roughly with questions such as who visits us, were our friends, where was Wasif now, do we know traitors like Altaf Mahmood, Chullu, Rumi, Bodi. I silently whispered to myself, I don't

know any traitors, only freedom fighters by those names. Rizwan, much to our shock suddenly said he knew Rumi. The Captain literally jumped up but Rizwan with a smile said he is a boy he goes to school with!

After a while we were called out to the back of our house and shown the place where the guns and grenades were buried but thankfully had already been removed a few days ago. However, evidence remained prompting them to start questioning us again. My mother who is originally from Kolkata and spoke fluent Urdu told them about her widowhood in 1959, how she had singlehandedly raised the four of us. She convinced them that we have been travelling and this must be the work of miscreants while we were away. Then in one horrifying moment another Jawan caught hold of Rizwan's hand and said, "let us take him, a little torture and he will reveal everything". We had heard too many stories of young boys taken away, their blood drained out and left to die. We just could not let them take Rizwan. I started screaming and crying, Ammu as we call our mother, suddenly became a lion protecting her cub. She stood tall and in a firm voice said: "NO I cannot let you take my son away from me they are all I have in this world" as we both caught his other arm. There was complete silence, after a long pause that felt like an eternity, the Major came

forward, looked straight into her eyes and said, "I am giving him back to a widowed mother but ask your older son Wasif '*wo Insaanbanjaye*' [he should become human]".

After the Army left, we broke down in relief but were bewildered thinking what could have happened to warrant such a visit by them. Our worst fear came true when we learnt of the tragedy that had unfolded the night before on August 29, when I had pleaded with Rumi to stay and yet he left to spend the night with his mother. Our friends, comrades, fellow freedom fighters such as Rumi, Chullu Sadique, Bodi, Altaf Mahmood his brothers in-law and many others were picked up in a raid dealing a massive blow to our covert operations.

I was devastated thinking of what Chullu bhaiya had told me. For days I could not eat or sleep and was haunted by images of our friends being tortured in captivity. We spent our days in anguish and tears thinking all was lost. Our neighbours later told us that morning when the army trucks were outside our home they saw a man being dragged out of the truck, his face covered with a black hood, he could hardly walk and had to be held. He was taken to the back side of our house. We found out that it was Bodi, forced to reveal the location of the buried ammunition. However, he knew that Wasif was away and the guns removed, even in

the face of torture he remembered to save his friend. Wasif returned a few days later but did not come home. He took shelter at Shireen Huq's house and her mother took care of him.

On the morning of December 17, when the entire country was going wild with celebration we were waiting impatiently to welcome our friends about to be released from jail. Wasif, Alam and others had gone to bring them, we knew they were headed towards our house. Hearing gunshots we rushed out crying and screaming. Shireen was with me that morning. Alas! Our joy turned to shock and despair as we found Rumi and Bodi were not in the jeep with the others. Rumi, Bodi, Altaf Mahmood were all murdered after brutal torture. Chullu bhai, his body bruised and battered but head held high, came out to a free and independent Bangladesh. Rumi, my friend spent the last night of his life with his mother Shaheed Janani Jahanara Imam.

Our freedom fighters sacrificed themselves at the prime of their lives so that we could live in a free and independent Bangladesh, speak our language, sing our songs, practice our religion and live in peace and dignity. I often wonder, have we adequately honoured their sacrifice?

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