

"WE WANT JUSTICE"

ZAINAH MEMOOD

I was lying flat on my front, with my glasses askew and digging into my temple, on an empty, dusty street that was veiled with a heavy smog, courtesy of the pollution my city is infamous for. My hands flat on the ground, leaving a temporary stamp made by the gravel. I couldn't move my eyelids. I wasn't able to block the light from entering my eyes. My nerve endings, sensitive to light, could not interpret the signals that were being sent to my brain. My consciousness was as black as the darkest night and as empty as the feeling of true nothingness. I could hear every single pound of my heartbeat. Not through my ears, those were occupied by the steady drum of people's passionate, chanting voices in our mother tongue.

We were the student body. We came from different schools, we shared different beliefs and adhered to different morals. Normally, I would call the two strangers standing on either side of me rivals, but today each is a brother, a friend, a comrade.

lingering smoke. There was one thing coming out of our hearts, expressed through the movement of our lips, 'Amra bichar chai'—we want justice.

The clouds were churlish and kraken-cruel; torrential rain had started to fall. We still managed to stand in unity, wearing our buttoned-up traditional school shirts and trousers, the green and blood-like red face paint faded away as the rain covered our faces and bodies, banners were made to mock the government's power. We were doing the duties of the officials; proving to the nation that what we are demanding can be done.

That brings me here, to this war-torn street, deserted by my fellow heroes, weeping bitterly due to the lingering traces of chemical mace in the air. The rain came harder. The scent of freshly fallen blood mimicked the smell of the bullets they carelessly shot at us, it followed like a snake slithering up on its prey.

Some say there are good cops and bad. I think that's an oversimplification. An officer had grabbed my arms suddenly and roughly. I attempted to break free of his hold. My struggle afforded me two precious seconds of freedom before I was held in his grasp again. The small glimpse I got of him, his strength was not a consequence of his bulk. He had the face of a father. As he spoke of the actions of the government, there was softness.

Distant screams were heard. The officer had left my sight.

I was stranded, stuck in the middle of fifty people. My stomach was churning and the feeling of depersonalisation struck me. I started to hyperventilate; my chest grew tight as bile rose in my throat.

Suddenly, hissing sounds covered the air. There was a weird smell: a mixture of wet earth due to rain sometime in the afternoon, faint traces of chemical mace and most overpoweringly, an acrid smell of vinegar. As I inhaled, the white fog crept into my lungs. My eyes started burning severely, then my throat. I started to cough uncontrollably and was wretched with tears and mucus streaming violently from my nose. My eyelids snapped shut causing temporary blindness.

Panic took over my body. The only sounds that left my mouth were piercing cries for help, no different to those individuals around me. The police had turned on us; people shouted as they ran for their lives. An unwelcoming shadow lurked behind me, I slowly moved my head towards the right. I was too stunned to realise that something very awful had just happened.

I fell to the floor. Darkness.

I can't move my eyelids. A tingling sensation is starting to occur at the bottom of my feet as my limbs begin to wake and regain function, replicating the sensation of stepping onto pins and needles.

Street lights flare up in response to the dark blue sky of the early evening.

I was angry at myself for believing in heroes because we did not need a hero to swoop in and save the day, we just needed normal, powerless people to grow a conscience and learn to lend a hand when needed. Then maybe I would not have woken up alone on that street today.

The brightness of the light bore into me, I struggle to turn away. My head feels rather light, scarcely set on my shoulders but spinning and floating. As I get far enough from the scene of my nightmares, I breathe in some fresh air, spluttering due to fatigue, and look around me. I notice couples strolling around hand-in-hand as if they live in the pages of some romance novel and hustling street vendors setting up their little stands for one more night of cut-throat business.

I look back at the uncertainty at the bend of the road I had just emerged from, wondering if I had imagined the last ten hours. But the blood that stained the ground around me proved that I had not imagined anything. I was angry at the realisation of how little our initiative today had meant to the very people for whom we had undertaken it. I was angry at a world so selfish that they rarely respond to anything that does not affect them directly. I was angry at how powerless we were. I was angry at myself for believing in heroes because we did not need a hero to swoop in and save the day, we just needed normal, powerless people to grow a conscience and learn to lend a hand when needed. Then maybe I would not have woken up alone on that street today. Then maybe my country would not be held captive by the ones in power and I would not be wondering who it was, exactly, that attacked us and whether we will ever be able to bring them to justice. Here we lay as pawns used in the game of government versus people, because in all games there must be sacrifices. Some sacrifices are simply greater than others.

Zainah Memood is a student who participated in the protest(s) following the deaths of two high-school students in a road accident in Dhaka on July 29, 2018.



ILLUSTRATION: REESHAM SHAHAB TIRTHO

Earlier today, my mother had hand-fed me breakfast, helped me braid my hair, got my school uniform ready, and sent me off to school with a home-cooked lunch and a kiss on my forehead. Sometimes, I embody that well-behaved parents' pet that everyone strives to be and despises at the same time. As such, the idea of me bunking school to join a protest is almost unimaginable.

We gathered near the bus stop where the incident had taken place. I glanced around the street and it looked like a vast expanse of cold concrete darkened by the