

An Unforgettable Journey

Shabbeedur Shuja

Chapter 1

1970.

My dad was posted in a government hospital in a town named Navarone in southern Bangladesh, then East Pakistan. He had landed this job after graduating from medical school the year before. This was a small, quiet town located near Jessore, a major city. I was five. My memory isn't very vivid about that town. My grandparent's house from my father's side was in a village near the suburb called Kaligonj located in the district of Satkhira. It was only about 50 miles away from Navarone, connected by a regular bus service.

Grandpa visited us frequently bringing along grandma and great-grandma, who was his stepmother and much younger than him. His dad – a rich landowner - in his old age convinced a poor family to give away their teenage daughter in marriage to take care of him. His first wife had died long ago. Little after the marriage, he passed away but great-grandma had stayed as a widow since. She had no children. We, her great grand children, were the jewel of her eyes. She had a great sense of humor and indulged Rushi – my kid sister – and me to no limits. In return, each of us loved her to death.

Grandma was a pretty woman who happened to be very quiet. Her display of love and affection was not very apparent but we felt it deep inside our hearts. Whenever the trio visited us in Navarone we became ecstatic. Rushi was only two and had an exceptional tendency to nag just about everything, which often turned into incessant crying. At times this became intolerable. You coo at her she goes berserk; you cuddle with her she still goes berserk. My parents gave me grief believing me to be the inevitable source of all her agony. They would give a deaf ear to what I had to say. Luckily, when we had visitors, she was usually better. With her tears subsided to some extent, the amount of scolding heading my way proportionately decreased.

Dad was working for East Pakistan health services. He was the assistant surgeon of the main hospital. Fortunately, he received government housing. This was a blessing as his salary was barely enough to maintain a decent life. There was never any savings. Mom never really liked Dad's job. The law and order situation in the region was deteriorating and the rate of murder was relatively high. One of Dad's responsibilities was to issue death certificates which he ended up doing too often for comfort. Mom had been a little bit on the timid side and worried about practically everything under the sun. Even a little thing would cause a severe nervous breakdown in her.

Our house was near the hospital. Sometimes corpse bearers would pass by our house carrying the hastily covered dead bodies. If Mom happened to be looking out at that moment and had a glimpse of the corpse she wouldn't be able to sleep that night. Her sleepless nights meant constant moaning and sobbing. Rushi and I used to share the same bed with our parents. On the nights when Mom cried, Rushi made it a routine to join Mom with her signature nasal, utterly annoying crying. There was very little I could do but listen to their wailing contest while keeping awake for most of the night. Mom usually cried relatively qui-

etly but not Rushi. She was loud as a horn and was incessant. Talk about a nuisance! Dad was having second thoughts about his job as well. The money was nothing to brag about; also he had to deal with too many dead bodies. He started to look around for other works.

In the meantime, a famous circus came to Navarone. I was ready to bolt to the circus arena. I had heard so much about it! There were tigers, lions, bears, elephants! How could anybody let go of such an unbelievable opportunity? I begged my dad to take me. I even bribed Rushi with some lozenges and urged her to do the same. Unfortunately, she was just as scared of circus animals as Mom was. The mention of tigers and bears instantly intimidated her. After constant pledging Dad finally agreed to take us to the circus. We got a ride in his government vehicle.

This was my first time in a circus. The animals were simply out of the world! Dad had a hard time managing my enthusiasm. Rushi on the other hand got scared with all the crowd and noise. She held on to Mom tightly. One of the main attractions of the circus was a gigantic elephant. As we approached the elephant Mom got very scared. This wasn't her first time seeing an elephant close up but it'd been a while and she seemed to have forgotten how big they actually could be. Rushi screamed in fear. Mom quickly stepped back with Rushi in her lap. I was not scared. Why would anybody fear such a gentle animal? They were also available to ride for a fee. With Dad's approval, I was soon placed on the back of the elephant. The animal walked in a small circle before I was brought down to the earth. I walked to Mom and Rushi with a victorious smile. Mom looked nervous and pale. "How in the whole world did you ride on that animal?" She gasped.

She remained shaky even after we reached home later in the evening. She had nightmares and screamed us awake. Dad tried to be patient. How could anybody freak out just by watching an elephant?

The next morning something even worse happened. A couple of murders were committed in a distant village the night before. The dead bodies were carried to the hospital in the morning. Talk about a stroke of luck – they went past right before the very eyes of my mother! She passed out immediately. Fortunately, I was nearby. I ran to get the lady from our neighboring house. She sprinkled water on Mom's face and fanned her with a hand-held fan.

That night Dad declared that he would actively look for other work. He had a desire to join the army for a while. It was considered to be a stable job with a good salary and additional facilities. After discussing with Mom he decided to give it a try. Mom was always terrified about wars. However, there was no reason to believe that a war was imminent. Pakistan was under the martial law rule of Yahya Khan. There were occasional civilian disturbances but no sign of any large-scale military involvement. On the other hand, Dad was a physician. Even if there was a war he wouldn't be sent directly in harm's way.

Dad joined the army in August 1970 as a Lieutenant Doctor. He was posted in Comilla cantonment, East Pakistan. After one year of service with favorable reference from his senior officer, he would be promoted to Captain. Dad was very pleased. Not only he would be making more money but also would be spared from dealing with dead bodies regularly. This

would supposedly make Mom much more comfortable as well. Before reporting to his job in Comilla he left us with his parents in the village. We were to join him later once he made a proper arrangement for housing. There was no housing available inside the cantonment. We didn't have to wait too long. He found a house near the Cantonment area. Housing inside the cantonment would have been free of cost. For this one, he would have to pay half the rent. With no other choice, he took it and brought us there.

Comilla Cantonment had a mixed population of people from both East and West Pakistan. There were several Pathans and Panjabis in Dad's group. Dad's C.O. (Commanding Officer) Lieutenant Colonel Romijuddin was from East Pakistan. He was a nice person. Dad's promotion would depend on his recommendation. The officers from West Pakistan were generally nice. Regardless, on many occasions, there were disagreements between the two, primarily due to ongoing political tension between the two parts of Pakistan – East and West. Briefly, at the end of the year, 1970 Yahya Khan called for an election. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, a reputed politician from East Pakistan and the head of the Awami League won the election clearly by a majority of votes from constituencies located in East Pakistan. On the other hand, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the founder of the Pakistan People's Party, won a large number of seats from West Pakistani constituencies. Bhutto refused to accept an Awami League government and demanded Sheikh Mujib to form a coalition government with PPP. However, Sheikh Mujib did not agree to such an undemocratic demand and as a result, Yahya Khan postponed the inaugural session of the National Assembly. After that, the political situation started to heat up quickly. The army was no exception. More and more incidents, though minor, were observed among both soldiers and officers.

Amid this, there was a talk about sending Dad and several other doctors to West Pakistan for training. Mom was not happy. If Dad went away for training then she would have no other choice but to take her two kids and either go back to our village home to live with our grandparents or go to Khulna to stay with her older sister and her husband. Dad studied medicine after he and Mom got married at an early age. Mom had to stay away from him for a while. Even after completing his degree, they didn't have much opportunity to live together. The thought of living without him again put a serious strain on her. Dad tried his best to assure her that he would be taking us to West Pakistan as soon as possible. He could have taken us with him but he neither knew the country nor had any acquaintances there. He didn't feel comfortable taking the whole family with him to an unfamiliar place. However, in Karachi, we had some family friends but he didn't have an opportunity to contact them. Mom went into her so-familiar breakdown feat. I wasn't sure what she was so sad about. No matter where we went, Grandparents' house or Aunt's house, it was all about running around, playing with cousins and friends, lots of freedom. Why was she so teary-eyed?

Soon we learned that the training schedule had changed. Nobody was being sent for training at that time. Was Mom happy? I was slightly disappointed. Whatever! Life inside the cantonment wasn't too boring either. I made a few friends and we played all over the area. I was spared from listening to Rushi's agonizing nagging at least for some time. A few of my friends were Urdu speaking. I picked up a few Urdu words from them. Things were sort of good. The only trouble came from Mom. She started to push me to study harder and harder. Did I mention she had a short temper? Most of my evenings were spent being yelled at. It

was difficult to see how somebody who got mad so easily could cry like a little girl when the situation demanded.

A couple of months later Dad's C.O. changed. Lieutenant Colonel Jahangir from East Pakistan became the new C.O. We heard good things about him. As time went by the differences inside the army grew steadily. It was not very apparent at first but a couple of incidents over the next few months underlined it.

The first incident happened when a West Pakistani general came for a short visit. A big party was thrown in his honor where the general and his companions drank profusely. Later all officers were asked to pay an equal portion of the fat bill. Many officers who abstained from drinking refused to pay. They didn't mind sharing the price of the food but not the liquor. Dad was one of them. He was determined not to pay the Rupee 30 asked by the authorities. Some of his colleagues from East Pakistan Doctors Mohsin, Faruk, Jahangir, and a few Pathans from the West heavily objected. Most Pathans came from the northern frontier of Pakistan and were much more sympathetic to East Pakistanis than the Panjabis were. Many times it was the Pathans who often sided with the East Pakistanis. After plenty of arguments and finally, with the help of the high-ranked officials, a solution was reached. Dad and his friends wouldn't have to pay for the liquor. But the event imprinted a permanent concern in the minds of many.

The second incident took place during one of the officer's open discussion meetings. Some officers from both ends were outspoken about the current political situation. There was a fear that the existing situation could deteriorate at any time. Officers from East Pakistan were unhappy with the way Yahya Khan gave in to Bhutto and did not allow Mujib to form the government. On the other hand officers from West Pakistan felt just the opposite. They didn't want Awami League to lead the country, regardless of the election result. They felt the politicians from West Pakistan should form the government. In the meeting, Dad expressed his discontent using chosen words making sure the overall tone didn't offend anybody. However, not everybody was able to keep their composure. Lieutenant Makbul from Education Core became so agitated that he even went as far as to say that the state of East Pakistan had no choice but to separate. The patience had worn out and it was time for the East to throw back all the crap that the West had thrown at it since the birth of Pakistan in 1947. After this, the meeting turned into a screaming match between the East and West. Eventually, Lieutenant Makbul was escorted out of the meeting to bring the situation under control. Later Bengali officers cordially congratulated him for speaking the inevitable, appropriate or not. The situation remained tense in the coming days.

The Bhola cyclone, a devastating tropical cyclone, struck East Pakistan and India's West Bengal on November 12, 1970. It was the deadliest tropical cyclone ever recorded with up to half a million people losing their lives primarily as a result of the storm surge that flooded much of the low-lying areas of the Ganges Delta. The cyclone practically destroyed the coastal areas of Noakhali. Villages were flattened, crops destroyed, and lives lost.

Dad and his team of doctors went there to treat the sick and distressed. The devastation was so bad that they had to struggle to keep their sanity. There were bloated, rotting

dead bodies floating all over the place. The survivors lived in inhuman conditions with no food or drinking water. The storm and subsequent flood had ripped open the wooden silos where the farmers traditionally stored their grains. Yesterday's rich were today's homeless. They had nothing to quench thirst, nothing to stop hunger. Dad and his team tried their best to treat the survivors. However, the supplies for food and water dripped in slowly and inadequately.

Fortunately, a Hindu rich farmer with the title Sadhu (saint) opened a food kitchen in his yard. Magically his house was unharmed and he suffered very little grain loss. It was a general belief that the densely grown tall coconut trees that surrounded his house worked as a natural barrier. It must have absorbed the thrust of the storm surge and the wind. A good and generous man Sadhu fed the hungry in his yard for two long weeks and provided shelter to the homeless. He knew that the rich farmers who had become homeless would never let go of their pride to come to his food kitchen. He sent food and water to those families. Dad was impressed at his generosity. He wasn't the only farmer saved from the wrath of the calamity but none came forward with such kindness.

During one of his meetings with Sadhu when Dad inquired he solemnly answered, "God saved me from this disaster. The grains that could have been destroyed by the water I am sharing with my neighbors. This is my duty. If we can't help when others need us then why born as a human? "

Dad never forgot about Sadhu.

Dad got selected to go for the training, once again. This time there was no talk of postponement. Mom was tense. I had to cope with incremental berating for practically everything. Rushi seemed to nag with double intensity. Our home suddenly turned into a morbid place. I wondered what would happen when Dad left. No date for departure was fixed yet but January or February looked bright. Our friends and families were concerned. The political situation had been steadily getting worse. Going to the West at a time like that didn't seem wise. The country was becoming restless. Awami League was still not permitted to form the government.

The rebellious student body of East Pakistan was getting impatient by the day. In 1952 it was primarily the students who had initiated the Bengali Language Movement advocating the recognition of the Bengali language as an official language of Pakistan. On 21st February when police fired and killed some of the protesters, civil unrest started led by the Awami Muslim League, later renamed as only Awami League. After years of conflict, the central government granted official status to the Bengali language. The memory of that glorious victory was still bright in their minds. It was only a matter of time before they burst into another uprising against the West Pakistani rulers. Demand for separation hadn't been raised yet but obviously, it crossed many minds. The sign of a brewing problem was evident. However, Dad wasn't ready to refuse to go for training, not unless something drastic had happened. The situation in the Army was still relatively normal. Two of his friends Drs. Mohsin and Jahangir had completed their training earlier. They were both posted in Comilla.

Finally, his training date was fixed in February. If we went with him the government would have paid all our expenses. The same would be true if we joined him within six months. Dad did not want to take us all into an uncertain situation. We had to stay back. There was another reason which I learned a few months later. We planned to stay with my paternal grandparents for a little while and then move in with Mom's older sister and her family in Khulna. Dad would try his best to arrange for our trip within six months which would save us a lot of money.

In January Dad received a sermon from Jessore Court of Law regarding a death certificate that he issued when he was working in Navarone. He was a witness for the defendants. Such sermons were normal but until then he never had to physically show up in court. This time he had no choice. Grandpa's house was only a few hours away from Jessore. He planned to take us all with him and drop us at Grandpa's house in the village. Once the court matter was resolved he would return to Comilla and fly to West Pakistan where his training would take place.

I was very excited. The memory of all the wonderful things in my grandparent's house flashed before my eyes – the vast fruit garden with dozens of varieties of mangos, several varieties of berries, jackfruits, coconuts, leeches, etc.; the fields of sugar canes; the ponds; the cattle grazing in the fields; the magical tune from the shepherd boy's flute – altogether a complete recipe for adventure. Most of my early childhood was spent there. I rolled and crawled on the clay courtyard, toddled in the neighborhood, and grew up in the lap of the loving but dirt-poor village women. Those memories got imprinted so deeply in my mind that the possibility of returning there filled me with joy and anticipation. I could barely wait.

Chapter 2

Winter wasn't over yet. The touch of coolness in the air felt quite good. One evening after traveling in a bus for practically the whole day we reached the tiny riverside suburb called Kaliganj. After crossing the river we would have to go another five miles to reach my grandparent's house. Grandpa had already been informed about our arrival and was supposed to send a bullock cart to carry us home. One of his servants should be waiting for us with the cart on the other side of the river.

As soon as we crossed the river in a wooden rowing boat I saw the shepherd boy who took care of my grandparent's cattle. His name was Alek Mia. He couldn't have been older than fifteen. He played the pipe very well and could jump from tree to tree like a monkey. During my visits to Grandpa's house, a major part of my time would be spent with him. Once he had secretly taken me to the grazing fields with the cattle. My disappearance had stirred up the neighborhood with everybody searching for me. Several hours later Grandma sent a domestic hand to the grazing fields – just in case. I was chasing around the calves with a stick. My safe return was celebrated with my devastated young mother relieved in a stream of tears.

That evening after Alek returned from the fields and drove the cattle in the shed next to the courtyard Grandpa summoned him in the outhouse. Vice president of the union for many years Grandpa was a well-known and respected person. He was a man of little words and much temper. However, I had never seen him hit anybody. But that night he slapped Alek on the face, once, in front of everybody. He did not say even a single word. Alek was not surprised at all. He knew something of this nature was going to happen. After this incident, things changed a little bit between us. We couldn't spend as much time together as before. Mom made a special effort to keep me away from him. She was a village girl but fostered a significant fear of the villagers. She believed that the villagers were simple-minded but were also capable of committing heinous crimes. She feared that Alek might try to harm me to take revenge on Grandpa. That day it was I who had insisted on going with him. He wasn't to be blamed.

A few days after that incident we moved to Navarone. Seeing Alek after a while my heart just danced on. He hugged me dearly and picked me up. I could see his eyes tearing up even in the dark. "Why did it take you guys so long?" He couldn't hide the wetness in his voice. "I was so worried."

My parents were anxious to get home as soon as possible. The overall situation of the country wasn't at its best. There was considerable fear of being robbed on the way. Our luggage was loaded swiftly into the cart and our slow journey started. One of my distant uncles lived nearby. We stopped at his place and took one of his workers to accompany us for added security. He lit a hurricane lamp and walked ahead of the cart. From time to time he yelled at the passing pedestrians and cyclists, "Who goes there?"

Inside the covered bullock cart, Mom and Rushi sat quietly. I sat at the back with my legs hanging out. Dad alternated between walking along with the cart and hopping on the cart to sit beside me. It was getting darker as the night encroached slowly. A crescent moon hung in the sky beyond the white clouds. The dirt road meandered through the paddy fields that extended to the horizon. Our cart moved slowly with the labored sound of the wheels, joining the synchronized sounds of the fireflies to create a piece of unique music. Now and then isolated cyclists approached us with their bells ringing 'Cring Cring' as they leaned forward to get a glimpse of the visitors.

"Where are you heading?" The curious ones asked gently.

"Goneshpur." Alek Mia or the man with the lamp answered alternately.

"Which house?" The follow-up question was inevitable.

"Habibur Morol."

"Oh!"

Not everybody recognized the man, but some did. They respectfully nodded and went in their ways. Our cart crawled through village after village. We turned west after reaching Pirojpur. If we had gone south for another 3 miles we would get to my mom's parental house.

Mom had ten uncles from her father's side. Each of them had at least half a dozen children. Some of their children had grown up and started families. Altogether they had occupied a full village. My time there went by so quickly! The hoard of cousins ensured that I was never bored. We roamed around the village, played tag in the moonlight on the sprawling courtyard, and dared the shady village roads at night to venture to the small convenience store located near the river to buy a delicious treat. The freedom was incomparable, memories were unforgettable. Of course, none of these would have been possible without my cousin's sister Rani. She was twelve and a daredevil. Her reputation had spread far beyond her village. A merited student she was the indisputable leader of the younger kids in the village. Adults trusted her and relied on her. Even my mom stopped worrying about me when I was with her.

I shot a meaningful look toward my dad. He read my mind. "Don't worry, you'll visit them," he said. "I'll tell your grandpa to send you folks to Dorgahpur for a few days."

"Isn't that what he wants!" Mom chirped in. "Once there I would barely see him. He would shadow Rani everywhere."

Dad's indulgent laughter rippled in the darkness. He had grown up in the villages and roamed around the countryside with his older sister. He knew the feeling.

As we closed onto Grandpa's house we met a group of four men: Alek's dad Shaheed, older brother Moti, and a couple of young men named Liakot and Rohim, all equipped with bamboo sticks and powerful flashlights. They worked for Grandpa.

"Alek, is that you? Alek? Hey Alek?" Uncle Shaheed yelled. Traditionally in the villages, elderly men are called *uncles* and women *aunts* regardless of any blood relation.

"Father!" Alek answered, relieved.

Uncle Shaheed hugged Dad. "Why so late? Your father has been so worried that he sent us to check."

Dad walked with him as he explained the delay due to the irregular bus service. Uncle Shaheed had been a long-time field hand of Grandpa and became an integral part of the family over the years. He had no land of his own. Grandpa had allowed him to build a hut in one corner of his land close to the main house. Uncle Shaheed and his family had lived there for years. He had two sons – Moti and Alek. Moti married a few years back and built another hut near his father's hut. They all had a special corner for Dad. Not only did he provide free medical treatment but he had also advocated for them to Grandpa to allow them to build a shelter in his land.

At Grandpa's house, we were greeted by a bustling crowd who had gathered in the courtyard. Villagers in this part of the country were impoverished with a few having any kind of education. Most were fieldhands working for a handful of rich farmers who owned most of the farming lands. Anybody who rose above the ordinary, especially with education, was honored and loved. When any of these successful children visited, villagers gathered to show their appreciation. Dad was special among specials and his popularity was enviable. Since becoming a licensed physician he had treated the poor villagers for free often handing over medicines free of cost as well. People came from far away, mostly the dirt poor. They took these opportunities to get a free check-up, often some free medicines, and a reasonably good meal, courtesy of grandma.

Upon our arrival, Grandma came rushing and hugged both Rushi and me tightly. She was very worried about our late arrival. That night when everybody left and we could finally get to bed it was already past midnight. In the villages, most people went to bed early to save on kerosene costs. Seldom there would be an exception to that. When my dad or his older brother Uncle Nowsher, a renowned teacher in the town of Satkhira, visited exceptions to that rule were made.

Dad left the next morning. He had to show up in Jessore Judge's court as a witness that day. Before leaving he held me lightly in his arms and said, "Take care of your mother and sister. Okay?"

I nodded with confidence. It was a big ask but I surely was up to the task. Dad said goodbye to everybody and climbed up the back of a passenger bike, customarily called a *helicopter* (a regular bike with an extra seat, usually just a flat piece of rectangular wood, attached to the carrier). When only men traveled they primarily used this means of transportation. It was much faster than the bullock carts. I ran alongside the helicopter that carried Dad for as long as I could. Slowly the bike rolled away out of sight on the meandering dirt road that disappeared into dense vegetation. I kept on waving until I could make out Dad's silhouette against the rising sun. Tears welled up in my eyes. I wondered when I was going to see him again. He was supposed to go back to Comilla from Jessore. From there he would make the trip to West Pakistan. There was no knowing when we could finally make it there. Alek had been running with me. He quietly picked me up into his lap.

Dad had no difficulty as a witness in the court of justice. He was asked whether he had issued the death certificate, which he answered positively. The handwriting was his. After that none of the parties had too many questions for him. This was his first time in a court. He was sort of nervous. He hadn't done anything wrong but the lawyers could be tenacious at times. He felt relieved once that part was over.

He made the journey to Comilla the same day. The next morning he called Uncle Nawsher in Satkhira to inform that he had reached Comilla safely. Satkhira was only a couple of hours from Grandpa's house. On the following weekend, he came down to the village himself to deliver the news. Normally important news would get passed on to acquaintances regularly commuting between Satkhira and Kaligonj. On our way to the village, we didn't stop by Uncle Nawsher's house. An affectionate person he took this opportunity to visit us in the village. Aunt stayed behind to take care of their house and children. They had four daughters, who were studying in school or college. They couldn't always leave the house together even if they wanted to.

When my uncle came to the village he took me on his bike and went around the village. He liked to meet the reputed and influential people of the village and exchange opinions and information. He proudly introduced me as his nephew to everybody. "Rasheed's son. Greet with Salam, son."

I would sheepishly murmur a Salam, the Muslim way of greeting. When among familiar faces I could be the loudest, however in the presence of new acquaintances I became almost invisible.

One day he took me to Uncle Motaleb's house. He was Dad's second cousin. He was big, well built like a wrestler. He used to work out and practice fighting with a bamboo stick. He showed some of his skills to me. He spun a long heavy bamboo stick around him with unbelievable deftness and speed as I observed with disbelief. Having no children of his own he was known for his affection for all children in the village. He invited them to his house and told stories or showed performances with a stick. Well known in the region he was considered to be an influential person.

From Uncle Motaleb's house, we headed toward the village market of Ratanpur.

"He is a good man but short-tempered." On the way, Uncle Nawsher conferred. "Got too many enemies. Beats up people for little things. Just the other day he pounded an insolent young man mercilessly for eve-teasing. Later it came out that the young man's father is an influential person in a nearby village. The time is bad but who is going to explain that to Motaleb?"

I nodded wisely. He did not discuss these matters with everybody. I knew because I shadowed him all through his visits. Not that I had any choice. He wouldn't go anywhere without me.

The village market in Ratanpur was only a mile away. Riding on the handle of my uncle's bike negotiating the narrow, uneven, tree-lined dirt road as we moved closer to the village market I felt an increasing presence of saliva in my mouth. On the south end of the market, there were several sweet shops. One of them was Kamal's who made finger-licking

rasgulla (small cheese balls soaked in sugary syrup) and hot *galebi* (a deep-fried sweet preparation). Coming to the market with my uncle invariably meant getting the taste of Kamal's sweet. I loved sweets, of any kind. Mom said when I was only a year old I screamed for molasses and wouldn't stop until got a plate full of it. Sweetmaker Kamal issued a broad smile at my sight. He stirred up the hot *rasgullas* floating in sugar syrup in a large deep pan. "How many do you want, son? Two or four? I have fresh *galebi*. Just made them. Sir, should I pack a kg to take home as well?"

Uncle Nawsher relaxed into a chair with me by his side. "Sure. Sure. First, serve each of us two *rasgullas* and a pair of *galebi*. Pack up some for home too. His mom loves your sweet."

"When did they arrive?"

"Just a few days back. His dad has to go to West Pakistan for training. He dropped them off here. They will stay for a few months. Son, do you want some *sondesh* (sweetened cottage cheese)? Kamal, go ahead, give us a couple of your special *sondesh*. He is a suck-up for sweet things. Have too many stomach worms but I guess a little sweet now and then won't do much harm."

"Sir, my sweet does not give stomach worm. This is Kamal's special sweet... I tell you, sir. Ha... ha... ha... "

Rajab Ali was the owner of the solitary bookstore located in the market. The clothing store next to his store belonged to Naisur Rahman. Both were uncle's long-time friends. Failing to do well in education they had resorted to business. Sales hadn't been great but enough to make a living. They had some paddy fields which were rented to landless farmers. In the end, they did well though with considerable effort. Regardless both were very ambitious and took a strong interest in politics. They would always get into loud discussions about local politics with Uncle. Sometimes the national politics sipped in too. Bhutto wasn't ready to let Mujib form the government. Serious trouble seemed almost unavoidable. It wasn't quite clear what would be the impact of such events in this remote area. India was nearby, no more than two to three miles, just across the river. How would they react? How was this issue going to be resolved?

All these discussions made me sleepy. Uncle Nawsher noticed. He was apologetic. "Oh, look how insensitive I am. I forgot about this little boy. What does he understand about politics? Come, Khoka. We'll go home."

We took a different route around the village to return home. Bored or not I loved to go around with him. It made me feel important. Who else would strike up a serious conversation with me?

Chapter 3

Finally, Dad's date of departure was fixed. He was scheduled to leave Dhaka on 7th February. I had a great desire to see Dad at the airport. But that was impossible to do when I was back in the village. Mom looked pretty sick lately and her temper had leaped as well. I avoided any contact with her. Who wanted to be barked at for nothing? I wondered if any airplanes flew over these villages. I had serious doubts. Regardless, I didn't lose hope completely. Every morning I routinely asked Grandpa what date it was. Just in case Dad's plane flew over us. I wouldn't have missed it for anything.

The harvesting in winter was one of my favorite events. The villages turned into a festive mode. The large courtyard of my grandparent's house would convert into an operation center. First, the grains had to be separated from the paddy. Several cows were tied by ropes around a central pole with a bearing that allowed the animals to walk around in a circle. A group of farmhands carried the harvested paddy from the fields to the yard in bundles. Another group banged these bundles on a flat wooden surface to separate the loose grains from the sheaf. Next, the bundles were loosened and the sheaf of paddy spread in layers on the path of the cows who were driven to walk around and around. The continuous movement of their hooves forced the grains to detach and pile up. The grains were collected at regular intervals and new batches were placed. This was a familiar view in the villages of Bangladesh. I loved it so much that I could probably watch it from dawn to dusk. The steady movement of the workers, the rhythmic shuffling noise of the cow huffs on the paddy, the brisk movement of the women preparing large pots to boil the rice, and the thick sound of the wooden rice huller thudding on regular intervals to remove the husk and bran from the grains – as a whole it was a memorable experience for the eyes, ears, and mind. I always had this desire to team up with the farmhands and harvest the paddy from the fields with a crescent-shaped knife, bundle them up, and carry them on my shoulder to the house. The hardship, the sweat, the dog-tired laborers – it all seemed like part of an adventure. I begged my mom numerous times to let me go with Alek but in vain.

Unfortunately, this time we came too late. The harvesting had already been completed. This was a great disappointment.

My grandparent's house had two separate large units with a thatched roof. The main larger unit was located in the lower half of the rectangular courtyard on a six-foot-high mud base and faced south for good air ventilation. This unit had a bedroom where Grandpa and Grandma slept and a cold room where rice, molasses, and relishes were stored. The other unit was occupied by my great-grandma. It was considerably smaller, had a three feet high base, and faced the larger unit. Strategically a couple of mud walls created some privacy for the women behind the main house where the kitchen and a covered eating space were located. A separate back entrance allowed maidservants to go to the pond to fetch water or do other errands in the garden.

We - Mom, Rushi, and I - used to sleep in the same room with great-grandma, on a second bed. Great-grandma didn't do much of the household work. She was not on good

terms with grandma and even insignificant things set up large-scale showdowns. Grandma was not known to raise her voice but she tried her best to hold her ground against the thunderous voice of great-grandma. Luckily things never spilled out of control. Great-grandma was severely short-sighted and slightly hard of hearing. She had to feel her way down the stairs to the courtyard from her terrace. I heard she had a cataract. Dad planned to get her operated but didn't have time before he left. Great-grandma was notorious for bossing around the maids, servants, and farmhands. She sat on a handcrafted mat on her terrace and called out at everything and everybody as she felt necessary. "Hey Moti, give that cow a nudge. Don't dose off." "Alek! Work faster. We don't pay you for nothing."

Nobody paid much attention to her though. She was equally liked and disliked. However, very few dared to take a stand against her. She had a nightmare of a tongue, especially when she got mad. She had an infinite collection of curses and marveled at delivering them, particularly ensuring that none from the immediate ancestors of the target were spared. No wonder everybody left her alone. I was the jewel of her eyes. Being the only male child on my Dad's side of the family I enjoyed relatively more attention than the other kids. This was customary in villages. A male child was considered to be the one carrying the family name. Uncle Nawsher had no son. My birth had brought many celebrations in this courtyard, I heard. A widow and childless, great-grandma had embraced me with all her heart. Since birth, I had always slept in her room, as a baby rested on her lap for hours at a time, during sicknesses ate soup from the chickens she raised and most of all were indulged beyond belief. No matter what mischief I did, as long as I made it to her lap there was not a soul who could give me grief. Any complaints were protested so vehemently that everybody just gave up. This was true against Mom too, thankfully. This made my visits to my grandparent's house particularly relaxing.

Life was good but not what it could have been if Rani Apa (customary to address an older sister) had been there. I started to miss her. I was hoping to make the trip to my maternal grandparents' house soon where I could pack up with Rani Apa, but it just kept on delaying, for reasons that I could only blame Mom for. She had been looking fairly strange lately, complaining about feeling nauseous all the time and having no appetite. It was quite evident that something mysterious was happening to her which was being kept a secret from me. Dying in curiosity finally I asked great-grandma, who laid it out before me with a mouth full of smile. I was going to have a new tiny brother or sister. I didn't fully understand the concept. I had no memory of the time when Rushi was born. What having a new sibling had to do with Mom not feeling well was out of my grasp but I was quite disappointed because it was holding us back from going to my maternal grandpa's house.

One afternoon the village doctor visited us. He pressed here and there on Mom's belly and then declared smilingly what everybody had guessed already. She was going to have another baby. He found it surprising that it took this long to catch her pregnancy. To everybody's dismay, Mom looked heartbroken. She would be limited in her movements and might not be able to travel to West Pakistan with Dad. She wept silently for a few days. I didn't dare to ask her anything, neither did Rushi. She kept on asking me. I said something good to comfort her. I prayed heavily for a little brother. One crying machine like Rushi was just enough for our household. Any more of that and I would have to look for a foster home.

Dad's flight was on 7th February. Everybody talked about it all through the day. I anchored in the outfields with my eyes fixed on the sky, excited and restless. What if his airplane flew over us? Perhaps I could get a glimpse of it. But all my waiting went in vain. At dusk, when everybody failed Mom herself took the painful trip to the outfields and pulled me inside. "Which way did Dad's plane fly, Mom?" I asked teary-eyed.

Mom smiled patiently. "Planes don't fly over here, son. Don't worry. We'll soon be with him."

I sighed. I wanted to go live with Dad but at the same time did not want to leave my grandparent's house. And there was Rani Apa. It was a difficult choice to make.

Before going to West Pakistan my dad was promoted to Captain. The promotion became possible solely upon the good recommendation of his C.O. Colonel Jahangir who liked him very much. Not only did he write a strong letter of recommendation, but he also called Dad into his office and conferred, "Once your training is complete, you'll be posted to Quetta Cantonment. Feel free to contact General Gul if you have any problems. He is Panjabi but very open-minded. We are on very good terms. Don't hesitate to mention me."

Dad, along with a few others, flew to Abbottabad, West Pakistan. This place was near Pindi and belonged to the North Frontier Province. Dad was to receive training in the Medical Training Center located there. However, after reaching their destination they were informed that the planned training had been canceled and they were to report to their respective workplace. Dad was posted to Quetta. It was the capital of the province of Baluchistan. Dad asked for a day off to check around but was denied. As a result, he and a few others had to start for Quetta almost immediately. Their train was to go to Lahore first and then to Quetta – a one-and-a-half-day journey. They would travel from one part of the country to the other. There was no planned break during their stay in Lahore.

He met quite a few people on the train. All West Pakistani, who spoke Urdu. Dad could speak a little Urdu. He somehow managed to carry on conversations. His lighter complexion and broken Urdu had many believe that he was a Pathan. This allowed some to open up their minds. It became quite clear that most were against handing over the government to Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the undisputed leader of East Pakistan. Even though Bhutto was defeated in the election they felt he should form the government of united Pakistan. Dad quietly listened to them. There was no sense in getting into unnecessary trouble. It was clear to him that most of these people had no understanding of the concept of democracy.

Later he met an adjutant who had a different opinion. He had trained under Ziaur Rahman, a future leader of Bangladesh, in the Army center located in Kakul. This was the first time on the trip that Dad met a West Pakistani who he found rational. Adjutant clearly stated, "See, I don't care about East or West. If we have set up a system where we are to elect our head of government through the majority of votes received, then I want to stick to that. Bhutto shouldn't be coming up with all these useless excuses after he has lost the election. If things don't get settled soon enough I fear we might get into some serious commotion. Can't say anything about others but I have no desire to go into a war against the Bengalis. Not only they are my compatriots, but most of us also share the same religion."

Dad did not hide his true identity from him. The Adjutant must have grown a soft corner for East Pakistan as a direct consequence of his training under Ziaur Rahman. Dad felt very at home in the company of this friendly and sensible person.

Chapter 4

Finally, one day Mom declared that she was feeling well enough to visit her parents' house. She still had volcanic coughs and the dreaded morning sickness but not as bad as before – in her own words. Her father Grandpa Shahar had already inquired several times making sure Mom knew how eagerly he was awaiting her visit. Considering the drama queen she was I understood his anxiety. As for me, I was counting the days. I loved my paternal grandparents' house the most but the different set of activities and attractions that waited for me in my maternal grandparents' house was simply irresistible. Of course, once there everything evolved around Rani Apa. Having a gang of cousins enhanced the overall excitement by manifold.

Grandpa Habibur arranged for our trip to Dorgahpur – maternal grandparents' house. One fine morning we started on a bullock cart. The cart would return after dropping us. Grandpa Shahar would arrange our return trip. To spice up our slow and steady progress I resorted to my usual catch-me-if-you-can routine. I jumped out of the cart, ran ahead until I was out of breath, stood under tall palm trees that lined many parts of the dusty road, and waited for the cart to catch me up. Eventually, it did cover the distance with its painfully slow movement but I again bolted ahead and gave it a new target. Mom and Rushi were quite comfortable under the covered hood, occasionally dosing off.

Many of our relatives lived by the road to Dorgahpur. News traveled fast in the villages. Hearing that Mom was passing by many came out of their houses to greet her. 'Jaira! It's been so long since we have seen you...'

We had to stop. Mom remained in the cart as the women flocked it, most with veils pulled far down. A quick session of chit-chat was inevitably followed by tears and sobs. These village women were so emotional! Eventually, we moved on, after an eternity. Every time we were interrupted my impatience grew. We were wasting time. Every stoppage added one hour to our dead slow journey. Mom read my mind and called out now and then, "Come to me, Son."

I didn't; instead, I bolted ahead and picked a tall palm tree to stand under until the cart caught me up.

We went and went on the meandering dirt road for several more hours crossing many villages before finally approaching the rickety red brick boundary wall of Grandpa Shahar's house. I was instantly pumped up. We went past a small round manmade lake and a Madrasa – an Islamic school – built next to it. The pleasant sound of a sweet voice reciting the Quran in Arabic greeted us right before Rani Apa and her army of kids broke the peace with a raucous welcome. Grandpa Shahar had married four times, under reasonable circumstances. He had many children, most quite young. Rani Apa, leading the pack, picked me up in her lap. I blushed. She must have forgotten that I wasn't a little kid anymore.

My mom's mother died when she was only a few months old. Her older sister practically raised her. She was my mother's only sister from the same parents. Grandpa Shahar

had two living wives who lived in the same house in their separate sections. Each of them had several kids and looked beaten and weary. They came promptly to greet us. Grandpa was away but we were told that he would be back before nightfall. Knowing Mom I was instantly alarmed. She did not disappoint me. Learning that her father decided to go out even after knowing she would be arriving today Mom instantly welled up and allowed the stream of tears to roll down her cheek profusely. This of course had a striking effect on the crowd that gathered around us. The words of sympathy that came her way were overwhelming with elder and younger grandma struggling to explain why Grandpa had no choice. Mom threw some sobbing into the mixture before uttering the magic words. "Dad never loved me."

This caused a gasp in the crowd. "He'll be back soon," Grandma Amina, the elder wife, carefully said.

"Why don't you step inside the house?" Grandma Rahima, the younger wife, pleaded. "Your dad has slaughtered a goat for you."

Mom sneered. "Do you think I don't get goat meat in the city? How much did it weigh?"

"Almost 20 pounds," Grandma Rahima cautiously replied.

"Small goat!" Mom sighed.

I had never understood her very well. Why would somebody create such big chaos about something so insignificant? Even Rushi had now started to nag. "I want to see Grandpa! I want to see Grandpa!"

Aunt Morium, my father's older sister, who was married to Mom's older brother Daud, walked out in the yard briskly and took control of the situation. "Let's save the emotions for later. Jaira, come inside. Freshen up, eat something, then we'll decide what to do with your old man," she said calmly, without sounding too imposing while not leaving much room for other alternatives. "Rani, take Khoka and Rushi out to play." She spoke to Rani Apa who was enjoying the circus. "Come back after half an hour. The meal will be ready. Jaira, step down carefully. Do you have any idea how many people are waiting inside the house to see you? Hold my hand."

Mom climbed down the cart and declared, "I'll take on Dad when he returns."

Aunt Morium nodded. "That's the right spirit."

Uncle Daud lived in a separate house next to my grandparents' house and shared the same courtyard. Whenever we visited Dorgahpur we always stayed in Uncle Daud's house. Grandpa Shahar had a large family and an old brick house with inadequate living space. There was no room for guests. Most meals we ate were also at Aunt Morium's house. However, occasionally Grandmas Amina and Rahima invited us to have dinner with them. Each of them had their separate kitchen and their children usually ate with their mothers.

As soon as Mom settled down I followed Rani Apa into the neighborhood. Rushi pondered a lot before following us. I warned her, "No nagging or crying." She unwillingly agreed.

Grandpa Shahar had many brothers. They all lived in the same village, side by side, with each house separated by rickety brick boundary walls. We ran across the courtyards dashing through rotting wooden doors that connected them, sped out into the backyard orchard where mango, berry, jackfruit, and coconut trees grew in abundance, circled the large pond, and bolted into the open fields, aimlessly. Rushi was falling behind. Rani Apa picked her up in the lap.

We roamed around the village constantly running into relatives who hugged, poked, patted, and kissed before finally returning home in the late afternoon. We didn't have to be scared of Mom. Aunt Morium would save us. "Why did you kids come back so late?" she chided mildly. "Go on, wash up. I am serving rice. Rani, take them with you."

Mom was about to roll her eyes and say something unpleasant. Sensing it we quickly ran out of her view and headed toward the pond.

The pond had a paved dock with concrete benches and several steps that ran into the water. Two big mango trees leaned heavily toward the water. Both the trees bore delicious mangoes. We washed up sitting on the paved stairs and later got busy playing hopscotch on the paved platform. After about half an hour Aunt Morium personally made the trip to the dock and pulled Rani Apa inside the house by the ear. We followed them quietly.

After the meal, we sat around the clay oven built in a corner of the courtyard. We lit dry hay to start up a small fire. Every time we put new hay the fire leaped up triggering us to jump with our hands clapping in harmony. Slowly the last rays of the sun disappeared from the sky and the flames turned deep red and velvety as the darkness surrounded us.

Rani Apa proposed to play tag. We all readily voiced our approval. In moments the quiet, shadowy courtyard turned into a noisy, screaming playground. Rushi was scared of the dark to death. She hung with me grabbing my shirt tightly. We played for hours until the elders broke us up and sent us inside.

Later that evening when Grandpa finally returned home things turned quite dramatic. Mom had plenty of time to rehearse. She marveled. First came the tears, then the sobbing, followed by the lethal words that supposedly would hurt Grandpa the most. *Grandpa knew she was coming today and yet didn't bother to change his plans. Why would he? If she hadn't lost her mother so early in her life Grandpa would never dare to neglect her.*

Grandpa Shahar had a special soft corner for Mom as she had grown up without the love of a mother. He chuckled foolishly. Mom went on and on until she started to feel nauseous. Grandpa helped her inside the house. The trouble was over for the time being. Grandpa had bought a nice gift for her – a green saree with yellow stripes and red edges. This worked magic in cheering Mom up. Her sadness quickly disappeared and was replaced with giggles. It was hard to read her mind. Laughter and crying followed in random patterns.

As the night deepened our bedtime was arriving quickly. Many kids had already hit the sack. Once the commotion subsided Rani Apa and I left Rushi with Mom and slipped out of the house. Mom had hawk eyes. She called out, "Hey! Where are you guys going?"

"Not too far. We'll be back in no time," Rani Apa mumbled.

She pulled me out and we walked briskly across the courtyard, past the pond of the neighboring house, and then onto a narrow trail.

"Where are we going, Rani Apa?" I asked.

"To the convenience store. Just a little ahead. They sell biscuits. You'll love it."

"What kind of biscuit?"

"They have all kinds but the one made from tamarind seed is the best."

"You can make biscuits from tamarind seed?"

"I don't know. That's what they say."

The store was a tiny shack with a flickering kerosene lamp. The storekeeper was a middle-aged skinny man. He smiled broadly at Rani Apa. "I haven't seen you for several days, dear. Where had you been?"

"Mom wouldn't let me come after dark," Rani Apa replied. "I have to come secretly. Why don't you open the store when there's still light?"

"I want to, dear, but I have a day job to attend. I can't make a living just from this tiny store. What can I get you today, my dear? Who is this boy?"

"Aunt Jaira's son."

"Really? He has grown up quite a bit. When did they come? I haven't seen Jaira for a long time. Son, I am your distant uncle. Tell your mother that you met Uncle Jobbar. She would remember me. As kids, we played together all the time. Her mother had died early so my mom used to give her a lot of attention. Dear Rani, should I fetch some tamarind seed biscuits for you kids?"

Before Rani Apa had replied a voice spoke out from the shadows. "Add in some lozenges with that, Uncle."

Rani Apa didn't even look back. It was clear that she knew the man. I looked into the dark and saw a shadowy figure. As he stepped out of the dark his face became visible in the pale light of the lamp. He was much older than Rani Apa.

"Bashir, don't bother her," Uncle Jobbar said. "Ask your parents to look for a bride for you."

"Uncle, watch your mouth," Bashir rudely replied. "Just do what I asked you to do. Give her some lozenges."

"You eat the lozenges," Rani Apa strongly said. "I don't want any. Uncle, please give two takas worth of biscuits."

The man stepped forward and stood very close to her. "What's the attitude about? You don't like me?"

"She is much younger than you, Bashir," Uncle Jobbar said.

"Why don't you shut your mouth up?" Bashir yelled at him. "Rani, I love you. Don't worry about the age difference. I look older than my age."

Rani Apa grabbed the packet of biscuits that Uncle Jobbar held out and tucked the two banknotes in his hand. She completely ignored Bashir as we started our way back.

"You can't escape me. I know where you live." Bashir warned from behind.

"I am going to complain against you," Rani Apa threatened.

"Go ahead. I am not afraid of that."

Rani Apa started to run. I followed her. We stopped when it felt safe.

"Who is this man?" I asked.

"A distant cousin. Bastard! Must be twice as old as I am. Sometimes I feel like shooting him. I am going to tell Dad tonight. He has been bothering me for a while now. Devil! Eat the biscuits. I'll take care of him."

Upon our return, we had to face combined scolding from Mom and Aunt Morium. None of them approved of us venturing out after dark. Uncle Daud had returned home. He indulged Rani Apa beyond limits. He saved us this time.

The next few days just flew by - roaming around the village in gangs, buying biscuits and lozenges from the village market, flying kites in the fields, arranging fake marriage ceremonies between boy and girl dolls, playing hopscotch and tag. I was having the time of my life.

Still, there was something that I couldn't shrug off my mind. Rani Apa had warned Bashir but in the end, she did not tell anybody about him. I didn't like him at all and wished somebody someday would beat him up. If I had grown up I would have certainly stood up against that creep. I dreamt of all kinds of ways to kick his ass.

One night four of us were playing a card game called Ram-Sham-Jadu-Madhu. We cut rectangular card-shaped pieces from white sheets of paper and wrote the words Ram, Sham, Jadu, and Madhu on them, four of each. The cards were then distributed among four players. The game continued until somebody had all four cards with the same word in hand. We played as a kerosene lamp glowed dimly providing just enough light for the eyes to work. Suddenly our little card game was interrupted by a familiar voice. It was Alek. I was very surprised. "What are you doing here, Alek?" I heard Mom inquiring. "Is everything alright?"

Alec mumbled something that I couldn't make out. Curious I stepped out. Alek was happy to see me and hugged me.

"How are you, bud? Are you having lots of fun?"

"What's wrong Alek Bhai?"

Alek smiled displaying the full set of his long, uneven teeth. "Your uncle Nawsher has come with his wife and younger daughter Minu Apa. They want to see you. They sent me to take you all home."

For a split second, I felt disappointed. I didn't want to leave so soon. We had just come. But the anticipation of seeing Minu Apa took away some of that grief. She was a few years older than Rani Apa but loved me very much too. My time with her was something to cherish as well.

"Did you bring the cart, Alek?" Aunt Morium asked.

"Yes. It's in the front yard. We have to start early tomorrow. It gets pretty hot later in the day."

Mom didn't look very happy. "Can't even stay a few days in peace." She muttered in despire. "Who asked them to come now? Damn!"

"Can I go too, Mom?" Rani Apa begged her mother. "My school will be closed for the next couple of days."

"How will you come back?" Aunt Morium asked, not fully blowing away the idea.

"Why, Alek could bring me back on the back of his bike. Hey Alek, do you have the extra passenger seat attached to your bike?"

"Of course!" Alek replied with a grin. "I sometimes use it as a helicopter. I could drop her off. Don't worry about it at all."

Aunt Morium furrowed her brows. "Ask your father. He might get mad at me later."

It took some clever pledging but finally, Uncle Daud gave in to Rani Apa. We were overwhelmed with joy. The night passed by in a blink. The next morning we woke up before dawn and boarded the bullock cart. It struggled its way through the first light of the day on the familiar dirt roads. On the way, Rani Apa and I took every opportunity to jump down the cart, run far ahead, and wait for the cart to catch us up. Five miles just flew by.

Uncle Nawsher greeted us cheerfully. "Finally you guys are here. Is that Rani? Good to see you, dear. Minu! Did you see who is here?"

Minu Apa came rushing. "I have been waiting so long!"

It didn't take us too long to gather up some of our distant cousins who lived next door to form a gang. A picnic was planned with overwhelming enthusiasm. Minu Apa and Rani Apa were the natural choices for cooks. The rest of us collected dried sticks and leaves for the fire. A makeshift oven was built by digging a small hole in the ground and making room for air to pass. One of Grandma's chickens was slaughtered and cooked with home-grown potatoes and plenty of spices. It smelt so good that we could barely wait to gorge on it. Even some of the adults came to check what was cooking. The rice was boiled. Alek and I went to banana groves and cut a bunch of long leaves, which we cleaned and divided into smaller dinner plate-size pieces. Later we sat in a circle and ate on the banana leaves. Mom, Uncle, and Aunt also joined us for the meal. Incidentally, the chicken curry had no trace of salt in it but that didn't stop us from savoring it. "Damn! I forgot to put any salt in it," Rani Apa admitted bitterly.

We broke into laughter. One of the maids brought some salt which was passed along the circle. All was fine.

Rani Apa returned home after a couple of days. Uncle Daud missed her so much that he came to take her back home. I was a little sad as Uncle Daud paddled away with Rani Apa on his bike.

"Don't be sad," Mom said. "We'll visit them again. Soon."

Hope was all I needed to feel better. I packed up with Minu Apa and explored the neighborhood visiting some of her friends in between. Generally, the villagers admired the Morol family – Grandpa had been the vice president of the Union for many years, Uncle Nawsher was a reputed teacher in Satkhira and Dad was a passionate physician who volunteered his service to the poor. People patted my back and said encouraging words, mostly demanding that I follow the trend of the family, especially because I was the oldest grandson, at that point the only one. This was somewhat indulging but mostly stressful. Whoever wanted to bear such high expectations on these small shoulders?

Lately, we have been having grandiose meals in the rural standard. Grandma slaughtered a chicken or a duck almost every day. Grandpa bought beef or goat meat from the village market. Uncle Nawsher and Aunt Banu ate very little but Grandma wouldn't listen. I didn't have to be a genius to figure out Grandma had a special bond with Uncle Nawsher, her first child. Perhaps my mom and I had the same. I just wished it didn't get so personal at times in the form of screaming, berating, yelling, and all other things I found so uncomfortable.

Visitors came at regular intervals, mostly the village elders. They sat in the outhouse in flickering kerosine lamps and engaged in loud discussions, almost always about politics. Yahya Khan didn't accept Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's six-point demands, the first and foremost being - that the constitution provided a Federation of Pakistan in its true sense on the Lahore Resolution and the parliamentary form of government with supremacy of a legislature directly elected based on the universal adult franchise was allowed to be established based on electoral majority. Public support in East Pakistan was gaining rapidly. The people of East Pakistan had given their verdict. The leaders of West Pakistan were using the smoke of nationalism to suck up the juice of East Pakistan. They cared nothing about the welfare of the people of this part of the country. Why would anybody here trust them? Mujib was right. We needed self-governing rights. Our kind will be our leaders, not someone from West Pakistan.

The discussions continued deeper into the night. Trying hard not to doze off all I could make out was that Yahya and Bhutto were the villains and Mujib was our hero. One day Mujib was going to beat the hell out of them. I neither tried nor understood anything more than that. The problem was Uncle Nawsher had no idea how bored I got. Alek used to sleep in one corner of the outhouse, in a small room. He would cough quietly when he wanted to attract my attention. I would then mumble ineligibly about peeing or getting a drink to my uncle and slip out. Two of us would then make our way through the vegetable garden to the rear pond and sit by the water. A bamboo flute would appear magically in his hands. He could play the sad tunes with such passion that even the ghostly creatures who resided in the nearby dense bamboo groves stopped to listen. At least that's what the villagers used to say. The thought of such ghoulish existence brought shivers in my body.

The village elders organized a meeting before Uncle Nawsher left. The overall situation of the country was turning bad and general unrest was not out of the question. How would the villagers handle such a situation? What would happen if, God forbid, a war broke out? The meeting took place in the courtyard of Grandpa's house. Wobbly chairs and hand-

crafted mats were offered to the attendees based on social distinction. The commoners stood in a semi-circle at the end of the gathering. The courtyard was crowded to maximum capacity. Uncle Motaleb, a diehard supporter of Mujib, attended and addressed the crowd with his usual bluntness. He demanded that if a war broke out all adults must sign up. Young men in the village seemed to get quite excited at the possibility of war. Alek's older brother Moti Bhai voiced his unconditional devotion to Mujib. War or unrest – he wasn't going to miss any. Uncle Shahid's face darkened. He looked worried and dejected but labored to look brave. This wasn't the time to display fear.

As the chief speaker, Uncle Nawsher spoke calmly. Yes, the possibility of war was real but a peaceful resolution was most desirable. Yahya Khan couldn't have been a total idiot. How could he not see that a war against East Pakistan would be devastating for both East and West? War was not in the best interest of anybody.

While the adults continued with their speeches, discussions, and occasional arguments, the kids took it one notch up. We ventured into the fruit orchard at the back of the house and started a battle. The dry fallen branches became our guns, our screaming mouths did the rest as we tried to shoot each other down ...bang ...bang ...whoosh ...whoosh ...POW...POW...We continued into the dusk oblivious about the proceedings of the meeting.

It was almost dark when the meeting finally ended. People returned to their homes in small groups. I heard pieces of discussions, some for the war, some against. Some wanted independence; some wanted to stay integrated as Muslim Pakistan. They did not want to pack with India. The despicable Hindus! The disrespect and distrust were crystal clear. I had already started to fall into the dubious effect of religion by then. There was no doubt in my mind that the Muslims were much better than the Hindus, though I wasn't quite sure about the reasoning behind such belief. The few families of Hindus who lived in our village were all poor, hard-working people. They were nice, well-behaved people. Hindu men wore dhuti, a long piece of cloth, as opposed to lungi, a sewn piece of cloth that Muslim men wore. Hindu married women put vermilion or Sindoor at the parting of the hair and maiden girls put dots on their forehead, often matching the color with their dress. I had noticed some Muslim women using dots as well. I heard that the Hindus ate turtles, crabs, and pork. I never saw them eating but they were sold in the village market. Komol da, a Hindi man who worked for Grandpa, processed the date trees to collect sap in the winter and carried the round belly clay containers full of sweet sap in the mornings to my grandparent's house. That sap was then boiled in large containers over clay ovens to make dense molasses. Just the other day he had smilingly called out, "How are you, little man? Why didn't you come during the sap time? Did you eat the molasses? The molasses that your grandma makes has a special taste to it."

Komol da was a good person. He had a large swell on his forehead. Dad said it was a tumor. One time I visited their house and had some sweets that they distributed after worship, which brought me some scolding from Mom. Alek got even more for taking me there. However, I had visited the houses of many Hindu families with Uncle Nawsher and even ate the meals they offered. Uncle Nawsher never considered them different than us.

Uncle Nawsher and his family left after a few days. Grandpa looked very worried. Mom wanted to visit her father again but Grandpa wouldn't allow it. The political situation

was not good. Our village was very close to the Indian border. He felt it was probably a better idea for us not to stay in the villages at all. Mom became nervous and started quite a tantrum. "Didn't I tell him not to go to West Pakistan for training? He left us here in this village all by ourselves. What are we going to do if the war starts?" She lamented.

Great-grandma couldn't contain her annoyance. "Can you stop blaming our son for a moment?" She barked.

Mom paid no attention to her. I only prayed she didn't lose her cool. I had seen them staring at each other. It always turned into a screaming match and wasn't a pleasant experience for the ears.

After much pondering it was decided that we'd move to Khulna and stay with Aunt Rafia until Dad returned or we made the trip to wherever he was. The thought of leaving the village made me sad but at the same time, I was somewhat excited thinking life in Khulna wasn't too boring either. I had a pair of adult cousin brothers who indulged me, and the domestic help – a boy in his adolescence- who I found both hilarious and interesting. Aunt Rafia's house never felt like anything but a second home.

Chapter 5

However, we still had to hold off the trip to Khulna until Mom felt well enough to make the trip. Her pregnancy seemed to have frequent ups and downs – screaming at me one moment, all nauseous the next followed by nasty throw-ups. Even going to Dorgahpur to her paternal house could be a struggle. Grandpa knew he had no choice but to accompany us to Khulna. Mom, in her current condition, could never handle an escape artist and a crying machine. However, he was in the middle of a land dispute and couldn't leave right away.

My life went on uninterrupted. At every chance I got, I wandered away into the village. This was particularly a concern to Mom. She never missed an opportunity to lecture me on the dangers of such ventures. Only if I could grasp the gravity of it! My time was spent doing the usual – roaming around in the orchards, listening to Alek's tunes, shepherding the cattle in the grazing fields, fishing in the pond with a hook on a fixed line tied at one end of a dried jute stick and so much more. Time flew by fast.

Once she was feeling a little better Mom demanded to visit her parental home one last time before going to Khulna. This was great news. I couldn't wait to join Rani Apa again and plow through the neighborhood. Alek was asked to find a temporary replacement to shepherd the cattle as he would have to take us there. Unfortunately, the trip kept on getting pushed back. Thanks to Mom who never seemed to feel better enough to make the trip safely. She was nauseous and miserable all the time. Some days she barely got up from the bed. Who knew carrying a baby was so much trouble?

One day I was riding with Alek on his bike to the village market when we crossed the postman, who stopped us.

"Hold on Alek. Isn't he Rasheed's son?"

"Yes," Alek answered. "Do you have anything for us?" Then he told me, "Khoka, this is Ahmed Bhai. He is our postman."

"I sure do," Ahmed Bhai smilingly said. "I was going to their house. I have a letter from Rasheed. Do you want it, Son?"

I jumped down from Alek's bike. "Yes, yes!"

The postman held out a colorful envelope at me. I was delighted with the beautiful stamps. I snatched it from his hand and bolted toward home. Alek followed me on his bike.

"Jump up on the bike, Khoka. How long are you going to run?" He called out.

That made sense. I rode on the handle of his bike as he flew through the uneven dirt road. We could hear Ahmed Bhai laughing behind us.

The letter created a ripple of emotions in the house. After traveling through several hands it finally reached Grandpa. It was addressed to him. He tore off one side of it carefully

and pulled out two neatly scribbled pages. The rest of us sat on the floor in a semi-circle as he proceeded to read it loudly.

Dad was posted in Quetta. His training was canceled. There was no time for it. The situation could turn bad abruptly. Preparations for war were in place. Dad did not get any housing there. He was staying in the officer's club for the time being. He didn't know how long he would stay in Quetta. There was already word of posting him somewhere else, which could be even further away. He missed all of us very much. He was trying hard to take us to him but everything depended on him finding some kind of housing. Everything seemed to be heading for turmoil. His working environment was yet to be impacted by politics but one could easily see subtle signs. The soldiers had differences in opinions which came out during several incidents. Like several other Bengali doctors, Dad kept quiet. There was no good in getting into unnecessary trouble. If the situation turned into a full-fledged confrontation then the time would come to decide. He was determined not to work for the West Pakistani army. However, there was no reason to believe that they would release him so easily. He wrote many other things. At one point Grandpa stopped reading and passed on the letter to Mom.

"The rest is for you, dear."

Mom was all tears. She took the letter and locked herself in a room. Clearly, she wasn't having much of a good time without Dad being around. Rushi, with tears rolling down non-stop from both her eyes and nostrils, banged on the closed doors. I took her away from there and followed Alek to the cowshed. Great-grandma had two cows. One of them was pregnant just like Mom. As we allowed Rushi to feel her bloated belly she became quiet. The pregnant cow watched her with big, affectionate eyes. Rushi thoughtfully said, "Is she going to have a girl like me?"

At this, both Alek and I burst into laughter. "Yes, she will. You'll see." Rushi adamantly said. "She is not going to have a brat like you. Neither will Mom."

Not good. "Don't say such an inauspicious thing," I gravely said.

That day we didn't even see Mom again until it was supper time. Finally, when she decided to step out of her room her face was swollen like a watermelon. It was clear that she cried to her heart's content. Great-grandma screamed at her mercilessly for breaking down like that. She was concerned about the baby. That night it was confirmed that we would go to maternal grandpa's house for a second visit in a couple of days. Once we returned from there we would be heading for Khulna. Dad specifically instructed Mom in his letter to go to Khulna and stay with Aunt Rafia. He didn't think it would be safe to live so near the border area just in case the situation deteriorated.

Chapter 6

During my next visit to my maternal grandpa's house, I had the opportunity to experience two unique things. One was exorcism and the other one was sanctified stick maneuver.

I had heard a lot of stories from Rani Apa about Jinn (Genies) and Pari (Fairies). In the villages, people had strong beliefs in those. What I learned from her was that Jinn - the male form, and Pari - the female form, were made of fire. The Qur'an, Islam's religious text, states about these life forms. They were invisible during the daytime. Among them, there were good types and evil types. It was the evil ones that gave much trouble to men. Most villagers claimed to have some kind of encounter with Jinn and Pari. The consensus was that while they were unable to harm the strong-minded people, they frequently took over the mentally weak. Once they took over, they were able to force that person to do things according to their wishes. It was quite common in the villages, confirmed Rani Apa. She even told a few supporting stories that gave me goosebumps. One time a Jinn pretending to be a human pushed one of our distant cousin's brothers into the river. Our cousin's brother knew how to swim and was able to save himself. In another incident, a Pari had forced a young man to climb up a tall palm tree where she kept him imprisoned for three long days. Later an exorcist was called and once he performed some routines the Pari ran away. The young man climbed down the tree and asked in bewilderment, "What's going on? What are you all doing here?"

Most villagers believed the bamboo grove was the primary housing for the Jinn and Pari. Walking through bamboo groves at night was considered very risky. There was no way to know if an evil Jinn was waiting to possess you.

Anyway, the whole village knew my Grandma Rahima was vulnerable to such attacks by the Jinns. Normally, she was a jolly, happy person. However, when Jinn possessed her she would become a completely different person. The events about her encounters with Jinns had spawned many stories, some hair-raising. Even the kids knew most of them. They were remembered in chronological order – by the season and the year of occurrence, like 'summer of 1967' or 'winter of 1968'.

Despite having heard tons of stories about the demonic Jinns that were more than enough to make me lose several nights' sleep, I had yet to see such an event with my own eyes. This time around I got lucky. On the afternoon of the day we arrived, Grandma Rahima suddenly collapsed on the front porch without any warning whatsoever. Her eyes rolled up, teeth clenched. We were playing in the courtyard. It happened right in front of our eyes. Within minutes the news spread across the neighborhood and people started to gather to experience this curious phenomenon. It was perplexing how quickly news traveled there.

Later when I, accompanied by Rani Apa, pushed through the crowd and got close to Grandma Rahima, somebody had picked her up from the ground and laid her on a hand-made mat. She was awake and glanced around her – baffled as if she didn't recognize anybody. She had this weird, distant look. Most who gathered around her stayed calm, being quite familiar with this situation. Some asked bizarre questions.

"What's your name?"

"Where do you live?"

"What's the current time of Saudi Arabia?"

"How many of you are here?" Etc.

The spooky part was that Grandma Rahima answered them promptly, her voice turned heavy, rough, and manly. From the answers she provided, we learned that the Jinn's name was Islon. He was the only one who possessed her. He lived nearby, in one of the bamboo groves. Of course! He wouldn't elaborate on which one. The question-answer session continued for more than ten minutes. I stood there with my eyes popping out, determined not to miss anything while holding Rani Apa tightly.

"Don't be scared," she whispered in my ears. "Jinns cannot harm the kids. We carry angels with us. They are our friends. Bad Jinns cannot enter a body where angels are present."

It was good to know. I just hoped the angels didn't take an untimely break leaving me all alone to fend off these ghostly presences.

Finally, an exorcist – 'Ojha' in village term, rushed in and stood right next to Grandma Rahima. "Leave before I get really mad," he barked at her at the top of his voice.

"Can I stay a little longer, please?" the Jinn pleaded.

"Not even a second," Ojha shouted. "Get out! Or I am going to beat the crap out of you."

He reached out into his bag and pulled out a thin stick. "Rani Apa, is he going to beat Grandma?" I asked, baffled.

"Not Grandma, actually the Jinn," Rani Apa whispered. "Until he leaves her body all the strikes will hurt him, not Grandma."

It was a difficult concept to apprehend. The audience however looked pumped up for the ensuing beating. Fortunately, the Jinn left before the beating started. Grandma Rahima suddenly shook his body and sat up erectly. "What's going on? What are you all doing here?"

Ojha smiled. "That bad Jinn had taken over you once again, sister. The moment he saw me, he just ran away with his life in his hand. Ha...ha...ha..."

Grandma Rahima looked embarrassed. She quickly pulled herself up and disappeared inside the house. Disappointed, the crowd disbursed quickly. Nobody thought the Jinn would give up without a fight. It was a big letdown. People had come from the far corners of the village leaving their household work. Bad, lazy Jinn! Some complained. Rani Apa pulled me out into the backyard orchard.

"Thank God, it resolved quickly. I don't like what this ojha does. A few years back a farmer's daughter got possessed. This creep must have done something wrong because the girl died. I don't think he knows what he is doing. I told my mother, if I ever get possessed she must not call him."

My whole body shivered, and a cold feeling ran down my spine. "Are you going to be possessed?"

Rani Apa burst into laughter. "No way! Don't be so scared. I just wanted to be on the safe side. Let's go to Uncle Jobbar's store."

Wonderful proposal! I was all ready to bolt. However, Rani Apa abruptly changed her mind. "Forget it. That bastard is anchored there all the time, along with his friends. Let's send the shepherd boy."

I understood her problem. We sent the shepherd boy to get us two takas worth of tamarind seed biscuits and sat on the grass by the pond and threw rocks and dried clay in the water. In the peaceful surroundings of the ensuing evening, the ripples in the calm water looked very pleasing to the eyes.

"I heard you guys are going to Khulna." Rani Apa sounded a little unmindful.

"Yes, Dad wrote it is not safe in the villages."

"He is right. People have changed. If war breaks down then we'll probably head for Khulna as well. I heard my parents discussing it."

"Is there really going to be a war? Against who? India?"

"Nope. Pakistan vs. Pakistan. We are East Pakistan and they are West Pakistan. They don't want our welfare. That's why our people are mad. I hope there's no war. War kills people, endangers girls."

"How does it endanger girls?"

"You won't understand. There are a lot of evil people in this world. During a war, not only the enemy but even friends also take advantage. If the war breaks out I'll certainly go to Khulna. When is your dad planning to take you guys to him?"

"Don't know. Dad wrote that he was trying. But he can't find a place for us to live."

"Don't worry. He'll find something soon. Do you miss him?"

"Sometimes."

The shepherd boy returned with the biscuits. All three of us sat by the pond and devoured his purchase.

The next morning I had barely wakened up when Rani Apa pulled me out of the house. "Completely forgot," she said excitedly. "Today there will be sanctified stick maneuvering in Uncle Naser's house. Hurry up. We don't want to be late."

I was surprised. "What is sanctified stick maneuvering?"

"You'll see."

I followed her silently. We took the backdoor, hurried through the fruit orchard, climbed over the neighbor's boundary fence, ran past a narrow trail through a bamboo grove, and finally stepped into the walled courtyard of Uncle Naser's house. Rani Apa was right. The place was jam-packed with curious onlookers. They stood in a large half-circle with a middle-aged man standing at the center. The man held a polished piece of thick bamboo stick, seven feet or so in length. He spun the stick in lightning speed over his head in regular intervals and viciously cried out, "Go get the bugger! Go get the bugger!"

At one end of the courtyard sat Uncle Naser on his high-back mahogany chair, his brows furrowed, face grave. He surely wasn't in his best mood. Near him stood three men – pale as a corpse. The middle-aged man, who was being referred to as a wizard, looked directly in their direction. A little later, putting together little snippets of information that she could gather from the audience, Rani Apa briefly explained the situation to me. Uncle Naser's golden watch had been stolen. It disappeared right from his room. At stake were honor and not necessarily money. Two days had passed and the watch was still missing, even after he had offered a reward. He suspected one of these three men had stolen it. They worked in his house as day laborers. His repetitive appeal to them to return the object fell on deaf ears. Finally, he asked for the help of Pagla Kanai, the wizard with the sanctified stick. Pagla Kanai looked alert, probably too much, and could be the result of some cheap drug in his system. His face was hard and mean; eyes sharp and bulging.

Pagla Kanai gave a sudden scream accompanied by another display of his skill with the stick before stopping to pick two healthy young men of his choice from the crowd to assist him in the procedure. In his instruction, the two men grabbed the two ends of the stick. A short meditation seemed to send him off to a mystical state as he pushed the stick with monstrous force while the two men tried in vain to stop his advancement. The stick looked alive in his hand as he pushed his way toward the three anxious day laborers, inch by inch. It menacingly moved back and forth as Kanai screamed fearsomely, "Go get the bugger! Go get the bugger! Give the golden watch back or I'll eat the head of your mother."

And to the amazement of the crowd, one of the laborers bolted out of the group and fell on the feet of Uncle Naser. His words became gibberish as he broke into a loud sob. The audience burst into loud applause. Pagla Kanai spun his stick in lightning speed over his head one last time as acknowledgment. Uncle Naser slapped the thief several times in the face. "Where's my watch? What did you do with it?"

"I sold it, sir. My son has an eye problem. He needs to be treated. I had no money to take him to an eye doctor. I beg for your forgiveness, sir."

"No forgiveness for you," Uncle Naser yelled. "My father gave me that watch. Who did you sell it to?"

Another smack on the face and the thief gave up the name. Rani Apa pulled me out of there.

"Why did he steal?" I asked, looking for more details.

Rani Apa sighed. "During harvest time a rice grain had hit his four-year-old son in the eye. That eye is about to go bad. If he doesn't get the treatment he'll lose that eye. I know

the man. His name is Aman Ali. He is a good man. Poverty can make people do bad things. There's too much poverty in the villages."

We suddenly found ourselves face-to-face with a young man. I could not recognize him but by the look of Rani Apa's face, I assumed this man was Bashir. He gave a wide smile. "Why do you turn so pale at my sight, Rani? I am not a bad person. Do you know how rich I am?"

"Your dad is rich, not you," Rani Apa bitterly said. "You are good for nothing. Anyway, I don't care about you. You are much older than I am. Please don't bother me."

Bashir smiled shamelessly. "Age is nothing. Love is everything. I am crazy for you."

Rani Apa gave a quick pull in my hand and ran. I followed her closely. We could hear Bashir laughing. A few of his friends joined him too. Rani Apa didn't stop until we reached the orchard at the rear of Grandpa's house. We gasped for air.

"Bastards like Bashir don't let the girls get a good education," Rani Apa muttered once she caught her breath. "Parents have little choice but to get their daughters married early. I'm not gonna be one of them. I want to be somebody. I must move to Khulna."

I was ecstatic. "That would be great! We'll have so much fun. You could stay with us in Aunt Rafia's house."

"Let's see what Dad says," Rani Apa thoughtfully said. "Do you want to throw rocks in the pond? Let's go."

The pond sent away ripples after ripples as we kept on throwing rocks into it. We spent hours doing so.

Chapter 7

We started from my maternal grandparents' house at dawn. Rani Apa walked as far as a mile along with the bullock cart. It was clear she didn't want to stay in the village anymore. She walked up to the village market of Tetulia before stopping. She stood there as long as I could see her. Mom said, "She is very loving."

I was sad. I wish she had come with us. She needed to leave this place in her best interest. But who was going to pay any attention to my opinion?

A few days after returning to Ganeshpur, we left for Khulna along with Grandpa. Alek dropped us at the boat ramp of Kaligonj. We crossed the river on a paddle boat to catch the bus that took us to Satkhira. We stayed overnight in Uncle Nawsher's house. The house was within the city limits but wasn't very urbanized. The two-story building had a large orchard in the rear with trees like mangos, berries, and jackfruits. Minu Apa had planted beautiful flowers at the front of the house. The garden had many blooms of roses. Rushi liked roses. Minu Apa picked some for her. She was all smiles.

"Situation is turning bad, exactly what we suspected," during supper Uncle Nawsher gravely said. "National assembly has been postponed for an indefinite period. The movement of Pakistani soldiers has increased. Yahya Khan and Bhutto are up to something. I have a bad feeling. "

"I heard he made Tikka Khan the military governor of East Pakistan," Grandpa said. "Who is going to submit to that?"

Aunt Banu rarely participated in these discussions but today even she could not keep quiet. "God is sure to punish them. He is never going to tolerate this quietly. I fear for all these Hindu families who have been living in the vicinity of my house for decades. Poor, hard-working people. If war breaks down, what will happen to them?"

Uncle Nawsher smiled. "Worry about them later, dear. Fear about your own family first. What makes you think that they would spare you just because you are a Muslim? War is devil's weaponry, it spares none."

After supper, two other teachers who taught at the local college stopped by. They engaged in long discussions with Uncle and Grandpa. At night I found Mom sobbing. I knew she was scared. With Dad away, she had no one to lean on. I wanted to soothe her but didn't brave it considering how cranky she had been lately. I quietly prayed. Oh dear God, please let everything be good again. The faith in celestial matters at that age was incomparable.

We climbed onto a bus the very next day, destination Khulna. Mom was very uncomfortable moving around with her big belly but what other choice did we have? Once we settled into Aunt Rafia's house in Khulna Mom surely wasn't planning another trip soon. She announced that at every opportunity she got.

We reached Khulna at dusk. We climbed up into two of the waiting rickshaws and asked to be taken to lawyer Mosabber's house. The rickshaw pullers stormed through the light traffic and dropped us in front of the wide iron gate of Aunt Rafia's two-storied house on the street named Cemetery Road. This was a very familiar gate. Rushi and I jumped off the rickshaw and ran inside the house. Aunt Rafia and Uncle Ahmed were waiting for us. They hugged us dearly. "Where is your Mom?"

Mom seemed to lose all her strength at the sight of her sister and brother-in-law. She had to be carried inside the house. Aunt Rafia had set up a room for us to stay. Mom was taken into that room where she collapsed on the bed. Then she embraced Aunt Rafia and burst into tears for apparently no reason. Soon Rushi glued herself to Mom and joined her in the wailing as well. I shrugged in despair and went on to the top floor to look for my cousins - Moni Bhai and Roni Bhai. Usually, in the evenings they gathered in the rooftop den with their friends. In their late teens, both were athletic, worked out regularly, and had a reputation as gangsters, a term used loosely to describe young men with attitude. They received plenty of respect from the local boys. Most times they would play cards in their den. Usually carefree and happy they went along considerably well but there were times when a fight would break down between them owing to differences triggered by various issues - from wearing a shirt without prior approval to hitting on the same girl. The fights invariably brought commotion in the neighborhood as both had a fascination for swearing, something they marveled in, and opted for more howling and banging than just getting outright physical.

I walked across the flat roof to reach the den at the other end. The den was structurally complete but had no electricity. They played under the light of the kerosine lamp. The shadowy roof reminded me of the villages after dusk. I fearfully checked around. Aunt Rafia's house bordered a Christian cemetery. Who knew why such a cemetery was created in the middle of the town? It was a well-known fact that ghostly presences inhibited the place. I had seen them with my own eyes. One time I slept on the open roof along with my cousins. At midnight I woke up for no apparent reason and noticed strange lights running around right over my head. I remained motionless for the rest of the night. I heard the best way to deter those ghostly creatures was to act dead. They might have looked like pulsing crickets but in reality, were demons in disguise. That was the last time I slept on an open roof.

Next to the cemetery, there was a muddy pond, the kingdom of the mosquitoes. Around this pond were several thatched huts where a few Hindu families made their homes. They were poor and lived in village-like settings with kerosine lamps as their only source of stable light.

I stood halfway down the roof and called out, "Moni Bhai! Roni Bhai!"

After several tries, I got their attention. The door opened and both faces peeked into the darkness. "When did you guys arrive? Why are you standing there? Hop in here."

I briskly walked into their den. It was filled with smoke. I detected a few beer bottles as well. Moni Bhai blinked at me. "Don't say it to anybody. It's okay for the grownups to try it sometimes. Not for you though. You may get drunk and make a big show. Ha...ha...ha..."

Everybody broke into laughter.

Roni Bhai pulled me close to him. "Don't listen to him. Drunken bastard! Sit beside me. I am getting all the bad hands. How is Aunt Jaira?"

"Anytime now. Her belly looks like a big balloon."

This caused another burst of laughter. "You shouldn't talk like that, idiot," Roni Bhai said. "Pick up my cards. Hopefully, you can bring some luck for me."

Looking at the bets I figured out they were playing Flash. Moni Bhai was winning. Everybody else was losing including Roni Bhai. My presence did not change his luck much.

After supper, Mom and Aunt Rafia sat in the attached grilled veranda along with a few neighboring women for a chat, in the absence of anything better to do I stationed myself nearby and kept my ears open just in case something interesting came up. Rushi had gone to sleep long ago. Moni Bhai was out. Roni Bhai was having a smoke in the front yard. Both of them had to smoke right after any meal, religiously. Uncle Ahmed did not come for supper today. He was a lawyer and seemed to be extremely busy most of the time though rarely missed supper – the only time when all members of the house ate together. He was also a leader of the Muslim League and frequently hosted party meetings in his chamber. That day he was having a meeting with the local leaders of his party. We heard noisy arguments at regular intervals coming from his closed chamber. Now and then his voice rose over others. "Sheikh Mujib wants to sell this country to India. He wants us to become slaves of the Hindus. Muslims must remain together. If there are any issues we must resolve them politically. We are not going to hold hands with the agents of India. What do you guys think?"

The audience howled in support. Encouraged, Uncle Ahmed spoke with even more enthusiasm. Aunt Rafia looked worried. "I fear for him," she told Mom. "Now it's the time of Awami league. They have supporters all over the country. People want freedom. These religious-themed ideas don't work anymore."

"Why doesn't he change party?" Mom said. "Everybody does. Just go with the wind."

"Not him!" Aunt Rafia bitterly said. "He is about sincerity and honesty. He is never going to switch."

I was tired and fell asleep soon.

The main two attractions of Aunt Rafia's house were their long-time servant Yunus and a pet parrot. The parrot was very fond of Yunus. He had taught it to say several words. Yunus was probably fifteen or sixteen years old. Some of his favorite things were to blow big bubbles with his saliva through his lips and to make inappropriate remarks at the other young female servants who worked in the neighborhood. He had worked hard to teach the parrot phrases like the following: "Get out! Get out!"; "Hello beauty!"; "Mr. Lawyer steals money" and many others of the same quality. When somebody stood before its cage the parrot would randomly say something at that person. One time after it called Uncle Ahmed "Hello beauty!" he got so mad that he took off his sleepers and beat Yunus until both the straps snapped. He then threw the pair at him and asked him to go to the cobbler and get them sewn.

Yunus was away for a few days visiting his family in the village. Once he returned my boredom evaporated completely. We started to venture out into the town. Even though he was a domestic help he rarely did any work in the house. Aunt Rafia was very annoyed with him, naturally. But she couldn't drive him away either. Yunus's father had left him in this house when he was just a little boy. Yunus had become almost like a child. He did get smacked by Uncle Ahmed now and then but so did Moni Bhai and Roni Bhai regularly as well. That was part of life, Yunus reasoned. One day he even took me to a movie theatre to watch the matinee show. After returning home I proudly disclosed it to Mom and Rushi. The outcome was not very pleasant. Aunt Rafia gave him a good smack on the back with a roller used to make flatbread. "How could you take a little boy in a movie theatre? Don't you have any common sense?"

Yunus avenged that by blowing several bubbles with his saliva at her back. With his close guidance, I quickly progressed to marvel at the art of blowing bubbles with saliva. When Rushi reported this to Mom I had to suffer severe humiliation in her hand. I learned that it was not a good practice. When I questioned how come Yunus could do it and not me she lowered her voice and gave me an earful. "Don't compare yourself with him. He is a servant. Your father is a doctor. How can you act the way he acts?"

I didn't fully grasp it but made a mental note to be aware of Rushi. The older she was getting the more trouble she was turning out to be. Girls were always trouble, I concluded.

One morning I had just finished my breakfast with Aunt Rafia's handmade flatbread and a piece of rasgulla when the quietness of the morning was shattered by a big commotion. Clueless for a few long moments I wondered if the soldiers were coming to kill us. Soon though, once my mind recovered from the shock, I realized it was just another fight between the two brothers. Both yelled and swore at the top of their voices and slammed the bamboo sticks each held on the sidewall of the house in clearly fruitless attempts to scare the other. Aunt Rafia, who had come out to inquire, was frantic. "Stop! Stop! Are you boys out of your minds?"

Moni Bhai, bloodshot eyes and dry mouth from all the shouting, howled over her.

"This idiot is an agent of India. He wants to hold hands with the Awami League. We are Muslims, we must hang with Muslims. Pakistanis are brothers. We need to shoot agents like you to death..." The last part was aimed at Roni Bhai, to everybody's relief.

Roni Bhai wasn't going to lose in this shouting match, not without a fight. "Shut up you suck up to the Pakis," he shouted back. "They neither feed us nor shelter us. Why should we stay with them? Sheikh Mujib is right. No co-operation with them anymore. Enough is enough."

At this point, both banged on the wall several times to make their points. Aunt Rafia had had just enough. She tried to chase the boys away. "Are you boys trying to break the house? Go somewhere else if you must fight. You are not damaging my wall."

"Get out! Get out!" The parrot joined in.

Uncle Ahmed had just settled in his chamber with a cup of tea. He hoped to check out quickly the caseload of the day. All this noise must have had a less-than-desirable effect

on him because he came galloping with his sleepers in his hands. He gave both the brothers a few smacks. None of them cared much but dropped their sticks and wrestled away to the street.

Uncle Ahmed threw his sleepers in front of Yunus. "Go on. See if the cobbler is there."

I went along with Yunus. I loved to watch the cobbler sewing the shoes and sleepers. There was a nice rhythm to it. I wasn't dreaming of becoming a cobbler when I grew up but wished to buy the equipment and try the art secretly at home.

Most days the supper dragged to midnight. Customary heavy afternoon snacks resulted in no appetite until late at night. Besides, Uncle Ahmed regularly retired from his chamber late, often juggling his time with the caseload and political agendas. A few days after the rumble between the brothers, Uncle Ahmed looked anxious during supper time. Usually, he ate silently and didn't say anything unless spoken to. Today was an exception. The brothers were about to restart their perennial argument about the Awami League and Muslim League in between munching their mouths full of food when Uncle Ahmed rebuffed them strongly. "Listen, time is bad. Yahya and Mujib were unable to reach an agreement. Lots of Pakistani soldiers are coming here. Watch out when you speak. Having political differences is not unusual but that doesn't mean you have to act on that."

"We are not afraid of them," Roni Bhai strongly said. "We'll grab Yahya by the neck and throw the bugger into the trash. Bastard!"

"Shut up...." Moni Bhai shouted back sputtering mouth full of rice all around him.

Uncle Ahmed snapped. "Don't fight like kids. Nobody knows how the situation turns. Remember, the family is above everything. Don't fight among brothers. Siblings are the dearest of all."

In this grave moment, the crazy parrot called out, "Hello beauty!"

Uncle Ahmed looked mad. "Why doesn't somebody kick this stupid bird away?"

"Innocent bird, why blame it?" Aunt Rafia said. "It's Yunus who taught it to talk like that."

Uncle Ahmed looked around for Yunus. He had already fled out of there.

Waking up the next morning I found Yunus mournful. I knew something was seriously wrong. He silently pointed out the empty cage of the parrot. So, beauty had escaped. Who knew how? Yunus and I went out to look for the parrot. We searched all over the town with no luck. I had never before seen Yunus shading tears, didn't think he was even capable of it. On this day he knelt on the ground, hid his face between his knees, and cried like a baby.

Chapter 8

After the speech by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on 7th March nobody had any doubt that the situation was quickly turning into troublesome. Mujibur Rahman had declared loudly and clearly, "Our stand is for freedom. Our stand is for independence." Kids of tender age were obsessed with such speeches. Many of us would repeat the whole speech word by word at any opportunity we got. One time I got severely scolded by Moni Bhai for doing so. A supporter of the Muslim League he believed in united Pakistan. Roni Bhai had a completely different standing. He wanted an independent Bangladesh. He was angry and complained about the way things were going. Why didn't Mujib declare war on 7th March? What was the meaning of attempting to fix something that had no chance? Bastard Yahya Khan! Bastard Tikka Khan! They had no business in this country and needed to be booted without delay.

Naturally, the frequency with which two of them got into arguments increased alarmingly after Mujib's speech. Some even worried that the two brothers might try to battle it out long before the two Pakistan did.

There were some signs of ensuing devastation but nobody even imagined how heinous it would turn out to be. On March 25, 1971, in the dark of the night, the Pakistani soldiers attacked the peaceful, self-righteous inhabitants of Dhaka. Their main targets were Dhaka University and Old Dhaka. They attacked the EPR base located in Pilkhana without any warning. Iqbal Hall - one of the residential halls located in Dhaka University - was the headquarters of the freedom-minded young men and became the primary target of the West Pakistani soldiers. A little after midnight the calmness of Dhaka was shattered by the deadly firings of mortars and machine guns. The rushing blood of the dead and the final cries of the wounded filled the air of the city. The attackers then lighted the Nilkhet slum and when the helpless slum dwellers tried to escape from the deadly flame they shot them mercilessly. Jagannath and several other student resident halls were also attacked simultaneously. Once the main attack subsided the soldiers entered the student halls and in a display of the most barbaric attitude shot and killed the students who were holed up inside the compounds.

When all these were happening I slept in peace. Rushi and I used to sleep beside Mom. After an active day once the supper settled into my stomach, I blacked out for the night. Even Rushi, a habitual bad sleeper who frequently moved all over the bed and rested her legs on me, could not bother me. Lately, Mom looked really embarrassing with her belly turning even bigger than ever. She had to visit the bathroom several times at night. Each of her visits caused a mini earthquake in the house. Even that wasn't enough to wake me up. However, on 25th March, all the chaos that started around dawn was enough to make an exception. The streets seemed to liven up in grief and anger. I heard Roni Bhai shouting at the top of his voice. "Those bastards think they can shoot us all dead. We'll fight for independence. Wake up, everybody. Listen to the radio. The sons of the bitches are drowning Dhaka in our blood. Get up all."

Any other time Moni Bhai would have yelled back at him for waking everybody up in the middle of the night, but today he was completely silent. I sensed Aunt Rafia and Uncle Ahmed waking up. Still quite sleepy I dragged myself up in a sitting position. Mom whispered to me, "Sleep baby. You don't need to know this. Not yet."

I didn't object. I was too sleepy to give in to the curiosity. I didn't even know when I went back to sleep.

As I opened my eyes a shiny sunlit day welcomed me. Stepping out of the room I knew something horrible had happened. The door of Uncle Ahmed's chamber was tightly closed. We could hear loud arguments inside. There were many voices but unlike other days I could barely hear Uncle Ahmed. I found Moni Bhai sitting quietly on the porch. Roni Bhai was nowhere to be seen. Aunt Rafia was making flatbread as she did every morning. A woman from the nearby slum came to help her with housework. She was known as Parvoti's mom. Hindu by religion, she wore sindoor (vermilion) on her forehead. She used to roll the flatbread while Aunt Rafia baked them on a flat pan.

The smell of the freshly baked bread filled the air. I peeked into the kitchen.

"Hungry?" Aunt Rafia asked.

I nodded.

"Wait a bit. I am frying some cauliflower. It would taste good with flatbread."

I patiently waited on the veranda. Moni Bhai looked grave and grumpy, totally unapproachable. I stood by the grilled window and looked down to observe the daily chores of the slum next to the pond. Interestingly, even there, things looked grave. They had gathered in small groups and discussed in low voices. Even the toddlers with running noses stood by silently sucking their thumbs. My curiosity rose sky-high. I gave another side look at Moni Bhai and decided for the second time not to risk bothering him. I had no desire to get scolded so early in the morning. Suddenly Yunus bolted in from the streets.

"Do you have any idea what happened last night?" he wearily said. "Pakistani soldiers killed many people. They took away Sheikh Mujib. Now they are going to regret it. We are going to hit back with maximum force. They don't know the Bengalis."

I knew he was going to get it.

"Shut up, you idiot," Moni Bhai snapped at him. "What do you know? This is the result of a conspiracy by the Hindus. They want to break down the unity of the Muslims. They want to make this land another kingdom for the Hindus. Good that a few Hindu bastards were killed. All of them should be killed."

I have never seen Yunus speaking up for anybody in this household. Today he must have been possessed.

"What are you saying, Moni Bhai?" he quickly responded. "Did you hear what they said on the radio? They killed Muslims mostly. Do you know how many students were killed in Dhaka University? I know I am an uneducated idiot. I barely understand all this. But you do, don't you? Do you think these killings were good? Muslims killing Muslims?"

For a moment it seemed that Moni Bhai was about to burst into anger but he struggled to contain himself. "This is what happens when you hold hands with the bastard Hindu," he muttered.

Parvati's mom had worked in this house for many years. I barely heard her ever talking more than a few words. "Ma'am, why is Moni Bhai so mad at us?" she mildly objected from the kitchen. "What did we do? This is our country too. What sin did we do by taking birth as Hindus? This is the religion of our ancestors."

"Let it go," Aunt Rafia said. "Don't take it seriously. This is all political talk. You have known Moni since he was a little boy. Don't listen to all this crap."

"All Hindus should go back to the Hindu kingdom of India. Bangladesh is the country of Muslims," muttered Moni Bhai before thumping his way out.

Parvati's mom started to sob. Aunt Rafia tried to soothe her.

"Don't listen to Moni Bhai," Yunus whispered in my ears. "He doesn't want freedom. He likes to do slavery of the bastard Pakistanis. They are nothing but sons of bitches. Muslim - my foot!"

I knew Yunus had become a protégé of Roni Bhai. "Where's Roni Bhai?" I asked.

"In the school grounds," Yunus whispered. "Many have gathered there. We are going to fight. We can't keep quiet anymore. Do you want to come with me?"

I nodded. I knew Mom and Aunt Rafia would try to stop me, so we tried to slip out secretly but to no avail. Rushi saw me. Immediately Mom came screaming out. "Khoka, don't go out of the house."

I was old enough to know no good could come from breaking such direct command. When angry, Mom was capable of making things quite uncomfortable with her barrage of slaps, pinches, and hair-pulling. Yunus read my mind. He shrugged and promised to take me another time.

"Yunus, where are you going?" Aunt Rafia called out.

"I'll be back in a minute."

"I didn't ask when you'll be back. Where are you going?"

Yunus had already slipped out.

On 26th March from the radio center of Chittagong Major Ziaur Rahman announced the declaration of independence on behalf of the provisional government of Bangladesh. This created a huge wave of commotion in the country. Most greeted it with joy and enthusiasm. Waves of people flooded the streets announcing solidarity with the provisional government.

The heat was felt clearly inside Aunt Rafia's house as well. Naturally, Uncle Ahmed and Moni Bhai were under immense pressure. They remained quiet, cautious. On the other hand, Roni Bhai romped around in support of the war. Many wanted to join the war but had

no battle training whatsoever. The possibility of setting up training facilities on this side of the border looked bleak. Roni Bhai and his friends planned to make the trip to India. We heard many had already gone to India to train with firearms.

Aunt Rafia broke down at this news. Mom tried to talk Roni Bhai out of it, unsuccessfully. Even Yunus was all set to go with him. However, under pressure from several fronts, he eventually backed away. In the end, Roni Bhai quietly left for India with a few of his close friends. Moni Bhai continued to have small gatherings in the den on the roof but he could barely hide his anxiousness. It was one thing to support the Muslim League and another to oppose the independence of your country. From their discussion, it was easy to make out that they were confused. Sometimes when they didn't have enough partners Moni Bhai allowed me to play cards with them. I took this opportunity to pick up a few games. Roni Bhai came up frequently in their discussions.

"Eh, what a warrior! He'll pass away in one slap on the face," Moni Bhai often muttered in disgust.

It was quite clear that the sudden fame that Roni Bhai gained had made him jealous. Even some of the pretty girls in the neighborhood had stopped me to ask about Roni Bhai, inquiring to know if he had gone to join the war. In my mind, I did not doubt that when Roni Bhai returned from the war he would have no problem hooking up with one of these pretty damsels.

We received another letter from Dad soon after. They had received the news of the barbaric events of 25th March but did not get the true picture. The radio centers in West Pakistan had presented the news in a way as if the West Pakistan military had only captured a few conspirators. During their operations, some Hindus might have met their ends. The number of East Pakistani soldiers in Dad's regiment was only about 5%. Most of them were doctors. Their main task was to accompany the Pakistani soldiers to different engagements and treat them for sickness and injuries. They continued their duties despite the Declaration of Independence of Bangladesh. They weren't quite sure what role they needed to play. Confused and worried they performed their respective tasks. Dad was very anxious to see us. He hadn't found any housing for us yet. His anxiety was so overwhelming that finally in desperation he decided to meet General Gul, who was the superior authority of the Quetta cantonment. He would be able to help him, Dad believed. Mom read the letter infinite times and cried relentlessly. I wasn't sure what all the crying was about. There was no way she could even make the trip to Quetta in her current size and shape.

In the meantime like an added trouble arrived my toothache. I had sweet teeth from a very early age. Lozenges were my inseparable company. Often I forgot to brush or floss. As a result, my milk teeth were mostly decayed. My broad smile used to make even the most serious person chuckle. Such clownish was my appearance. When several teeth started to hurt like hell and gave me sleepless nights I had no other option but to resort to the least popular solution – visiting a dentist. One fine morning it was decided that we would visit the dental clinic of Uncle Ashfaq.

A very big man Uncle Ashfaq was Dad's second cousin. Just looking at him could make a kid run away. Many times I had wondered how a man with such a large stature man-

aged to walk around doing regular chores. Our planned visit to him must have imprinted a sign of anxiety on my face because even Mom felt the need to put up some kind words. "What's there to be scared of? He likes you."

"What liking has anything to do with extracting teeth?" I muttered.

Mom laughed. "How many times did I tell you to brush properly? Now you'll have to face the consequences."

"Cavity boy!" Rushi giggled. I glared at her.

I would have smacked her on the head but had to pull myself back. It would be a bad idea in Mom's presence. We were to visit Uncle Ashfaq in the evening. My heart started to beat faster. I couldn't concentrate on anything and spent most of the day lying down on the bed.

Uncle Ashfaq's dental clinic was on the first floor of a two-story building located at the corner of the block known as Dak Bangla. He allowed himself a broad smile at my very sight. "How are you doing, Son? You succeeded in destroying most of your teeth, haven't you? Don't worry. These are all milk teeth. You'll get nice new teeth once these are gone."

All these pep talks didn't make me feel better for a moment. Uncle Ashfaq had me seated on a high dental chair and examined my teeth. Now and then he mumbled, "Exactly what I thought. This one is completely gone. That one doesn't look very good either. You need to cut down on lozenges."

"I keep telling him. He wouldn't listen." Mom spread some salt on the open wound.

After his examination concluded Uncle Ashfaq let out a big smile, which freaked me out. "Nothing to worry about! For now, I'll just take out the two teeth that are hurting you. If you are still in pain come back. I'll take care of the rest."

He smilingly picked up a gigantic syringe. "Just need to put your gums to sleep."

I saw total darkness for a few seconds, mostly out of fear. The experience turned out to be nowhere as painful as I had anticipated. He quickly uprooted the two teeth, folded them in a piece of paper, and handed them over to me. Mom had almost no money with her but she still offered him the regular fee. He refused to take it. "Sis, I can't take money from you," he smilingly added. "I'll take it from his dad when I see him again. If the boy is having any other issues just bring him back. Don't be shy. I haven't done much for them. This way I can feel a little less guilty."

I tried to hide my worries. I had no desire to head back this way again – pain or not. Nevertheless, I had to revisit him twice more that month. He merrily pulled out half of my teeth. When the ordeal was over he patted my back and smilingly said, "Take care of your teeth, or next time I'll pull all the rest."

I feared the gigantic syringe. Returning home I brushed and flossed several times for a few days before the lapses started to happen. Sensing my degrading motivation Mom put Rushi on my back. This strained our sibling relationship further but it worked. I would do just about anything to make Rushi quiet.

Chapter 9

A few days later we received an urgent message about Great-grandma. She wasn't doing well. She had been suffering from a variety of health issues for ages and went through ups and downs but rarely anything life-threatening. A man who had come to Khulna from the village for personal reasons carried the message. He mentioned with great detail how vulnerable Great-grandma had become mentally and physically and demanded to see me particularly. Mom wasn't in any condition to travel. She had difficulties just going to the bathroom. Yet she told the man to let Grandpa know that if he sent somebody for us we would go. Who knew when death would strike? This could be our last opportunity to see Great-grandma one more time.

Grandpa himself came to get us the very next day after he got the message. We learned from him that Great-grandma was bedridden. Her body had swollen and she could barely move. She wasn't in a condition to eat or drink normally and everybody feared that her last moment was nearing quickly. She had been constantly asking to see me. We knew it was against our best judgment to drag Mom into this trip to the village but everybody bowed out to her determination and we were on our way the following morning.

The regular bus service between Khulna and Satkhira wasn't operational due to some kind of labor unrest. We rode three-wheelers, and rickshaws and even walked some before reaching Kaligonj after dusk. Mom was completely exhausted but she tried her best to hide it. After crossing the river we found Alek waiting for us with his bullock cart and a broad smile. Once on the cart, Mom collapsed on her back. With every movement of the cart, she grumbled in pain. Comically Rushi echoed Mom grumble by grumble. Alek and I burst into giggles. When was she going to get to her senses? Grandpa had left his bike in a store in Kaligonj on his way to Khulna. He picked it up and rode it slowly beside the cart trying to stay with it. He looked worried for Mom and inquired about her condition every few minutes. "How are you feeling now, dear? We are almost there."

As we advanced slowly Alek Mia took the liberty to sing out loudly a familiar rural song "Oh, the lonely boat..."

Grandpa instantly shut him down. "Alek, keep your mouth closed."

Alek turned completely quiet. Grandpa was known for his terrible temper. Everybody played it safely around him. With his permission, I slipped out of the cover and sat by Alek at the front. Alek passed on the thin stick that he was carrying to me. "Go on; drive the cows for a little bit. Don't hit them hard. They can feel pain."

There were two oxen – one red and one black – pulling the cart. I gave a very soft tap on the back of the red-colored ox. "Let's go, come on!"

It turned its neck and gave me a tender look. "This ox belongs to you," Alek said. "Great-grandma gave it to you. And this black ox belongs to your Grandpa."

It took me by surprise. "This red one is mine?"

"Yes. Great-grandma has three other cows. One of them is a female. She is pregnant again. Great-grandma says when she dies you'll get everything that she owns. She practically raised you since you were born. She has unconditional love for you. Don't ever hurt her, okay?"

I already knew Great-grandma had a special bond with me. What I didn't know was the fact that I had an ox, a red one! My heart filled with joy. The ownership of such a big and beautiful living thing seemed overwhelming. "Alek Bhai, don't hit it too hard, okay?" I pledged.

Alek laughed. "Why would I hit it, bro? I just poke them a little bit to keep them moving. They are innocent animals, I'll never hurt them."

His laughter echoed in the calm and quiet surroundings of the nightfall. Grandpa looked annoyed. "Keep your mouth closed, Alek," he gravely said.

"Yes, sir," Alek muttered, apologetically.

Seconds later he glanced at me smilingly and blinked.

At Grandpa's house, we were greeted by a large crowd, larger than I had ever remembered seeing. The news of Great-grandma approaching her last moments had spread quickly and many of our relatives had made the trip to see her for the last time. There was barely any space in the courtyard. The place shone brightly with the lights from several powerful propane lamps. Our presence generated a loud buzz with everybody rushing forward to take a peek at us. Several voices called out with garbled words. The only one that I could recognize belonged to Uncle Shahid. He kept on repeating himself. "Khoka is here! Khoka is here! Open your eyes, Great-grandma, your Khoka is here. Move away! Move away!"

Mom, Rushi, and I moved through the crowd and climbed up on the porch of Great-grandma's hut. She was inside her room lying down on the floor over a handmade mat. Beside her sat anxiously the village allopathic and the ayurvedic (an ancient healing practice from India) doctors.

Her body was swollen almost beyond recognition, eyes closed. When Uncle Shahid announced our presence she opened her eyes, her murky vision roamed around aimlessly, and showed no sign of remembering any of us.

Mom almost collapsed by her side, totally drained after the stressful long trip. "Great grandma, wake up. Look, Khoka is here. Can you hear me?"

None of us noticed when Uncle Nawsher stood by us. "Great-grandma hasn't been talking since noon. Go on Khoka, sit by her side for a little bit."

I did as told. That didn't do any magic. Great-grandma lay down on the floor with her eyes closed like a corpse. Looking around I noticed with surprise that not only Minu Apa had come from Satkhira but also came Grandpa Shahar and several others from my maternal side. At the sight of her father, Mom suddenly lost all her resistance and broke into tears. Her father hugged her and patted her on the back, speaking soothingly. "Don't worry. Everything will be okay. You should rest."

Mom howled. Any other time this would be pretty embarrassing but for the time being, it wasn't totally out of place. And then I saw Rani Apa in the crowd with Uncle Daud and Aunt Morium. She waved at me. I waved back with a big smile. I was already feeling much better.

That night none of us got much sleep. Most people slept in the courtyard on mats. The weather was warm with no rain. Nobody complained. We – Rushi, Rani Apa, Minu Apa, and I slept in Grandma's bed. Rushi was knocked out in moments. The three of us stayed awake quite late whispering under the sheet to avoid attracting undue attention. I didn't even know when I dozed off.

The next morning when I woke up the sun was already high in the sky. I noticed the crowd had lightened. I climbed down to the courtyard and found a small crowd in front of Great-grandma's hut. Pushing through the crowd I saw both Minu Apa and Rani Apa patiently sitting on the floor. Minu Apa waved at me. "Great-grandma is well now." She sounded excited. "Since morning she could sit on her own and talk a little. Come, she has been asking for you."

Great-grandma was lying down on her back, eyes closed, still very weak. She must have sensed my presence because she slowly opened her eyes. Her lips extended in a pale smile. "Khoka! When did you come? Come to me. All the kids, come, sit by my sides."

We hugged her tenderly and sat by her quietly for a while. She wasn't in a condition to talk much but she wept silently with tears running down her cheek.

"Why are you crying?" Rani Apa wiped off the tears. "You are okay now."

"God spared me this time just for the kids," Great-grandma whispered. "What else do I have to live for?"

Most visitors left that afternoon. The caravan of bullock carts parked in front of the outhouse disappeared one by one until only one was left. This was Grandpa Shahar's cart. God must have listened to my silent prayers because soon we learned that while Grandpa Shahar would return to Dorgahpur, Rani Apa and her parents would stay a few more days. Alek would drop them off later. This was something to celebrate, especially when I found out that even Minu Apa and her parents were staying back for a few more days. This was getting better and better.

It was summertime and the mango trees scattered all over my grandparent's property had fruited profusely. There were several varieties each with its specialty – East Indian. Florigon, Glenn, Imam Pasand, Mallika, Neelum, Edward, Bombay, Alphonso, Cushman, and more. They came in all shapes and sizes and had distinct tastes, textures, and flavors. Several of the trees were grafted and produced the best fruits. Most mangoes had local names to quickly identify them. Two of our favorite ones were 'Kacha-Mitha' (sweet and sour) and 'Koolop' (from a grafted plant). The mangoes had just started to ripen, some varieties more than the rest. We always targeted 'Kacha-Mitha' mangoes first for their fibreless flesh and the delicious taste that had the touch of both sweetness and a bit of tanginess. They were usually large when matured. The problem was this tree was very tall, almost like an adult coconut

tree. None of us could climb this tree and resorted to throwing rocks or mud pellets in our futile attempt to drop some of the fruits. The tree produced few mangoes and they were usually at the top branches of the tree. We had to ask for Alek's help. He was a master climber who was an expert in scaling coconut trees. I had seen very few people who could scale vertical length so deftly. If he could spare some time he climbed up the 'Kacha-Mitha' tree and got us a few mangoes. We would peel them, cut them into small pieces, and mix them up with salt, milk, lemon leaf, and green chili. We devoured it often fighting for a larger share.

The pond in the backyard had a huge mango tree leaning over it. This one had small yellow fruits. When bathing in the pond we threw pellets to drop the mangoes. When one fell we competed to grab it. The 'Kolop' tree was located on the other side of the pond, near the small family grave where Grandpa's parents were buried. This tree produced large mangoes with beautiful green and red hues. This was a small tree but bore so many mangoes that the branches leaned in the weight of the fruits. These mangoes didn't taste very well when green but were something to die for as they ripened. We had already noticed some of them were ripening.

A few days later one afternoon dark cloud rolled in and covered the sky. People anxiously wrapped up whatever they were doing, moved dry stuff indoors, drove the brood of chickens and ducks in their coup, closed the doors and windows, and took shelter inside the house. "There's going to be a storm," Rani Apa said. "The mangoes will drop like hails."

"Really!" This was news to me. "Are we going to pick them?"

The answer came from Aunt Banu. "I don't want to see anybody going out during the storm," she warned.

When the mangoes would be dropping how could anybody possibly stay home? Who had ever heard of such an impossible thing? Especially in the villages not only the kids but even the adults also dared the storm to pick fallen mangoes. We were worried that the opportunists might rush to the garden before us and pick up the good ones. Despite the warning, we waited patiently for Aunt Banu to move away to help others prepare for the storm. We anxiously observed the progression of the storm hoping that it would blow on us before too late. If we dozed off the others might beat us to the chase.

The sky turned darker and darker, the wind stopped blowing. The domestic hands hurriedly returned to their homes. My uncles and aunts gathered in Grandpa's room prepared to pass the storm there. We kids took shelter in Great-grandma's hut along with Mom. We huddled with Great-grandma in the king-size bed she slept on. Due to the oncoming storm, we had eaten our supper early. Alek had driven the cattle in the shed long ago, ate his supper, and took shelter in the outhouse. He alternatively went back home or slept here at night. Today Grandma had specifically asked him to stay back. If the cattle felt distressed during the storm he would come in very handy. We had stopped by in the outhouse to see him once. He had spread out a mat and was preparing to sleep. After spending the whole day on the fields he used to get very tired by dusk. I had seen him gobbling up a large plate of rice and go to bed.

Tonight we had given him an added responsibility. During the storm children from the neighboring houses came out to pick mangoes, most from poor families. Those children had very little access to the fruit trees in the village most of which were owned by landlords. Storms like that allowed them to grab a few fruits. Alek's job was to keep them away long enough for us to finish picking. Once we were done they could move in and take the rest. This was our garden and we felt we should get the priority.

Hunkered down inside Great-grandma's hut we chatted on to keep us engaged and awake, our eyes and ears focused outside. The storm seemed to take awfully long to hit us. Rani Apa called out for Alek every few minutes to ensure that he didn't fall asleep. Initially, he was responding but as the night deepened we stopped hearing back from him. Rani Apa was upset. "Great! He fell asleep. Why the stupid storm isn't here yet?"

"Sleep." Great-grandma urged. "Who knows when the storm would come?"

After struggling to keep awake for another half an hour we finally gave up and went to bed. There was little chance the storm was coming tonight. After running around the whole day I was pretty tired and probably was the first one to fall asleep.

Suddenly I was shaken out of my sleep. Rani Apa stood by my side, all ready to go. "Get up," she said, boiling in excitement. "The storm is here. Can you hear the mangoes dropping?"

I was tired and had to force myself to get up. However, soon the excitement captured me as well and I jumped out of the bed, slid the sleepers into my feet, and was all set to venture out. I could hear the wind blowing forcefully. We opened one of the doors slightly and slipped out into the courtyard. It was dark and I could barely see my own hands. Minu Apa grabbed a flashlight and led us through the backdoor into the garden. Great-grandma was a light sleeper. The blasting of the wind against the walls and trees must have woken her up. She called out to stop us but to no avail. We heard the mangoes dropping constantly, almost like rocks falling from the sky. There was no stopping now.

We fought the strong wind and ubiquitous dust on our way through the garden. We had to cover our eyes with the palms of our hands to save them from the gusts and flying debris. We could hear the voices of other people nearby. Many had already beaten us to it. Desperation and anger both flashed through my mind. We started to run ignoring the turmoil that was happening around us. Our first target was the 'Sweet and Sour' tree. Rani Apa was bolting with a large jute bag in her hand.

To our relief, there were only a handful of people under this tree. We knelt on the ground and looked as several flashlights danced around. We found fewer than we expected. Disappointed, Rani Apa shouted at the intruders trying to drive them away. The wind blew so hard that we could barely hear ourselves flanked to each other. Her warning had no impact. Instead of wasting time there, we started moving toward the 'Kalap' tree, our top target. That tree had the most delicious mangoes and naturally would be the primary destination for all the pickers. We dared the strong wind roaring by and crouched past the backyard pond as Minu Apa and Rani Apa shone their flashlights on the trail.

Our fear proved to be true. When we arrived at the tree we found several older girls had already camped there. Rani Apa shouted at them a few times to discourage them but they didn't pay much attention. We had no choice but to compete with them. Thankfully there was plentiful and soon our bag was almost full. The storm picked up and blowing dirt made it hard to see. We shouted at each other to ensure that we didn't separate. I could hear Uncle Nawsher and Aunt Banu calling out for us at the top of their voices. "Let's go back," finally Minu Apa broke off the party. "My parents found out. We are in a lot of trouble."

We had to head back, which turned out to be more difficult now with the heavy sack filled with mangoes. Three of us dragged it slowly careful not to lose any. Once we made our way back to the house, we were greeted by Aunt Banu who looked very mad. She didn't hold her back. Fortunately, the wind was so loud that we barely heard anything that she said. Once she was done with us, we carried the mango sack inside Great-grandma's hut and counted our pickings. One hundred and eighty-five. Not a bad night's work.

The next morning we woke up early and went back to the orchard. The storm subsided long ago. In the daylight, we foraged through the garden and collected the ones that went unnoticed in the dark. In the end, we had a grand total of two hundred and fifty. However, not all were of good quality and we got rid of the bad ones. When Mom heard about our night out she lost her cool too. But when I prepared some of her favorite mango salad she was all smiles. "Did you pick them? They are delicious!" There was a hint of admiration in her voice. This I found very pleasing. I just wished she would remember this when she went ballistic on me next time for minor lapses.

Minu Apa and her family left a couple of days later. The war had started. Even though the impact wasn't yet noticeable in our region they didn't feel comfortable staying away from home for too long. Who knew how things would turn out? I heard that many people from the neighboring villages had signed up for the war and went to India for training. Indian border was only three miles away.

It was a common fear that the war would turn bigger and bloodier. India hadn't yet announced its support openly but was helping in various ways. Many people trying to escape the brutality of war had left Bangladesh and entered the Indian Territory. India was providing shelter to those refugees. They had also opened up numerous centers to train prospective freedom fighters with battlefield training. Moti Bhai, Alek's older brother, went to India for training. Rohim and Liakot, who worked as day laborers for Grandpa, had accompanied Moti Bhai as well. Though there were contrasting opinions among the villagers, we heard that some people were doing horrible things in the name of the war, like robbing the houses of the rich farmers. Rani Apa was afraid that Bashir might take advantage of the situation and attempt to kidnap her or something of that nature. There was no way to know what he might have been planning. She had no choice but to tell her father about Bashir. Since then Uncle Daud wouldn't let her go alone anywhere. He also bought a rifle. But could a single rifle save them against a gang?

After Minu Apa left Rani Apa and I had little more time to discuss her worries about Bashir. I felt angry thinking a young girl like her had to be worried about such things.

“Why couldn’t Bashir just find an older woman to get married?” I asked Rani Apa.

“That’s how things are in the villages,” she said bitterly. “Young girls are forced into marriages. By the time they are seventeen, they are a mother of two. I am not gonna be one of them. I asked Dad to send me to Khulna. But now that the war has started, we must wait to see how the situation turns in Khulna.”

I sat silently for a long time with a sore heart. I didn’t yet understand the concept of war fully. I didn’t even know clearly why there was a war being fought between East and West Pakistan but just the thought of Rani Apa being in harm's way got me filled with both anger and anguish.

Within a few days, Great-grandma started to feel much better. She started to stroll around using her walking stick. Not everybody in the household welcomed that though. One of her shortcomings was to pick on others at every possible opportunity. Not only the servants but even Grandma was afraid of her sharp tongue. When she was bedridden everybody felt a little relieved. As she found her legs a sense of discomfort returned. However, Great-grandma appeared to have a change of heart, to everybody’s amazement. She turned quiet and spent the majority of the day with me and Rani Apa. After Alek took the cattle to the fields in the morning three of us would walk to the vegetable garden just outside the courtyard, pick vegetables, and make small talk. Sometimes she would tell us stories. I had no idea she had such a rich collection in her stock. Most of her stories were about royalty, some were quite scary. Especially the one she told us about the pond in the backyard gave me nightmares for a while.

A few generations ago a vicious dacoit named Bishnu used to live here. During the day he was an ordinary farmer. His wife Sulekha was a simple woman who loved him very much. Bishnu appeared to love her as well. But Bishnu had a secret. After dark, he turned into a dacoit and robbed others of their valuables.

Every month he robbed one household with his army of accomplices. With their massive knives when they broke into the houses of the rich farmers, there was not much the victims could do. Bishnu would command them to put all their jewelry and gold coins in a sack. If anybody objected he slaughtered them. After sharing the loot with his gang members he hid portions in large round belly clay pots and stored them in underground storage. When the pot became full he closed the mouth tightly and sunk it in the backyard pond. That way even if anybody ever suspected him they couldn’t possibly find the fortune. Bishnu planned to have five such pots full of valuables, move to another village far away, and become a landlord.

He never disclosed his secret to Sulekha but she was becoming suspicious. Sometimes when she woke up at night she didn’t find her husband by her side. When asked Bishnu would say he couldn’t sleep so just went for a walk by the river. Sulekha had a hard time believing that. One time after a robbery as Bishnu was hiding his loot inside the secret underground storage Sulekha caught him red-handed. Left with no other option he revealed his secret. But he cautioned if she told anybody he would have no choice but to kill her.

Sulekha was shocked to know about the dark side of her husband and became very fearful. Terrified that something may slip out of her mouth accidentally and put her at risk, she even stopped socializing with others. Bishnu continued to rob without any trouble. His fifth pot was almost full. He decided that he would rob only one more house. He picked a well-off farmer who lived far away and broke into his house with his gang in the middle of the night. However, unlike other times, when he saw the unmarried young and beautiful daughter of the landlord he lost his mind. This time not only valuables but on his way out he also tied down the girl and brought her with him. Sulekha objected to it.

"This girl will stay with us," Bishnu declared. "I'll marry her."

"How can you take another wife when you already have one?" Sulekha bitterly protested.

"I did not think about that," Bishnu thoughtfully said. "Okay. I'll return her tomorrow. Let's hide her in the underground storage for just tonight."

Sulekha felt relieved. But Bishnu had another plan. The next day during lunch he secretly mixed up poison into his wife's food. After consuming that poison Sulekha lost consciousness. Bishnu tied her up with his fifth pot and sunk it in the pond. He planned to marry the other girl first, then when the proper opportunity came pull up the pots out of the water, carry them to a distant village, buy a few hundred acres of land, and build a palace. Even though he had kidnapped the girl, once married she would have no choice but to accept her fate.

As planned he forced the girl into marrying him. Everybody learned that Sulekha had lost her mind and went away without telling anybody anything. Bishnu stopped robbing and looked around for a suitable village to settle in.

Finally, one night he dipped in the pond to pick up his clay pots with valuables. After picking up the first four pots and placing them by the side of the pond he went to get the fifth one. The pot still had the corpse of his wife tied to it. The corpse had started to rot. Bishnu tried to untie the rope and separate the pot from the corpse but to his amazement, the long saree that Sulekha wore suddenly came at him like a snake and coiled around him. The more he tried to swim up the more it pulled him down. After struggling for some time Bishnu could no longer hold his breath and slowly died. The next morning people found the four pots on the side of the pond but even after searching thoroughly inside the pond, they neither found the corpse of Bishnu and Sulekha nor the fifth pot filled with valuables. But the legend went that the pot rose above the water randomly with Sulekha's corpse tied to it and at length floated Bishnu's corpse coiled in Sulekha's saree. *Anybody who would see that view would die exactly in one week.*

After hearing this story I stopped going to the backyard pond, especially after dusk.

A few days later Rani Apa left too with her parents. We were under a lot of duress. Mom hadn't been doing very well. I heard that the baby who was growing inside her belly was scheduled to come out soon. Would it be a wise decision for her to get on another trip to Khulna? The situation in the rural areas wasn't that bad yet. So why not wait until the baby is born? Grandpa, Grandma, and Great-grandma reasoned to convince Mom, who despite

planning to have the baby in her sister's place bowed to her poor physical condition and decided to stay back in the village.

We hadn't received any more news from Dad. We had no way to know how he was doing in Pakistan. As the possibility of joining with him kept on pushing back Mom became more and more miserable. I could sense her agony. Even I felt a bit of anger at Dad for taking so long to have the family reunited.

Chapter 10

Only about a week had passed since Rani Apa left. Great-grandma slowly returned to her normal routine of pestering everybody. Mom wasn't doing any better. She spent most of her time on the bed. Rushi and I spent a lot of time in the gardens with Grandma, helping her pick varieties of vegetables and fruits. Since Mom was bedridden I was saved from all the scolding that she bestowed on me every day. I was savoring these moments. Great-grandma told me that after the baby was born Mom would be limited in movement for at least a month or two. This meant I would be enjoying my freedom even longer than I anticipated. Unfortunately, my happiness was very short.

One night my Grandpa's house was breached by a group of dacoits. The house was secured by almost eight feet high walls made of mud and bamboo sticks. The main house, kitchen, outhouse, Great-grandma's hut, and the cattle shed - everything was inside the walls. They had four wooden grain silos located in the yard between the main house and the outhouse. Every day after dusk when the cattle were driven inside the shed, the main door was secured by several bolts and drawbars. Once the poultry moved into their coup the back door was bolted and secured by drawbars as well. The domestic helpers returned to their homes before dark. Time was not good and things turned very quiet after dusk. The fear of thieves and dacoits had increased drastically.

Many years ago my grandparents' house was robbed once. The overall situation in the countryside was not very good. Many did not have food to survive. The dacoits took the grains from his storage and did not harm anybody. Police were informed. Nobody ever was apprehended. Even though Grandpa was a landlord he wasn't exactly rich and there was no reason to think the dacoits would be interested in robbing him. Their main target was cash and jewelry. Grandpa had much land but practically no cash. Grandma and Great-grandma had only a few pieces of jewelry made of gold and silver. Nobody ever thought dacoits would care to take the trouble to get those measly valuables.

That night after supper we hit the bed between eight and nine. I was listening to my great-grandma telling me some more stories and didn't know when I fell asleep. Suddenly there was a loud noise and I jumped out of bed. Great-grandma had wakened up about the same time. We could hear four or five male voices roaring in the courtyard. "Hey old hag-gard, open the door," somebody shouted. "Step outside. Now!"

I heard Grandpa's door opening. Grandpa slowly walked out on the porch. He was holding a kerosine lamp. In the pale light, he looked weak, helpless. I peeked through the narrow gaps of the wooden door and saw the yard was flooded with light shining from several powerful flashlights. A few men with their faces covered in towels were walking up and down the courtyard restlessly. One of them approached Grandpa in long, strong strides. He was probably the leader of this group. "Get me all the money and jewelry that you have in the house," he said hoarsely. "You have ten minutes. If you don't comply I am going to cut everybody's throat." He held up the long curved knife that he was holding in his hand and shook it menacingly.

"Son, we don't have much cash or jewelry," Grandpa calmly said. "The old women have a few ounces of gold and I have a couple of hundred takas in cash. If that's what you are looking for I'll give you that."

Before he could finish Grandma came out of the house holding a small packet in her hands. "Here's all my jewelry. Please take. Dear, give them the two hundred takas. Don't make them mad."

The leader of the dacoits impatiently looked at the rest of his group. Clearly, he was very annoyed. One of his gang members standing at the back suddenly said, "The army officer's wife is here."

The voice was slightly muffled as it came from below the towel but it sure sounded familiar.

"That sounded like Mintu," Great-grandma whispered in my ears. "He worked here as a day laborer, helped in harvesting the grains. That bastard brought these dacoits!"

I had seen Mintu a few times. He was in his early twenties, and a little shy. It was hard for me to understand why in the whole world he would bring these dacoits to Grandpa's house. I also didn't grasp the reference about the 'Army officer's wife'.

My grandparents looked very worried. "She is eight months pregnant," Grandma pleaded. "She has a few gold ornaments. I'll get them. Please wait here. I'll be back in no time..."

The leader looked suspicious. "No, you wait here oldie. I'll do it myself."

Grandpa took a stand this time. "No! I can't let that happen..."

The gang leader grabbed Grandpa by the neck. "What are you going to do old man? I can kill you anytime. Guys, keep an eye on them. If anybody makes a noise just cut the throat."

He started to climb up the stairs toward my grandparent's bedroom. This is when I suddenly realized what was happening. They were talking about my mother! I felt this sudden rush of anger in me. Great-grandma was holding me tightly. I shook her hands off me, unbolted the door, and jumped outside the hut. "Don't touch my mother," I shouted with every bit of strength that I had. "When I grow up I'll kill all of you. Mintu Bhai, I'll tell the police that you brought the dacoits."

For a second the yard turned completely silent. The gang leader standing halfway up the stairs watched me with sheer amazement. Then he roared, "Mintu, you bastard, even this little kid recognized you. Finish him off."

Great-grandma had walked out and stood by me. Fearing for my life she lit up like a fire. Her thunderous voice echoed in the darkness of the village. "If you touch him I swear upon god every member of your family will die in leprosy. Your kids will die of fever. Your houses will burn into ashes. Your grains will be eaten by the rats..."

Suddenly we heard a lot of noise outside the boundary walls. There were more shouts and footsteps at a distance approaching fast. It was clear that the villagers had found out that the dacoits had attacked my grandparent's house and they had come to help.

"Let's get out of here, boss," one of the gang members fearfully said. "If we get caught they'll beat us to death."

The gang leader looked scared as well. No matter how dreadful they were they had no chance against hundreds of villagers who would mercilessly kill them if get an opportunity. He ran down the stairs.

"We have to get out through the back door. Mintu, where is the back door?"

Mintu ran toward the back of the house. The rest followed him. In the next few seconds, they were out in the garden. We could hear their footsteps quickly moving away. The villagers started to bang on the front door. Grandpa opened it.

Uncle Shahid was standing at the front of the crowd holding a long bamboo stick. His wife stood right by him with a sharp vegetable cutter. Alek Mia stood behind them with a spear in his hand. They were accompanied by at least fifteen to twenty men and women. All of them made a living working in this household. During the time of need, they had rushed in to help before anybody else did. Grandpa hugged Uncle Shahid tightly. "The bastards ran away." His voice was heavy in gratitude. "You guys came at the right time."

"Don't worry, Morol sahib," Uncle Shahid said. "We'll guard the house for the rest of the night."

Within a few minutes, another thirty to forty people with sticks from the neighboring houses rushed in to help. There were several young men in this group. They dared to chase the dacoits through the garden. Uncle Shahid and the others spent the rest of the night in the courtyard. Great-grandma held me tightly in her lap, closed the door, and lay down on the bed. I checked on Mom as soon as I had a chance. She was very nervous, her face white in fear. Grandma sat by her side and tried to comfort her. "I'm heading for Khulna tomorrow." Mom tearfully repeated. "I can't stay here for another night."

The next day Grandpa arranged for us to make the trip to Khulna. He decided to accompany us as well. Around noon we packed up all our stuff and started. As usual, Alek was going to take us to Kaligonj. He handed over his cattle to another boy for the day. Great-grandma hugged me dearly and cried her heart off. "Will I see you again, Khoka? When will you come again? Will I still be alive?"

All the tears made me sad as well. I muttered something under my breath before running to catch up with the bullock cart that already started its slow journey. Looking back I saw Great-grandma, Grandma along several other villagers standing quietly, watching us go. Suddenly I felt an overwhelming surge of emotions. They all seemed so much of an integral part of my existence. A mixed sense of loss and agony flooded me. The house, the yards, the orchards with all its exciting varieties of fruit trees, the bamboo groves, and the ponds - everything seemed so precious and endearing! With my vision blurred as tear-filled my eyes, I quietly climbed up on Grandpa's bike. We rode slowly beside the bullock cart on the meandering dirt road, behind remained a plethora of my most cherished memories.

Chapter 11

Once we reached Khulna Mom collapsed on Aunt Rafia's lap and cried profusely, as usual. We moved into the same room where we stayed before. There was no news of Roni Bhai yet but everybody believed he was in India. Once his training was completed he would return with other fighters. However, what surprised me was Moni Bhai, who had changed dramatically in just a few days. He had almost totally stopped inviting his friends to the den and spent most of his time alone. When I went to see him he gestured me to sit down. "It's good that you folks came back here."

I nodded. "After the robbery, Mom got very scared."

Moni Bhai lit a cigarette and silently smoked for a little while. "What do you think? Is Bangladesh good or Pakistan?"

I didn't have to think too much. "Bangladesh is better. Our struggle is for freedom."

Moni Bhai let go a heavy sigh. "You are just a boy, you wouldn't understand this. Once Bangladesh is born the Hindus will rule this country. Today they serve in our houses. Then they will turn us into their servants. Do you know how the Muslims live in India?"

He paced inside the room restlessly. "Good for Roni to join the war. As for me, I can't focus on anything. What is more important – religion or country? Pakistan or India?"

"You mean Bangladesh?"

"Bangladesh? My foot. We'll be nothing but just another state of India. Today Pakistanis are robbing us, tomorrow the Indians will."

"Don't you want to go to the war, Moni Bhai? If I was older I would have certainly gone. They killed so many people the other night. I would shoot them all dead."

"Be thankful that you are just a kid. You don't have to worry about all the political complexities. I should go to the war but my mind doesn't approve of it. Anyway, let it go. Do you want to eat some fritters?"

I loved the fried treats. I nodded greedily. We walked to the small tea stall of Kumar and occupied the broken wooden bench that was placed in front of it. Kumar was famous for his fritters. He served us hot ones and refused to take payment. He never did from Moni Bhai. Slowly in the next hour or so several of Moni Bhai's friends gathered there. At any other time they would all get into noisy discussions just about anything but today I found them quiet, unmindful. I went back home. Mom wasn't feeling very good again. She felt better when I stayed near her.

In the evening the house felt empty. Mom was lying on the bed in her room. Aunt Rafia was with her. They chatted in a low voice. Rushi went to the floor right above to play with the little girl of the family that rented it. Parvati's mom was handling the kitchen. I peeked into Mom's room on my way to the veranda. The empty cage of the parrot was still hanging. That made me even sadder. Yunus had left. Nobody knew where he went. Aunt

Rafia believed he had also joined Roni Bhai for the training. Uncle Ahmed thought he didn't have the guts. Possibly he found a better-paying job somewhere else. Didn't look like his absence caused any difficulties in this household. He hardly helped with any housework anyway. Besides he was frequently getting into arguments with Moni Bhai who smacked him one day. He left after that. I learned this from Aunt Rafia.

I could hear Uncle Ahmed talking excitedly in his chamber. The door was closed so I couldn't see his visitors. But I knew like most of his party members he was a supporter of United Pakistan. He had no interest in joining hands with Hindu-inhabited India. But he didn't believe in violence. Even though he had a detest for the Hindu religion and India in general, nobody could suggest that he had any hatred for the people from the local Hindu community. Instead, his friendly nature made him quite popular among both Hindus and Muslims in the area. He was leading an organized peace committee to ensure that people in the neighborhood remained peaceful. One thing I noticed whenever he mentioned Roni Bhai he could barely hide his pride. He seemed to like the fact that Roni Bhai dared to join the war and fight for something that he felt so passionately. Moni Bhai must have noticed it as well because he had stopped joining the family for supper. He ate later, alone.

Little after midnight, Mom's water broke. Rushi and I were sleeping. We both woke up to Mom's painful scream. Aunt Rafia came running.

"What's happening, Jaira?"

"I think it's time, sister," Mom said, "Sermon the midwife."

The only midwife who served the area was Turzo's mom. She was Parvati's neighbor. Aunt Rafia ran to the veranda at the back and called out for her. "Hey! Turzo's mom! Turzo's mom! Jaira's water broke!"

Within ten minutes Turzo's mom along with a few other women from her neighborhood showed up. Rushi and I were already driven out of Mom's room. The lady on the next floor took Rushi with her. She would sleep with her little daughter for the night. Moni Bhai climbed down hearing all the noise. I hung with him. Just in case there was a need I wouldn't have to go looking for him. Only Turzo's mom and Aunt Rafia were allowed to enter Mom's room. The rest of the women camped in the corridor and chatted. Uncle Ahmed looked nervous. "Why don't we take her to a hospital?" He asked Aunt Rafia every time he saw her. "This is a serious matter."

Aunt Rafia chided him. "Both your boys were born in the hand of Turzo's mom. Why are you suddenly making such a big fuss about hospitals? Jaira is doing perfectly fine. The baby is placed properly. There will be no difficulties in birth. Why don't you go back to bed and try to get some sleep?"

"Are you nuts? How can I sleep in a situation like this?"

Uncle Ahmed paced up and down in the corridor anxiously. Moni Bhai and I waited nearby, sitting on the floor. I didn't even know when I fell asleep propping against Moni Bhai. The cry of a newborn baby woke me up. Moni Bhai must have fallen asleep too. He rubbed his eyes with the back of his hands. "You have a new sibling. Go, see it."

I sprung to my feet and bolted into Mom's room. This tiny baby was lying right by Mom. I checked it out with amazement. It was a boy! It cried louder at my sight. Mom weakly said, "Looks exactly like you, only the hair is curly."

I hugged Mom. "I am going to love him a lot. I'll never hurt him. I promise."

The rest of the night passed by quickly. In the morning the neighboring women came along with their children to see the baby. It felt like a big festival. Uncle Ahmed bought plenty of sweets and had them distributed among the neighbors. I ate to my heart's content.

About a week later after a lot of pondering the baby was named Milky. I can't remember who had first proposed the name but it must have had something to do with his frequent feeding tendency. Pretty soon we became quite close. He would twist his lips at my sight. The only sad thing was that for some strange reason, he liked Rushi more than me. He went ballistic with his hands and legs as soon as she went near him. I couldn't understand why would he like a girl so much, especially someone who nagged all the time.

A few weeks elapsed since Milky was born. One evening we ate our supper and played a little bit before being sent to bed. Rushi and I slept next to Mom. Milky slept on one side and us on the other. Not sure how late it was but we all woke up in a big commotion. For a little while, I could only hear a lot of noise but nothing meaningful. Slowly as my head cleared up I started to understand what it was all about. A few young men were calling out Uncle Ahmed by his name. The iron gate at the entrance of the house was followed by a small cobbled yard and a long porch. All the bedrooms were along this porch, ours first, then Uncle Ahmed's, and a third one which was sometimes used as a guest room. The young men were standing on the porch. I could hear the sound of glass breaking, must be some of the windows.

"Come out, Ahmed. Come out, you bastard! You are an accomplice of the Pakistanis. Today is the end of the line for you. Come out, you murderer." Several voices roared.

Mom held two of us tightly and trembled in morbid fear. Milky had woken up and was howling at the top of his voice. At this point, we heard the door in Uncle Ahmed's room being unbolted and opened. Next, his voice roared back, "Who are you calling murderer? Me? Who did I murder? When? Where? I am a true Muslim. I'll never hold hands with the infidel Hindus. But I am not a murderer. Why do you rascals want to kill me?"

His words were sunk by the trembling voice of Aunt Rafia, "Sons, don't you all know him very well? He doesn't harm anybody. You guys are freedom fighters. Why would you kill a good man? My one son went to war. You know Roni, don't you? He went to the war."

"Your husband is a Pakistani spy," one young man yelled back at Aunt Rafia. "We want an independent Bangladesh. We want to kick those Pakistani butchers out of our land. Your husband is cooperating with those murderers. We want an eye for an eye. Go on, kill that spy." He gestured at another young man holding a rifle.

Aunt Rafia shrieked.

"Go ahead, shoot me," Uncle Ahmed sounded all pumped up. "I don't fear death. I have followed the words of God all my life. Shoot me!"

Suddenly Mom released us and jumped off the bed, her fear dissipated magically. Filled in a sudden burst of braveness she unbolted the door and rushed out to the porch. I ran after her. Rushi hid under the bed and joined Milky in a crying contest.

Once out on the porch, I was horrified to notice that two young men had advanced at Uncle Ahmed with their rifles leveled at his heart. Several other youths with guns stood on the porch. To everybody's bewilderment, Mom ran in front of the two advancing young men and stood with her hands extended as a blockade. "Don't do this, boys. I am not saying this because he is my brother-in-law but I have never seen him harming anybody. All Hindus in the neighborhood come here when in trouble. They trust him with their lives. Please don't hurt him."

"Move out of our way, sister," one of the boys urged. "If we don't shed blood as a response to the murders they committed, those bastard Pakistanis won't stop. They have made this country a killing field. Cohorts like this man are allowing them to continue in their barbarian invasion. We need to kill them all one by one."

"Shoot," Uncle Ahmed boldly repeated his open invitation. "I am not afraid of you. I only fear God. Shoot me!"

Mom held the hands of the young men and begged, "All of you are sons of Khulna. Most of you know this man more or less. Have any of you ever heard him hurting anybody? Have mercy, let him live. Please don't do this."

The youths turned soft in her pleadings. They exchanged glances. Mom continued, "Move on, boys. I'll pray for you. Free Bangladesh from its enemies. We are all so proud of you."

The youths looked restless as they glanced around. The situation wasn't very safe. Pakistani soldiers might show up to get tips from the neighborhood. Before leaving they cautioned Uncle Ahmed, "If you ever harm any freedom fighter we won't spare your life next time."

"My son went in the war," Uncle Ahmed raised a fist in the air and proudly said. "I would never harm any of you, remember that. I am a true Muslim, not a killer. I'll embrace death without fear when my time comes."

Before leaving the youths did something unexpected. They touched my mom's feet asking for her blessings. "Sister, please pray that we can free this country and come back alive to our families."

Mom could no longer stop her tears. "I am always praying, boys. Every time I sit on the prayer mat, I pray for every one of you. God bless you all."

The team of young freedom fighters disappeared quickly into the darkness. With them gone everything abruptly turned unusually silent for a few moments. Mom collapsed on the stairs, tired and shaken she burst into silent tears with her face drowned between her knees. Aunt Rafia and Uncle Ahmed almost picked her up and put her back on the bed. At this point, Moni Bhai tiptoes down. Finding me curiously observing him he explained, "I know those boys. They would have insulted me if I came down. It was a good thing that Roni

went to the war. One must pick a side in a war. Staying in the middle is no good. You get harassed by both parties."

We shut down all the doors and windows and spent the rest of the night awake. Mom fell asleep around the morning. Aunt Rafia tried her best but could not take Uncle Ahmed back to bed. He continued to pace briskly up and down the corridor.

Chapter 12

Around the first week of August 1971, Dad finally got a family quarter in the town of Chaman, located in the province of Baluchistan. The few Bengali doctors who worked in Pakistan continued to perform their jobs quietly. The impact of the war wasn't that apparent yet. The news media in West Pakistan took every attempt to describe it as lightly and incorrectly as possible. They portrayed it as a conspiracy of India and the Awami League. For the Bengali officers and soldiers posted in East Pakistan choosing a side was an easy decision to make. However, personnel who were posted in West Pakistan lived in fear and confusion. They had no way to leave and risked serious consequences if attempted. In a situation like this, their primary goal was to move their families to safety.

Once the house was ready to move in, Dad arranged for us to make the trip. Coincidentally we boarded the last PIA flight from Dhaka to Karachi in mid-August right before all flights got suspended due to the war. Four of us – Mom, Rushi, I, and Milky in Mom's lap with his eyes bulging out in utter amazement, left Bangladesh for a land completely unknown.

Uncle Ahmed had come to Dhaka with us to see us off. We stayed in a relative's house for a couple of days. Before boarding the plane Mom embraced Uncle Ahmed and wept quietly. Her sister and brother-in-law practically raised her. To her, they were more like parents. Uncle Ahmed wiped his eyes.

The flight to Karachi took much longer than usual as we had to fly via Ceylon. It didn't have permission to fly over India. The most frustrating part of the flight was Milky's non-stop howling, especially during take-off and landing as his ears probably got plugged. Fortunately, Dad was able to take a week off from work and came to Karachi to receive us. He smiled victoriously at our sight.

"How was the flight?" he asked Mom.

"How do you think it was?" Mom snapped. "Do you have any idea how stressful it can get traveling with these three monkeys?"

Dad smiled ear to ear and picked Milky up in his lap. Milky gave out a huge cry.

"He is our Dad!" We tried to explain to him in vain. He only stopped once Mom took him in her lap. From there he watched Dad with his big baby eyes.

"I couldn't have gone back to Dhaka even if I wanted to," Dad explained. "Government isn't allowing anybody to return now. Thank God that you could come. This was the last flight."

Ayesha Apa, one of our cousins, and her husband Jaman Bhai had come to the airport to receive us as well. Jaman Bhai was a government employee. They had been living in Karachi for a long time. We collected our luggage and made our way out of the airport. The first thing that caught my eye was the crowd. For most of my life, I had either lived in villages or

small towns. I was quite taken by the crammed streets and the assortment of vendors. Rushi who usually remained engaged with her useless dolls was also equally surprised. Only Milky didn't know the difference and cried his head off.

Jaman Bhai and Ayesha Apa lived in a small apartment but yet graciously welcomed us to stay with them for a few days. Dad hadn't yet had a chance to see Karachi. This was an attractive city and tourists flocked here from all over the world. It would be a mistake if we didn't take this opportunity to check the city out.

We stayed in Karachi for four days and visited numerous attractions, of which a couple stuck in my mind - the Clifton beach and the grave of Quaid-e-Azam.

Clifton Beach, situated by the Arabian Sea was not too far from the city. The beautiful sand extended far away. There was an aquarium and a facility that offered visitors camel and horse rides for a fee. This was a place where many city dwellers came to escape from the crowded Karachi to get some fresh air and relax in the soft sand.

This was my first visit to a sea beach. I was speechless at the beauty of the surroundings – the long sandy beach looked the most beautiful thing in the world as the blue waves of the Arabian Sea constantly broke against it and slowly but softly touched my bare feet with its cool, pleasing touch. I had earlier followed the steps of Dad and hung my shoes on my shoulder after tying them together with shoestrings. Mom stayed out of the reach of the waves with Milky. I walked over the sand along the shoreline with my feet making clear prints on the soft sand. Rushi followed me from a safe distance. I waved at her to join me but she didn't come. Mom was calling me back. I unwillingly returned. There was no good in agitating her. I also wanted to check out the Aquarium.

The aquarium was located in a building close to the beach. It consisted of several large tanks of different sizes housing many varieties of saltwater fishes and giant turtles. This was an amazing experience for all of us. This was Mom's first as well and she showed equal excitement as the kids. Milky who never did anything but cry had also remained calm and watched the strange animals. I was quite taken by the sharks on display. I had read so many stories about them. They had razor-sharp teeth and could neatly cut off limbs from a human body. As they swam in circles with their slick bodies I watched them in pure awe and possibly some apprehension. Later Dad had to pull me away from there.

Next, we went to ride the camels and horses. Mom had a long-time desire to ride a horse. She had read stories about Rajia Sultana since a kid, the Indian princess who fought battles riding a horse along with male soldiers. I heard in the old days there were many horses back in our villages. During his youth, Mom's father had several horses. Once he became a family man he had gotten rid of that expensive hobby.

Mom passed on Milky to Dad's lap and went to ride a horse. After quite a bit of struggle she finally made it on the horse's back but as soon as the animal started to move her face turned white as paper. "I am going to fall! I am going to fall!" she screamed in panic.

The Urdu-speaking horse owner tried to calm her down with his comforting smile and soft words but that didn't do any good. She continued to scream, begging to be relieved from this predicament. Even Rushi burst into a giggle. Once taken down Mom was so re-

lieved that she sat right on the sand. We all laughed at her. Little Milky joined us too without knowing what was all the fuss about.

I was more interested in climbing on a camel. I expressed that to Dad who took me to the camel owner. He had the camel sit on the ground and helped me on its back. As it slowly stood up I jammed. From the ground, it didn't seem like the animal was that tall. Falling from its back was going to be pretty painful. I held on to the saddle hard. The camel walked slowly. With every step it took its back moved heavily, making me think that I was about to slip down. Overall a thrilling experience. After getting down I labored to look normal though inside I was quite relieved. Any display of weakness would allow Mom and Rushi to tease me. Dad climbed both the horse and the camel. No amount of pleading worked with Rushi. She had no interest in riding anything living. She stayed with Mom, holding one end of her saree.

The grave of Quaid-e-Azam was quite amazing as well. Everything was so neat and shiny! Quaid-e-Azam Mohammed Ali Jinnah was the founder of Pakistan. After Second World War the British emperor decided to free India. During that tumultuous time, he worked with Gandhi to create a separate nation for the Muslims apart from India. West and East Pakistan were the regions where most Muslims lived, hence these two parts constituted one Pakistan. I read some in the book and heard the rest from Dad. Currently, the war that broke down was between East and West Pakistan. Dad had already explained to me why East Pakistan was trying to separate. The central government of Pakistan had been acting as an authoritarian entity toward the East part since the very beginning. He made no reservation expressing to me his desire to leave Pakistan but unfortunately, he was helpless for the time being.

We were to make the journey to Quetta from Karachi on a train. It was supposed to be a day-long trip. From there we would be heading for Chaman - another seven-hour train trip. We planned to stay overnight in Quetta. Dad had a few acquaintances in the Quetta cantonment who he wanted to meet. We would get some rest as well.

Our train started one beautiful sunny morning. When I was a little kid I had ridden in trains but I could barely remember. After arriving at the train station just watching this long snake-like giant machine with lined-up compartments and big steel wheels Rushi and I both were quite astounded. We gave our constant bickerings a break and joined forces to count the compartments. We couldn't finish counting them all as Dad called us back when he noticed we were drifting too far away. Milky seemed to be very keen to share our joy as well. He threw his hands and legs in the air and struggled with Mom to slip down from her lap onto the platform.

The train departed a little later. We received tickets for first class and were very happy getting our own little room, especially Mom. She had to feed Milky and didn't feel comfortable doing it in public. Ignoring repeated requests from our parents Rushi and I stuck our heads out of the windows as far as we could and watched the long train wiggle forward like a snake. There was nothing compared to the beauty of that view. And the constant sound of the wheels rolling and the whistles blowing ... chuga chuga chuga chuga choo choo ..., it felt like we were heading toward a land of dreams riding on a mythical animal. Our excitement

must have annoyed Mom because she bitterly said, "Why are you kids so happy? Who knows which cave are we heading to?"

The word *cave* increased our excitement even further. If we were really going to live in a cave that wouldn't be too bad at all! The hope of something so bizarre happening disappeared soon. Dad chuckled. "Just because we are going in a rocky region doesn't mean we'll be living in caves."

"We'll see about that," Mom shot back. "I heard only mountain people live there and it's very cold. How am I going to live there with this baby?"

"We'll be living inside the cantonment," Dad reassured her. "People are very friendly."

Mom didn't look happy. Dad left her alone and took the time to answer some of my questions about our destinations and the people who lived there. Pretty soon I learned quite a bit about Quetta.

Quetta was the capital of the province named Baluchistan. The town was located in the proximity of Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan borders close to the impenetrable Bolan Pass. 5500 feet above sea level it was surrounded by mountains. Each of these mountains had beautiful names – Chiltan, Takatu, Mordar, Jarghun. Due to its location, it became the most significant military base in the whole of Pakistan. It was about five hundred fifty miles away from Karachi, about seven hundred and fifty miles from Lahore, and about a thousand miles from Peshawar. The name Quetta came from the Pashtu word 'Quetta' which meant castle. In reality, due to its mountainous location, it did enjoy a castle-like advantage. During the eleventh century after King Mahmud of Ghazni occupied Quetta its reputation increased manifold. In the year 1543 Mogul Emperor Humayun stopped here to rest on his way back from Persia. When he left he arranged for his one-year-old son Akbar to stay here. Akbar lived here for the next couple of years. Humayun later came back to take him back with him. Moguls ruled Quetta until 1556. After that, it was conquered by the Persians. Later in 1595, Akbar conquered it back from them.

In 1839 during the Afghan war, the town temporarily went under the rule of the British who succeeded in strengthening their foothold here. After the division of India, the population here increased drastically mainly because of the military base and the massive commercialized cultivation projects. Unfortunately on 31st May 1935, the populous town was almost destroyed owing to a devastating earthquake. Forty thousand people had met their ends. From that land of the dead, the town slowly rose back again. But this time the town was built much simplistically keeping in mind the future possibility of more earthquakes.

I didn't know when I had fallen asleep listening to Dad. When I woke up I found the train stopped at a station. All of us climbed down on the platform. As I ran along the length of the train Rushi also joined me. This was something new. Most times I couldn't get her to do anything with me, not even by pleading. We ran to the end. Dad and Mom allowed us as there were only a handful of people in the station and we were never out of their sight. We ran our way back as well. Rushi was gasping for air midway. I waited for her to catch her breath. It was a great pleasure to see that she was finally starting to see how much fun there was beyond her stupid dolls. I could not tolerate those dolls. Though Mom always used to

say that as a little boy, I frequently played with dolls when in the company of Rani Apa. What a bloody shame!

The train departed again. Clickity clack, clickity clack... the usual melody followed us along the way. Rushi went back to sleep tiredly. Milky was observing me with his big black eyes. I smiled at him. "When we grow up we'll become good friends, remember that." I thought. He seemed to know what I was thinking because he smiled back. At that moment we two brothers built a bridge that would never break in our lifetime. Nobody else noticed what had just happened. Dad was reading, and Mom trying to sleep. I looked out through the window. The heat of the sun was decreasing slowly. The soft rays of the afternoon sun flooded nature with affection. Slowly the pattern of the land was changing as well. There were fewer and fewer trees, and more barren, dry land. Dad mentioned that Baluchistan was desert-like, mountainous; not like the province Sindh which was green with an abundance of plants. Karachi was in Sindh. All my life I had spent in the naturally beautiful Bangladesh where the sky was deep blue and the ground was amazingly green. The love and affection that I had for greeneries would never go away but deep inside me I also felt this mysterious call of the desert, the mountains. The rough and the mystic land waved at me as if to say, "Come, Khoka, come." I stuck my head out of the window. Where are you? How far? When would I see you? The long train ran faster and faster as it buzzed into my ears, "Almost there, almost there." As more and more hills popped up in the views I eagerly tried to look beyond them, my whole body shivered in anticipation of the ensuing new world. How far are you?

The closer we got to Quetta the landscape continually turned more and more rugged. Our train rolled up, scaling the steep slopes of stony mountains. An additional engine was attached to strengthen its power needed for the journey uphill. The sound of its rhythmic movement echoed in the ridges ... Clickity clack, clickity-clack. Clickity clack, clickity clack. I listened to that sound with all my heart. It felt as if we were going on this impossible mission through the beautiful but dangerous land around us. The further we went the denser the mystery turned. The best parts were the tunnels. As the train passed through an assortment of tunnels, small to big, everything turned completely dark. Suddenly the sound of the wheels increased manifold, almost hurting the ears. The pitch-black darkness along with the loud reverberating echoes made me shiver in excitement. My hair stood up in anticipation every time we approached a tunnel. Rushi must have felt the same way because she held my hand tightly as we peeked through the window into the darkness. Moments after we passed through it the darkness would blend into the shining sun, blinding us with a flash of brightness.

"What are you kids watching?" Mom inquired, finding us glued to the window.

Rushi was three but had a pathetic vocabulary. "Mountains. Big mountains." The answer miraculously came from her.

"What's so interesting about mountains? They all look the same," Mom muttered.

I didn't try to explain this to her. She had no heart for all these natural stuff – mountains, rivers, creeks. All she did was drive us mad to either eat or sleep and be bossy all the time. Dad was sleeping in a bunker. He had gone through this route a few times. His interest

in nature wasn't too bad but repeat trips could take away the thrill – I concluded. "Tullen, tullen," Rushi excitedly said to Mom. She still had issues with 'l' and 'n'. My attempts to correct her usually met with frantic objections and denials hence I stopped trying. Someday she would figure it out, I hoped.

I didn't realize when I fell asleep. At the first light of the morning, I jumped out of my bed. The deep red sun rising at the backdrop of the blue sky and the riffs were a mind-blowing view. This was my first trip to the mountains. Mesmerized I observed how a new day embraced this rough, rocky land with the rays glittering between the occasional tree leaves and meandering narrow streams. I watched with all my heart and listened with all my soul as the train continued in its journey – rugged land, barren desert, rugged land, barren desert..."

Thanks to Dad I was already familiar with Nazrul's work, one of the most prolific writers of the Bengali language. In these unique surroundings snippets of his writings came to me naturally.

*Rugged land, barren desert, a distance hard to pass,
Conquer we must, sailing in the dark after nightfall,
Watch out, comrades!*

...What could be more thrilling and interesting than this journey?

After twenty-four hours on the train, we finally reached Quetta. Here we were to stay a day in one of Dad's friends' house. Then we would start for Chaman, another seven hours of the train. Chaman was located almost next to the border with Afghanistan. We would be going through the famous Khojak Pass. I was enjoying the train trip so much that I didn't want to get off in Quetta. Anyway, that night we stayed in the house of Captain Bajlur. His wife Saleha was very nice. They cordially welcomed us into their house and treated us like royals. Their only son Moti quickly became my friend. He was about the same age as me and we played together for a long time, mostly running around in the house. Rushi also joined us. Usually, I would have discouraged her but we had made some sort of connection on the train. She had proven to me that she could be a lot of fun if she wanted to.

In the afternoon we went to the bazaar situated on Jinnah Road. The place was crowded with Pathans wearing their usual headdressing (pagri) and the Beluchi hawkers wearing hand-designed red hats. The local mountain women covered in colorful dresses were selling clothes with flashy designs and sequence work. There wasn't a thing that one wouldn't find there. From handicrafts to fur coats, shoes, and sandals, Afghani mats, colorful decorative stones, all kinds of fruits, nuts, pistachios, etc. We purchased some food. Rushi wanted to buy a small shawl made for kids. Dad didn't have much money left and had to pass. At her tender age, how would Rushi know all the complexity of money? She shed some tears in protest. I liked a pair of mountain shoes but didn't even dare to bring it up to Dad's attention.

Later at night, the adults chatted until very late. After the long train trip, Milky must have been very tired because he slept like a rock which gave Mom some time to relax. Rushi

was still sad about that shawl and cried to sleep. Moti and I played mock shooting games for a while. After we broke a water glass the parents interrupted and forced us to bed.

The next morning we hopped in on another train. I felt a little sad saying goodbye to Moti. Coming so far from the familiar land and making a friend on such short notice wasn't a regular thing. I invited him to visit us in Chaman before climbing up into our compartment. His parents repeatedly mentioned that they would visit us at the first chance they got. A little later our train moved ahead leaving the three of them behind on the station.

Rugged land, barren desert... Clickity clack... Rugged land, barren desert...The feeling of shivering returned. Such a wonderful feeling I felt only when I walked on the dusty roads of my village. Memories of Grandpa, Grandma, Great-grandma, Rani Apa, Minu Apa, and many others flashed before my eyes. I wondered how they were all doing. The war was going on in full force, people were dying. I heard my Dad discussing it with Captain Bajlur. They had to be very careful. Even a slight suspicion of treason could be the cause of court-martial. There was no chance for any of them to join the independence war of Bangladesh from here. Their only option was to wait for the right moment. Low-ranked officers and ordinary soldiers were yet to show any disrespect to them but there was no telling that the situation won't change. Nobody wanted to put their families in a dire situation. In public, they restrained themselves from showing any interest in the ongoing war. There was no reason to make anybody suspicious.

The train continued its journey through the elevations. I heard that the trip to Chaman was even more thrilling than that to Quetta. The reason was not difficult to see. This was a mountainous terrain with tall peaks and ridges. Kandahar wasn't too far from here. The biggest attraction and the most thrilling part of this train trip was the Khojak Pass tunnel. Located about 7500 feet above the ground this tunnel was 3.2 miles long and ended in the Pakistan Railway Terminal in Chaman. Dad informed me that it was the longest tunnel in South Asia, a wonderful specimen of an engineering marvel. The work started around the end of the eighteenth century. The tunnel was dug simultaneously from two ends of the mountain body and was supposed to meet halfway down. However, in reality, things didn't go as planned and the story went that the engineer who was in charge tried to commit suicide. Later a solution was found and the tunnel was opened for use in 1892.

Rushi and I eagerly waited for the Khojak Pass tunnel. We had been going through numerous small tunnels but after hearing about the giant nothing else impressed us anymore. In his attempt to keep us occupied Dad started to talk about the rock formations that surrounded us. Thousands of years ago as a result of frequent earthquakes and volcanic eruptions various types of rocks were created in this part of Baluchistan. There was two main lava stream in this region – uh-uh and pa-hoy-hoy. The stones that looked like twisted ropes or the triangular boulders were all created from lava. Often they looked as if some artist un mindfully created such beautiful sculptures. Uh-uh and Pa-hoy-hoy the two words originated from Hawaiian. The stream of lava that contained triangular pieces is called uh-uh. Such lava streams could be as thick as 100 meters. On the other hand, Pa-hoy-hoy flowed smoothly and was only a meter thick. Besides the lava rocks, this region had its special look and feel, something one can only find here.

Finally, we entered the Khojak pass tunnel. Like a mythical monster from the magical world of imagination, our vehicle slithered its way into the dark world. Suddenly we discovered ourselves in a mysterious world submerged into eternal darkness. The monster's angry roars echoed again and again on to the walls of the cave until they slowly died off and new stronger echoes took their places. I was completely lost in this strange world of darkness, roars, and echoes. I stood with my eyes wide open, ears standing. Rushi stood by me holding the bottom of my shorts tightly. Mom was awake. She impatiently said, "How long is this thing? When is it going to end?"

Mom was afraid of darkness, especially if she was in a tight space. Milky slept in peace. He didn't even know what he missed. Maybe on our way back, he would be old enough to understand. Who knew when we could return?

The train moved slowly. Time seemed to stop in the underground world. "Watch out! Watch out! Watch out!" The monster made its way through the darkness cautiously. Finally, a flash of light popped up at the end of the tunnel. I let go of a deep breath, slowly, a little sad. Mom was relieved. "Finally! I can't stand tunnels."

Slowly we emerged out into the sun, leaving behind the mystic world.

Chaman was a small town but the cantonment was comparatively large. Dad was able to secure an officer's quarter - a spacious two-bedroom house. Mom liked it instantly. There weren't too many officers in this location. In total seven with two families from Bangladesh – Major Altaf and Major Jafor. Both of them were senior to Dad but they became good friends. Dad was the first doctor here. Aunt Nuri, Major Altaf's wife, was a very social person. She arrived with plenty of cooked food the first day we moved in there. With her came their two children – Roushan Bhai and Rushni Apa. They couldn't have been older than 14 and 12 respectively. Both were easygoing, and cheerful. They were very happy to have Rushi and me. They weren't having much of a good time in Chaman. They had no friends in there. There was no school either. As a result, whenever new kids came in they became excited. We liked both of them very much too. They lived just a couple of houses apart.

Major Jafor and his wife Aunt Asifa were on the quieter side. They had two sons – Bashar and Ratul. Bashar was a year older than me, Ratul was a year younger. It didn't take us too long to get going. However, I soon realized that Aunt Nuri and Aunt Asifa were not on the best of terms and the two families had limited social connections. After we moved in Mom invited both the families several times. We also joined them for dinners and other functions. It took considerable effort but eventually, the ice broke.

Chaman was located right next to the Afghanistan border. In this region besides Baluchis presence of Pashtuns was very prominent. They were very religious and independent-minded. Women didn't wear traditional burkha but wore all covering colorful clothes revealing their faces only. Men wore traditional loose pajamas, long kurta, and either Pagri or hat on their heads. Most of them were pretty big. The first local family that we got to know was Jahir Khan and his family.

Jahir was Beluchi. He was very poor and worked as a gardener in the cantonment. Even though civilians weren't supposed to live inside the cantonment an exception was made for him. The officers had arranged for him to stay inside the cantonment near the of-

ficer's quarters. It was an old brick building where Jahir lived with his wife Fatima, his mother, and a mentally unstable brother Amir Khan. He was mild in manners and shy with words. He worked quietly. Their house couldn't have been more than a quarter of a mile away from where we lived. Bashar, Ratul, and I went down there quite frequently. Fatima had no children. She seemed pretty young. She liked us very much. To earn some extra money she used to work with her mother-in-law, sewing clothes in colorful designs with sequences and selling them. Many of the officer's wives bought those. Some they sold in the market. She was very affectionate to us.

"How are you boys today?" would be the first thing she said when we visited.

Next, she would quickly bring out some lozenges from a glass container and distribute them among us. Cheap stuff but tasted delicious. Three of us fought for those. However, besides Fatima, we had another reason to visit Jahir's house. It was Amir Khan. Right in the middle of the front yard of the house, Amir was digging a deep hole. He used to spend most of his time during the day digging. It was close to 10 feet deep and going deeper. Untrimmed beard and layered in dirt Amir continued to work with his shovel hour after hour. We stood by the hole and watched him with deadly curiosity. He never really cared about our presence. Still, Fatima would always caution us, "Not a word. When mad he can be dangerous."

After such a warning, we would take a step back. We wondered how he might have lost his mind at such a young age. Jahir's mother was old but very nice. Like Fatima, she enjoyed our presence as well. Sometimes she would even tell us stories. We learned from her that since his childhood Amir had been suffering from an untreatable disease. There was no good physician in the area. Even if there was they probably wouldn't be able to afford his service. She was very much worried about Amir. A few years back when her husband died he had instructed Jahir to look after his brother. It was a big burden on Jahir yet he did his best. He even took him to local doctors a few times who practiced traditional medicine but they couldn't provide any treatment. The old woman wanted to get him married but wondered where would she find a girl who would agree to marry her crazy son.

It could get pretty cold in Chaman, especially in December, we learned. At the end of August, the weather was comfortable, especially for the kids. We ran all around the cantonment area. Sometimes we even allowed Rushi to join us. One day she did something very unusual. She went for a mid-afternoon stroll or something like that on her own. When Mom didn't find her anywhere she could think of, she panicked. I was alarmed too. Rushi was very fearful and rarely went too far from home. Bashar, Ratul, and I joined Mom in looking for her, even when Dad came back from work. Finally, we found her in Jahir's house. It was Fatima who waved me in. Stepping inside I saw Rushi sitting comfortably on the ground chewing on a loaf of thick wheat bread. Mom, a total wreck by now, was running all over the place with Milky in her lap. Once I gave her the message she sighed in relief and followed me to Jahir's house. At the sight of Rushi, she couldn't stop the tears of joy that rolled down her cheek. Rushi however foolishly kept on smiling.

She suffered a stomach upset that very night. The flatbread that the locals made at home was delicious but I guess it was too much for the tender stomach of Rushi. She had to

be on bed rest for the next couple of days. This incident did bring some good for Mom. She met Fatima who with her friendly and cheerful manners quickly won over her. Soon she started to pick up sequence and bid works and knitting wools from Fatima. I found myself fascinated with knitting and helped Mom during my leisurely times, acquiring some expertise soon, especially knitting woolen strings. This was done using a wooden block with a hole in the middle and four nails placed apart at an equal distance around the hole. The technique was to continue to wrap the wool around the nails at the top and have the string grow down the hole. Mom knitted a hat for Milky for the ensuing winter and I knitted the string for it.

In this far borderland, people were aware of the ongoing independence war of Bangladesh but they didn't have much reason to become too much concerned. Dad listened to B.B.C. and other media like that and tried to understand the current situation. Sometimes he would get together with Uncles Altaf and Jafor and discuss quietly. From hearing pieces of talks what I understood was that the war was moving ahead in full force. The freedom fighters of Bangladesh were vehemently resisting the Pakistani army's aggression. They had better success near the Indian borders. India had strengthened its assistance toward Bangladesh. Pakistan had also increased its number of soldiers in the war zone. In various border areas, they were exchanging shots with the Indian army. Nobody knew which way the war was going. I quietly prayed with all my heart so that nobody in Khulna and villages was hurt. I worried about Rani Apa. I wondered if worthless Bashir would try to harm her in any way.

Dad's winter military exercise started in September and continued until the end of November. One morning he bid us byes and went along the border to another part of Baluchistan with his unit. Mom cried a lot. I was quite sad as well. Dad won't be coming back for a while. Before leaving he took me into his arms and said, "Take care of your Mom. She won't be able to handle both Rushi and Milky alone. You must give her a hand."

This new responsibility enhanced my sense of pride by manifold. I nodded seriously. Uncles Altaf and Jafor also went away for winter exercise. I won't lie, after that, our life felt a lot freer. Especially because Mom truly became so engaged in managing both Rushi and Milky that she would barely have time or desire left to give me a hard time. At every opportunity, I grouped up with Bashar and Ratul and drifted into the surrounding areas. We would also party with Roushon Bhai and Rushni Apa. Roushon Bhai taught us a few card games. We played them whenever we got together. I tried my best to keep it a secret from Mom. Playing cards wasn't considered an acceptable activity for kids and she might tell Dad when he returned. I didn't want any unnecessary trouble.

In October we heard that the freedom fighters had increased their resistance by manifold. Pakistan also increased its military presence to 80 thousand. India hadn't joined the war directly but did everything to assist the freedom fighters who had their major camps in Tripura, Assam, and West Bengal. Refugees from the war-affected country continued to flood bordering India. Suddenly Pakistan army decided to send the Infantry battalion located in Chaman to Mirpur Khash, located in Sindh, near the border of Rajasthan, India. Dad was ordered to go with this battalion to cover medical needs. Before leaving for Mirpur Khash he came home for a short visit. Mom was devastated by the news and became sick. Dad had to put her on saline. Thankfully Aunts Nori and Asifa volunteered to take care of Milky and

Rushi during this challenging time. Bedridden and tearful Mom kept on asking, "Why are they sending you to war?"

"I am a doctor," Dad would explain patiently. "They are not sending me to war. I'll be going with the soldiers just to cover them medically. After we reach there, I'll come back. Why are you so worried?"

Mom didn't find much consolation. She continued to shed tears even after Dad left. Rushi joined her sometime as usual. However, to everybody's surprise, Milky remained in good spirits, smiling and giggling throughout the entire family crisis.

Dad's battalion moved ahead in a long caravan. It took them five days to reach Mirpur Khash. The trip went without any incidents. After reaching there, Dad was asked to find his unit. Dad was a member of the 31st field ambulance. Fortunately, his unit was nearby with another battalion. He joined them and stayed in Mirpur Khash until the next instruction came. In the meantime, the army decided to move all the families from Chaman to Quetta. Several of the families including us packed up and moved in army vehicles. We had no contact with Dad in between. But we were told that all the officers who were away on duty would meet us in Quetta when they were released from their duties. Mom could barely wait. She stayed on the prayer mat for most of the day.

We were given housing inside Quetta Cantonment – a spacious house with two units. Roushon Bhai and his family occupied the unit attached to ours. Ratul's family got a house far from us.

Chapter 13

I fell in love with our new home very quickly. While the house was great – spacious and everything, that wasn't the main reason for my excitement. It was the yards that I loved. The big orchard in the front yard consisted of all kinds of fruit trees including apples, peaches, apricots, grapes, and pears. There was a rose garden on one side of the house. The apple trees were just flowering. I spent most of my time in the gardens, checking out the trees, and taking mental notes on their conditions. They became my new friends. The apricot tree was quite large which I learned to scale. Rushni Apa liked apricots. To ensure her continuous affection I filled up my pockets with apricots and delivered half of that to her. Mom liked apricots too. The other half went to her. But she was scared to let me climb trees. However, once I showed her my newly earned skill she was pretty impressed.

Two long grapevines climbed onto our high boundary walls. Those were flowering as well. Rushi and I made time to examine them regularly. I never dreamt of having a house with so many trees in this exotic land. Very soon I forgot about losing Bashar and Ratul.

At the end of November, Dad had an opportunity to visit us in Quetta. He liked the house as well. Most of his life was spent in the villages. Greeneries moved him too. We had a large yard inside the boundary wall as well. During his short stay, he prepared the soil planted several pumpkin plants, and sprinkled radish seeds. He heard from the locals that the earth here was good for pumpkins. It fell on my shoulder to water the plants and seeds and uproot the weeds. I loved gardening and spent a large portion of my day either in the vegetable garden or in the orchard. Rushi would give me a hand sometimes too, depending on how she felt on a particular day. Milky had just turned five months. He kept all of us entertained with his baby talks. Lately, he had been trying to crawl but no matter how much effort he put he wasn't going anywhere with his puffy body. He seemed to patronize me quite a bit, smiling whenever I came into his view. When the time came for Dad to leave even he seemed a little sad. He held Milky a little longer than usual but didn't say anything. He left in an army vehicle. We walked behind the vehicle up to the main road. It was already getting a little cold. Seeing Milky shivering inside Mom's lap we quickly returned home.

On December 3rd Pakistan abruptly attacked India by air on the ground that the latter was providing unwanted assistance to East Pakistan. The very next day Indian government decided to send an army to help East Pakistan. Until then prime minister of India Indira Gandhi had been hesitating to formally approve the war. This attack made her job simpler. The initial air attack that Pakistan conducted was unable to do much damage to India. Very soon they took control of the air. The army that India ended up sending to Bangladesh consisted of nine infantry divisions with armor units and arms units. They were divided into five branches and moved through Bangladesh very quickly. Their primary target was to reach Dhaka, the capital of East Pakistan. On the way, they avoided the small strongholds of the Pakistani armies.

In this journey, their primary help came from the innumerable units of freedom fighters who engaged the Pakistani army units in small, consuming battles all over the country. Four of the army divisions belonging to Pakistan initially resisted the advance of the Indian army strongly but eventually, they started to break down. All the supply routes and escape routes choked they had no other option but to surrender. On December 16th Dhaka fell.

Commander of Pakistani army Lieutenant General A.A.K.Niazi surrendered to the Commander of the joined forces of the Indian army and the freedom fighters of Bangladesh Lieutenant General J.S.Arora. On the Western front, the war that had been initiated between India and Pakistan didn't give any edge to Pakistan either.

In the news of independence, the Bangladeshi community here became overwhelmed. Everybody was hoping to return home soon. Dad returned from the battlefield almost immediately. There was no talk of getting us back to Bangladesh yet but having Dad back made our lives pretty happy. Dad and I joined forces to clean our vegetable garden of weeds that grew abundant despite all my efforts to stop their spread. The pumpkin plants had started to flower. The earth was undoubtedly very fertile. In the apple garden, the apple buds were turning into small apples. I made it my daily routine to walk around the garden and check on every tree. Rushi would accompany me most days. She had been showing unusual interest in nature since we moved in here.

Most of us hoped to return home without much delay. Such thoughts brought both happy and sad feelings to me. I was happy because it would allow me to see my relatives back home. The sadness came from the fact that I had already become so attached to the gardens and the trees that I would miss them very much. If we had to leave too quickly we wouldn't be able to see the apples grow or the pumpkins. Some people had already been questioning my sanity noticing my devotion to those plants.

One day all soldiers and officers were called in a meeting in the Camp Coulee which was part of the Quetta cantonment. Everybody was asked whether they desired to stay back in Pakistan or return to Bangladesh. A handful of men had married Pakistani women who opted to stay in Pakistan, the rest eagerly wanted to return. Pakistan's government confirmed that everybody would return home though the schedule was not yet fixed. When Pakistan surrendered India took about 75000 soldiers as prisoners. Pakistan was trying to use the expatriate Bangladeshi soldiers and officers to bring back some of those prisoners. At this news, Mom again started to cry. Honestly, I was sort of happy. This would give me a few months. It was decided that everybody would continue to live in their current abode but the men would have to show up in an assembly once every day. The government didn't want anybody to escape.

December in Quetta was cold. Hail and snow both were possibilities. We started to feel the coolness to some extent. Every night three of us siblings took a bath in water that was warmed up using a small dip in heaters. After the bath Mom would quickly wipe us dry, help us put on nightdresses, and send us to the bed under the warm waiting blankets. Milky was about six months old and was a lot of fun. His excitement increased considerably at my sight, especially when I would open the front or back door and allow him to crawl out into the yard. Sometimes I carefully picked him up in my lap and took him around the gardens. Mom didn't feel very comfortable about it fearing I might drop him. But Milky liked it so much that she was hesitant to stop me from doing it. Rushi often struggled to pick Milky up in her lap but she was so skinny that it was out of the question. One time in her request I had put Milky on her lap. After just two shaky steps she fell on the ground with Milky rolling on her. Not sure where she was hurt but she did cry for a while. The good part was Milky had a blast in the process and giggled unstopped. Rushni Apa and Roushan Bhai both were big fans

of Milky. Rushni Apa took Milky with her on her frequent social trips into the neighborhood. She met a few girls of her age in the area. Milky soon became very fond of her. We were blessed having the two siblings and enjoyed all the affection and indulgence we received from them.

Amid all this one day I ended up doing something very undesirable. I had accompanied Dad to the local store. It was night and the store did not have very bright lights. When Dad was busy purchasing essentials I observed the glass cases where various sweets were neatly arranged for display on ceramic plates. They looked so tempting that at one opportunity I picked one up and put it in my mouth. However, soon I remembered Dad had mentioned to me not to eat anything from a store without paying for it first. I was in trouble. I could neither chew it nor take it out, both of which were risky as either one Dad or the store owner might notice it. I placed the sweet in one corner of my mouth and stood innocently. I noticed the store owner smiling at me. I acted as if I had no clue. Anyway, Dad eventually noticed the bulge in my mouth. "What is it in your mouth, Khoka?" he asked.

I kept quiet, naturally. The store owner laughed. "Don't worry about it. He is just a kid, got tempted."

Dad was mad. "If you wanted sweet why didn't you ask me? Throw it out."

I threw it out. Dad bought some sweets to take back home with us. On our way back I looked down the entire path. Even I didn't know why I had done something so foolish. Dad remained grave. He was a man of principle and never took such lapses very well.

As we approached our house I muttered, "I'll never do it again. They looked too good."

"That was stealing. Do not ever do it again. Are you going to remember that?"

I nodded. After reaching home I ate half of the sweets. "Why are you eating so many sweets?" Mom inquired. "You already have too many cavities."

I didn't respond to her. Luckily Dad did not tell her about the incident in the store. It saved me from a lot of agonies. If she heard about it she would have made my life miserable for months bringing it up in every possible opportunity.

Almost before our eyes, the pumpkins continued to grow larger and larger into sort of giants and the radishes became thicker and longer with the green leaves growing taller. This practically wiped out any doubt that we might have had about the fertility of the land here. The question now was what to do with all that harvest. We ate and distributed in the neighborhood but there was still much left.

The apples grew slowly but steadily. A few more days and they would ripen into delicious fruits. I tried out a few but they were still very green and tasted sour. The trees were mostly medium in size but they bore so many fruits that the branches leaned toward the ground. I couldn't help but wonder what we would do with so many apples.

God must have taken my worries too seriously because a few days later suddenly one night there was a big hailstorm. I could barely sleep that night worrying about the apples. The hails would either detach the fruits or damage them. The next morning as soon as I

woke up I ran to the apple garden along with my Dad. We walked around to check on all the trees. The damage was far more than what I had anticipated. There was not a single apple that wasn't damaged. If we left them in the trees they would eventually rot. We decided to harvest all of them. Mom knew how to make good jelly.

For the rest of the day, we filled out bushels with apples and carried them inside the house. The ones that we couldn't reach from the ground I quickly climbed up the trees and picked them up. Watching me running around busily Milky got excited and tried to follow me into the garden on four. Mom picked him up, ending his adventurous expedition. He screamed and cried in vain. Rushni Apa, Roushon Bhai, and their parents joined us in the garden as well. It turned out to be something like a festival. For the next few days, Mom cut the apples, separated the white flesh, and boiled them in large pots. The whole place smelled strange, not something very pleasant. Later she mixed up the broth with sugar and continued to heat it until emitted the appetizing smell of jelly. Later the jelly was poured into containers of all kinds and shapes. After distributing half of them what remained even that was enough for a year.

A new problem popped up at the beginning of January. A few Bangladeshi officers had escaped from another region. Pakistan's government didn't like that. They took the precaution to ensure that the folks who were staying in Quetta did not try anything foolish. Soon all the officers and their families were moved to Hotel Jiltan located inside the cantonment which was used to host officers who came for training and the soldiers and their families were taken to Camp Coulie. Each of the officer's family was assigned a suite. Moving to a small hotel suite and leaving behind such a beautiful house and garden made me very sad. The suite had two rooms with a small kitchen and a balcony. We were told that this arrangement was very temporary. Soon the government would move us all to another unspecified place. All together we were a few hundred families. The new place would have to be big enough to hold all of us.

Once the initial shock was over we kind of started to like it in the hotel, especially me, after realizing that this allowed me to get together with Bashar, Ratul, and Moti again. We were also delighted to find out that there were at least seven other boys of our age in the camp. Our lives became exciting again. We packed up and played as long as we wanted. There was no schooling and very little studies. Just play, play, and play. The adults weren't having a bad time either, especially the Dads. They still had to attend the daily roll call but after that, they were free to do whatever they wanted. There was a field in front of the hotel with a volleyball ground at its center. Soon the men teamed up and started to play volleyball in the afternoons. The women gathered on the front balconies to either watch the men and kids play or just chat with each other. There was undeniably some advantage of living in such a close community.

Since coming to West Pakistan I haven't seen such festive mode. We kids also copied the elders and tried to come up with our own sport experimenting with soccer, cricket, and hockey. Unfortunately, there wasn't enough space, and none of the games stuck. Finally, we got creative and collectively came up with the one deadly solution that everybody readily agreed to - the war games. We divided into two groups with Bashar, Ratul, Moti, Ranju, Ovi,

and I in one team and Tanna, Mishon, Mijan, Aman, Joti, and Roni in the other. A few girls tried to join us but were not allowed. They tend to get tired quickly and are prone to start girlish conversations instead of battling them out. Nobody appreciated such childish behavior in a serious matter like a war. Our rifles were tree branches, rocks grenades, and a light post in front of the hotel became the war bell. The game started with several bangs on the light post – dong, dong, dong...and continued until one of the teams got tired or surrendered.

Every afternoon when men went to play volleyball, we got busy fighting mock battles. Often hours would pass and none of the teams would give up. We fired rat-a-tat-tat...dashed for shelter...hid behind the trees...dived inside holes in the ground...more rat-a-tat-tat...threw grenades...kaboom! Almost every day we had to be yelled at and forced into our homes, often by the ears. Soon we became skilled soldiers and knew all the hiding places in the hotel premises like the back of our hands. We also introduced battle plans and spent hours plotting strategies to beat our opponent. I was the self-proclaimed commander-in-chief of my team while Aman with his heavyset body easily became the chief of the other team. He was the only son of Uncle Syed and Aunt Misha and was slightly older than us. He was quieter and a little weird. Everybody avoided unnecessary encounters with him, fearing that getting into trouble with him couldn't be anything pleasant.

Mothers soon reigned in our freedom and drastically increased our study times. We were no longer allowed to go out in the mornings. As a result, we eagerly waited for the afternoons. Once the sun leaned toward the west and the day started to cool off slowly the men made their way out to the field in small groups, opening the door for us to go out. We bolted out at the first opportunity, competed among ourselves to bang the war bell ...dong...dong... dong... and got engaged in fierce battles ...screaming and shooting...running around like loose cannons.

I met Aman after moving to Hotel Jiltan. For reasons unclear to me, we didn't hit the right notes. We settled as rivals instead. When we came face to face we glared at each other and barely spoke. Since we started to play war games our relationship had deteriorated even further. Now when we saw each other we frowned. The conversations went something like this:

"Yesterday we won," Aman would gravely declare.

"Don't be silly. I killed all of you with my machinegun," I would disregard his claim with disgust.

"No way! I blew all of you with my bombs," he would insist, aggressively.

After such exchanges naturally the excitement ran high on the battlefield. None of us wanted to leave any doubt about the outcome. During the battles, I led my team through the battlefield attacking the enemy with spraying bullets rat-a-tat-tat...Aman's primary strategy was to hide behind the trees and throw bombs constantly. Initially, he threw mock bombs which quickly became small rocks. As the rivalry increased between us the size of the rocks grew bigger as well. It did not worry any of us. The more dangerous the enemy, the more was the fun. We dashed from shelter to shelter avoiding the rocks that Aman and his

team kept on throwing at us. When somehow we made it behind them without being detected a sudden 'Hands Up!' cleanly made us the winner.

After losing to me a few times Aman must have felt very embarrassed because he looked mad. I felt he was up to something but had no idea what mischief he was planning. One day as we fought out our regular battles I stuck to my usual strategy and hid in my favorite ditch while shooting relentlessly rat-a-tat-tat...The bullets were sprayed at such a rate that there was no question of any enemy soldiers approaching me, as they would be sure to get shot. However, today Aman broke the rule. He ignored all the shootings and bombings directed at him and walked straight to me with his assortments of rocks proxying for grenades.

"Aman you are dead," I screamed after spraying him with another round of deadly bullets. "Drop down."

"No, I am not dead," Aman shouted back stubbornly. "I am wearing a bulletproof vest."

Before I had an opportunity to object he started pelting rocks at me. I successfully avoided some by moving my head but was eventually hit by a large one in the middle of my forehead. It didn't hurt much but I saw blood gushing out. I knew I had a large cut. Dad was playing volleyball with his friends. I climbed out of the ditch and darted toward him. Aman had already disappeared. My father saw me from a distance and came running. He picked me up in his lap and ran toward our suit followed by some of my friends. He laid me down on a bed and stitched my cut. I had lost some blood and was feeling weak and drowsy. However, that didn't stop Mom from going nuts. "How many times did I tell you not to play that game? How about now? If you play it again I'll break your head myself."

My friends quickly disappeared fearing they might become her next target. Dad didn't return to play. He sat by me and took my temperature at regular intervals. Rushi parked herself at a safe distance and watched me cautiously. She had no stomach for blood. I called her several times but she did not attempt to move closer. Milky was the happiest. When I went out to play with my friends he stayed back with Mom, not something he appreciated. Now that I was stuck inside the home he spent most of his time crawling and drooling over me. His joy had lessened some of my pain.

Next few days I had to stay inside the house. Any attempt to step out met severe warnings and screaming from Mom. Bashar and Ratul had come to see me but terrified of Mom they didn't dare to knock on the door and left after waiting some time in the corridor. I could hear them whispering. Our war games had stopped. Everybody heard about the misdeed of Aman. His parents grounded him for three whole days.

"He should face court-martial," I demanded to Dad.

Dad smiled. "Both of you should face court-martial. There are so many sports and you guys have to play war games?"

I shrugged silently. How could I possibly explain to him how thrilling and exciting it was?

A few days later, one evening Aman's parents visited us along with him. They were kind and affectionate people. His mother brought me some homemade sweets. I devoured most of them. The best part came when they insisted on Aman to formally apologize to me. Aman put on a nasty frown on his face, stubbornly looked down, and muttered, "Sorry. I'll never do it again."

I expected more but anything from him was appreciated.

My parents ruled that until my cut completely healed I wouldn't be allowed to go out. As a result, I had to spend my afternoons on the balcony. Bashar, Ratul, Joti, Roni, and others played hide and seek. They didn't let Aman play with them for several days. Aman used to stand all by himself. After I urged Ratul he was allowed in. I thought after that we would become friends but in reality, he continued to hold a grudge against me.

A few days later, something happened that was way more serious than anything we kids ever did. It was another ordinary afternoon. Mom had gone to visit one of our neighbors taking Milky along with her. I was sitting on the balcony watching the usual activities on the ground. I wasn't yet allowed to go out of the suit. I saw some kids running around. A dozen or so men were playing volleyball. Dad was there as usual. He was one of the regulars. I had noticed that the men always had two teams with the same people who always played against each other. Captain Syed, Captain Bajlur, Major Jafor, and Captain Jolil were on my Dad's team. Major Altaf, Captain Sujon, Major Nayeem, Captain Ovi, and Captain Ranju made up the other team. It was a known fact that Captain Sujon had a short temper and got into arguments too often. However, things had never gone too far primarily because nobody wanted unnecessary trouble.

At one point during the game, Captain Sujon got agitated for some reason and started to scream at my father. Dad was generally a calm person but when provoked he wasn't someone to retreat. He protested and soon they were engaged in a full-fledged argument. Later I learned it all started with a line call. Dad insisted the ball was out, but Captain Sujon disagreed. Eventually, the argument turned into a scuffle between the two teams. At one point Captain Sujon pulled a knife out of his pocket and attacked Major Jafor. Fortunately, Major Altaf was able to stop him to avert a disaster. The sudden turn of events took everybody by surprise. Things had never gone this far before.

Several women rushed to the volleyball ground and pulled their husbands away. I saw Mom bolting across the field with Milky still in her lap. A few minutes later she returned with Dad, who still looked pretty mad, and vented some more from the balcony.

Things calmed down quickly but the effect of it hung around for a long time. The trouble in the volleyball ground impacted the families as well. Before we had a very warm relationship with Major Altaf's family. After that incident, it turned ice cold.

A few days later my stitches were taken off. There was a visible scar on the forehead, which I thought gave me something to be proud of. After all, it was from a battle wound, mock or not. That afternoon, back in the playground, I banged on the light post with a fist-sized rock dong...dong...dong...At first, a few of the boys came out curiously. Soon we called

out the rest, including Aman. We collectively agreed not to use any rocks and went back to our favorite battle games. The men also slowly returned to the volleyball ground after a few days, though Captain Sujon never showed up again.

At the end of January, the government decided to send us all to a prison camp in Fort Sandeman.

Chapter 14

The small town called Fort Sandeman was located in the valley of Jobe. The word Jobe meant a stream of water. The name reflected the fact that it was the source of the river Jobe. A part of Baluchistan, this region was on the north-east border of Pakistan and Afghanistan. This valley was famous for its mountainous geography and historical value in the whole of Pakistan. This valley began from Muslimbag, a place 7500 feet above sea level, and ended in Fort Sandeman, 10000 feet above sea level. The town was named after Sir Robert Sandeman who established the rule of the British Empire in this region. He was the political agent of the Governor-General of Baluchistan in 1890. This town was located about three hundred kilometers away from Quetta. (* Today it is called Jobe. On 1976 July 30th Zulfikar Ali Bhutto changed the name of Fort Sandeman to Jobe.)

We rode the train once again. Another memorable trip! We passed through mountain after mountain and tunnel after tunnel on our way to Fort Sandeman. It was surrounded by pine forests. We were placed inside the cantonment. There was inadequate officers' housing hence two families had to share the same house. Major Yunus's family and our family shared a two-bedroom house. Uncle Yunus had two sons – Tanna and Mijan. We were three siblings. It was very difficult for one family to live in just one room. Dad applied for new housing. He was informed that in the officer's housing, there was no other vacancy however in the GCO housing there was. Dad readily accepted it. We packed up again, bid farewell to Tanna and Mijan, and moved to the GCO quarter nearby. This house was also a two-bedroom unit but we had it all by ourselves. Dad and Mom sighed in relief. They occupied one room with Milky sleeping with them, Rushi and I took the other. We got our own beds. Rushi was a bad sleeper and continued to fall from his bed almost every night. Sometimes she managed to get back on the bed, some other mornings we found her curled up on the floor. This soon became a cherished joke among us. Milky had started to crawl. He looked very happy in the new house.

The in-row houses with slanted roofs were located next to the road with tall light posts that ran through the cantonment. The officer's quarter was only a few minutes' walk. I used to walk down there to play with Bashar and Ratul. Roushon Bhai and Rushni Apa's family got a specious house. I also visited them sometimes. Dad and Uncle Altaf still hadn't com-

pletely warmed up since the incident on the volleyball ground. However, that had no impact on us kids. Roushon Bhai and Rushni Apa frequently visited us.

Soon I made a shocking discovery - Aman's family moved into a house very close to ours. Since the cut, we played together but barely spoke. Being forced to apologize to me must have been very embarrassing to him because every time he saw me his face turned dark.

Since we moved to Fort Sandeman our war games were on hold primarily because it was winter here. This region could get pretty cold and heavy snowfall was a usual thing. We were from a tropical region, not accustomed to severe cold. Many of us suffer from colds and coughs regularly. Nevertheless, we bolted out at every opportunity we got. The temptation to play outdoors with friends was too strong to be held back by petty weather. On my regular visits to the Officer's quarters, I started to meet Aman on the way quite frequently. It didn't take me too long to figure out that Aman planned it that way. Against all odds, we soon became good friends though I had to take initiative. One day as he silently walked behind me to the officer's quarters keeping a short distance I stopped. "Let's be friends again," I proposed.

Aman twisted his lips and observed me thoughtfully. Finally, he nodded approvingly. We locked our pinkies and promised to be friends forever.

"My forehead is fine now," I said casually.

Aman smiled quietly. He wasn't very good with words but his smiles were meaningful. It told me that he was very happy.

The next afternoon it snowed a little. The rolling hills, slanted roofs, asphalt roads everything became covered in white snow. Mom had cautioned me earlier not to go out in that weather. I had nothing much to do and was quite bored at home. I wondered what Aman was doing. Mom was keeping a close eye fearing I might ignore her warning and slipped out of the house. Suddenly I heard a loud bang ...dong...dong...dong...somebody was using a rock to bang on the light post – the war bell! Mom heard that as well. "Step outside and I'll break your legs," she issued a stern warning.

Helpless and unhappy I stomped inside the house restlessly. Dad chuckled. "Let him go for a little bit. Don't go too far."

"You indulge him too much," Mom shot back. "He slips out as he wishes. Don't listen to anything I say."

I bolted out of the door before Dad changed his mind. Stepping out I got a pleasant surprise. All the boys from the officer's housing including Bashar and Ratul had come. Aman was diligently banging on a light post. We wasted no time. Two teams were formed quickly and the game started - once again. The only difference was this time Aman and I belonged to the same team. Pretty soon with our shouting and screaming, we shook up the neighborhood.

We didn't play every day. Sometimes Aman and I walked aimlessly in the surrounding areas. It became one of our favorite activities. Often we met the locals. They waived affectionately and sometimes made small conversations. Every time we went in a new direction.

Occasionally even Rushi joined us with her favorite doll in her lap. Many of the soldiers knew us. "Boys, don't go too far." They gravely warned. "Go back home before it's dark." We adhered to those rules anyway. First of all, getting back late would mean relentless scolding from Mom; secondly, both of us were more or less scared of darkness.

There was no school here. We were all being homeschooled. Dad and Mom suddenly started to push both Rushi and me harder. They feared that once we returned home we would find ourselves behind other kids of our age. This, of course, made our lives a bit difficult. I heard that the parents were pondering to start a temporary school inside the confinement for the expatriate Bangladeshis. Finding proper books and eligible teachers for the older kids could be difficult but getting something going for the younger kids like us was relatively easy. However, owing to various issues the school didn't materialize during the winter months. We were very excited about the school. Under normal conditions getting out of the house before the afternoon was hard for all of us. With the school open we could spend a major portion of the day away from the hawk eyes of our parents. None of us were too crazy about studying but we were ready to take it for some freedom.

In the meantime, Dad found a hafiz (a religious scholar) among the soldiers. He was in his mid-twenties and grew up in Khulna. He had memorized the Qur'an in its entirety. A cheerful person in nature he taught kids how to read Arabic and eventually the Qur'an. I liked him for his easygoing personality. His name was Mohammed Meher, we called him Meher Bhai. He called Mom aunt and quickly became an integral part of our family. He taught Rushi and me how to read Arabic. Rushi got stuck on the alphabet while I quickly passed through the intermediate stages and started to read the Qur'an. Though I didn't understand the meaning of the words I learned to read them very well. Meher Bhai tried to teach me how to recite Qur'an but I had no interest in that. All I wanted was to read the Qur'an to the end at least once and stun my friends many of whom were struggling to finish Ampara, the intermediary step.

Meher Bhai used to teach Bashir and Ratul Arabic as well and both were stuck in Ampara. He felt they were not paying much attention. I on the other hand continued to surprise him, according to him, with my hard work as I read through half of a chapter in one sitting, not a simple task for a novice reader by any means. What he didn't know was a little secret that worked like a steroid for me. My parents had promised me to arrange for a Milad Mehfil (a religious gathering) to celebrate my completion of the Qur'an where all my friends along with their families would be invited. Just the thought of everybody coming under the same roof to acknowledge one of my great accomplishments gave me great inspiration.

A few days later we received a letter from Grandpa. This was the first letter since independence. Grandpa wrote that they were safe and sound in the village. After the robbery attempt, things had been pretty quiet. The dacoits were never caught. Everybody was fine in maternal grandpa's house as well. Knowing my special concern he specifically mentioned Rani Apa. She could not go to Khulna and stayed back in the village during the war. The worthless Bashir joined a unit of freedom fighters and was killed in an operation. His death was sort of suspicious as nobody saw the dead body. Grandpa cast his doubt about him joining the war. Uncle Nawsher and his family were okay in Satkhira. They had suffered no damages. To his best knowledge, Aunt Rafia and Uncle Ahmed were doing just fine in Khulna.

We were all very much relieved, especially me. The news of Bashir dying came as a pleasant surprise. I had no doubt God was beating the hell out of him. That's what you get for eve-teasing. Dad and Mom arranged for a religious gathering where one or several persons would recite the Quran from start to end. Meher Bhai decided to recite it all alone throughout the day. As a Hafez he had the Quran memorized. The event created a big commotion in the kid's circle. How could anybody memorize such a large book when we had a tough time remembering tiny verses? Everybody came to see him reciting from memory. In the evening when the recitation was finally completed, Mom offered everybody her homemade sweet balls and jalebi. Her jalebi turned out reasonably good but the sweet balls often came out kind of hard. Today was no exception. However, everybody gorged on them anyway.

The winter passed by eventually. Here the summer was hot but not as humid which made it kind of bearable. Finally, after a lot of trouble, a school was established for the kids. There was a single-storied building near the officer's housing which was converted into the school. Initially, it started with only three grades – two, three, and four. Even though I had completed all the grade two books at home I had to be admitted in grade two because of my age. The only other student in my class was Ratul. The rest of the boys who came to attend the school were slightly older than the two of us. Most of them were put in grade three with a handful in grade four. This was the first time for me and Ratul in a school. We both loved it, especially the short recesses after every lesson. We all poured out in the field and kicked around a soccer ball until the call for the next lesson came.

In grade two our teacher was a young Pakistani woman named Nabihah Khan. She was very pretty and kept herself well. She spoke softly and smiled frequently. When she spoke both Ratul and I listened eagerly. We competed against each other to become her object of affection. We raced to finish our classwork ahead of others. Fortunately, I beat Ratul most of the time. When she smiled beautifully at me and said in her pleasant voice, "Good work Khoka!" my world became so much better. Sometimes if Ratul was sick I was sent to grade three. I hated those days. I wanted to be in Miss Nabihah's class. Eventually, Ratul and I learned to share this wonderful gift between us. Miss Nabihah must have guessed something fishy was going on noticing our constant nudges and whisperings because I found her chuckling now and then. Talk about embarrassment!

Time passed by in Fort Sandeman. While the kids had a considerably good time with school and sports the adults were more or less bored. My parents were anxious to go back home. How long could one remain stuck in a foreign land? I noticed Dad looked worried sometimes. The new prime minister of Bangladesh was Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. He returned to Bangladesh on 19th January 1972 after being released from the Pakistani prison. At first, he occupied the position of president but later resigned and accepted the position of prime minister. On 4th November of the same year, Bangladesh created its first constitution in the same form as British styled Indian constitution. All the news that we received gave us the impression that the situation in Bangladesh could take a while to settle down. Many freedom fighters did not give up their weapons after the independence. Many joined the Bangladesh army and occupied higher ranks too quickly. Dad and other officers who were stuck in

Pakistan feared that when they returned home they wouldn't get their fitting ranks. It was their misfortune that they became stuck in West Pakistan and did not have the opportunity to participate in the war for Bangladesh. They believed officers who were juniors to them would grab this opportunity to embarrass them. I could make out from his expressions that he was seriously pondering quitting the army once he returned home. However, returning to Bangladesh seemed a distant option. Pakistan was using us to have India release a large number of soldiers and officers it took as prisoners. Exchanging prisoners wasn't an easy thing especially when this was done with a third country. There were also many Biharis stranded in Bangladesh who wanted to return to Pakistan. Overall quite a complex situation. Things seemed to move very slowly in the political arena. We knew our chances of going back home too soon were unrealistic.

Mom planted some vegetables in the small patch of land attached to the house. I lend her a hand whenever possible. Milky had turned a year old. He was power crawling and had started to stand up on his own. He was already trying to follow me everywhere. If I went outside he would scream to go with me. If I went to the garden he would also crawl to the garden. Helpless, I had to pick him up in my lap or he would plow through the plants. Aman became very fond of us. He had no siblings. He must have felt very lonely at home because he frequently visited our house. Mom liked him for his quiet and calm nature. Later he even joined us in Arabic class. However, Meher Bhai was not impressed with his progress and often teased him. "Aman, are you reading Bengali or Arabic?"

Aman was determined not to get discouraged. Meher Bhai was a patient man. He tried hard to help him pick it up. My progress, on the other hand, started to make both my parents and Meher Bhai suspicious. They did not appreciate my fast pace. Could it be that I wasn't reading properly? Maybe I was making a lot of mistakes. They hinted at many things. I remained motivated and ignored all undue criticisms.

The short summer raced by as the winter was approaching fast. I still had several chapters to read and was starting to have serious doubts about meeting my goal. The final school test was also coming up. We learned that the first boy or girl in every grade would get a reward. Beating Ratul didn't seem like a problem at all. I was already speculating about the nature and size of the reward that I was going to receive.

In this mountainous region, winter came abruptly. Before we knew the summer was gone. The feeling of coolness felt sort of good at the beginning of winter but later things became shivering cold. Every morning Aman and I walked to the school all wrapped up in warm clothes. I was in grade two, and Aman was in grade three.

Miss Nabiha prepared the question papers for the final exam. She explained repeatedly the full syllabus of our ensuing tests. There will be two tests – English and Maths. Her question papers were usually easy. The thought of receiving the prize from her hand sounded so luring that I studied very well. Ratul and I sat side by side on the same bench and wrote the tests. Miss Nabiha sometimes sat in front of us and sometimes stepped out to get fresh air.

The English test went very well for both of us. We answered all the questions correctly. Ratul was good in English. His problem was maths. I had a strong belief that in maths I

would have no problem beating him. Once I looked at the question paper I could not stop smiling. It was so easy! Even Ratul looked very relaxed. However, around the end, he faced some difficulties. When Miss Nabiha stepped out he asked for my help. The thought of not helping a friend never occurred in my mind. I, rather foolishly, showed him everything he needed. What a catastrophe! When the results came out I found out that I scored 1 point less in English than Ratul. We both scored the same points in Maths. Ratul was first, me second.

On the day when Miss Nabiha brought the huge wrapped-up gift to Ratul's house, I was playing in the vicinity. She waved at me. I waved back dryly. Finally, it was Ratul who won. I didn't have to help him with maths. I shook the thought out of my mind quickly. He was my friend and helping him was the right thing to do. Who cared about a stinky award? Aman read my mind. He approved, in his own way. "This is a worthless prize. Let's go for a walk." I quietly followed him.

My parents had much more difficulty in accepting it. None of them had any doubt that I secured the first position. Recently the news was being leaked that the kids whose parents were in the governing body of the school were receiving undue favors, especially from the teachers. I found it difficult to believe that Miss Nabiha would intentionally give me a low score. In English, I was generally better than Ratul but perhaps I didn't do as well in this particular test. Maybe I made a few silly mistakes. My being second had nothing to do with Ratul's dad being a member of the governing body. But it was difficult to explain that to my parents, especially my mom. The suspicion became so strong that the next year I wasn't sent to school anymore. I was being homeschooled. I had no desire to leave the joyous environment of the school and stay home but there wasn't much I could do. I saw my friends in the afternoon. Recently we stopped playing war games and started to play soccer. Who knew there was so much pleasure in chasing a ball around? My skills grew fast. Soon I became a key player in the group.

One night in the wee hours a sudden loud noise woke me up. Dad and Mom woke up too. Dad looked outside through the windows to figure out what might have happened. That didn't help much as none of the windows in our house had a clear view of the road. But we agreed that it sounded like a car skidding and hitting something. "Could be an accident," Dad said. "You guys go to bed. I'll go check."

I wanted to go with him but Mom stopped me. Disheartened I went back to bed. I thought of staying awake until Dad returned but I was tired and soon fell asleep. In the morning after waking up I slipped out of the house. Aman was coming this way. I learned from him that the commander himself had a car accident the night before. We ran toward the street. After looking around for a little bit we found the spot. The wreckage of the car had already been moved but the signs of the accident were visible on the lamp post that the car hit including dried impact bloodstains.

That night I had a nightmare. Screaming at the top of my voice I woke everybody up in the household. Mom was merciless. "Did you go to check out the accident site? Did you?"

She screamed. "No wonder you are having nightmares. Didn't I ask you not to? One more scream and I'll slap the crap out of you."

I dipped inside the blanket and tried to sleep. I used to dream a lot but not scary ones. This freaked me out.

Finally, at the end of March 1973, I completed reading the Qur'an to the end for the first time. Still suspicious about the quality my parents arranged for the celebration anyway. Mom prepared her famous jalebi and sweet balls. Dad bought some sweets from the store as well. Meher Bhai led the Milad Mehfil with every bit of his heart. All the boys had come though not all of their parents did. I was noticing as the days passed by the kids were gradually learning to stop quibbling and to be friends while the grownups were getting more divided. It was becoming difficult for us to keep track of the bickering parents who weren't on talking terms.

Roushon Bhai and Rushni Apa came in the Milad but Uncle Altaf and Aunt Nuri didn't. After that fight in the volleyball ground the relationship between some of the adults never really went back to the way it was before. Since Ratul secured the first position the interaction between my parents and Uncle Bajlur and Aunt Saleha turned cold too. But I wasn't to be bothered with those tiny details. I was happy to see all my friends in the Milad. We screamed at the top of our voice 'Yea nabi salam alaika' (a salute to you dear prophet) with Meher Bhai. I felt quite proud knowing that my friends were looking at me a little differently at my achievement. Meher Bhai was so happy that he bought a hat for me.

However, there was a by-product of this that made my life a little painful. My parents started to push me to pray. Dad sometimes insisted I join him in a group prayer. I obliged. However, after each prayer, I raised my hands to God and prayed for earthly belongings, mostly books. And surprisingly God listened to me sometimes and left storybooks under my pillow. That was probably the beginning of my reading habit. The few books that I received were written in easy English. I read them many times.

Chapter 15

Finally, in August 1973 India and Pakistan signed a formal prisoner exchange agreement. India would release the 'Prisoner of Wars' in exchange for all the stranded Bangladeshi army personnel and civilians. Worried and uncertain about the situation back home Dad and Mom still were overjoyed with the prospect of going back. I on the other hand became truly sad at the thought of losing all my friends. Aman wasn't too happy either. One day we walked quietly along the street for a while.

"Where are you going to live once back home?" Aman asked.

I heard my parents discussing it. Dad would have to join the Dhaka cantonment upon his return. If the working condition was not good then he planned to retire and start his private practice in Dhaka. I explained it to Aman. His father was thinking in the same line. Still, both of us knew once in Dhaka we weren't going to be able to see each other the way we did here. We probably would be living far away and if lucky may meet once in a blue moon. Dhaka was a big city, a crowded city.

Around the end of November, we packed up our stuff and joined several others in boarding a train. We would go to Karachi first and, from there fly to Dhaka. Ratul and his family were going on the same train with us. Aman would go a few days later. He came to the train station with his dad to say goodbye. Right before the train started, he shyly murmured, "I am sorry I hurt you."

I embraced him dearly and gave him a broad smile. "Dad said the scar on my forehead won't go away too soon. That means I won't forget you that quickly."

Aman rarely smiled but at this moment his face lit up with an innocent smile. I waved at him and jumped back onto the train. Soon the train moved forward. After two years we left our temporary homes, memories, and a thousand small things behind us as the train headed toward Quetta. From Quetta to Karachi, then Dhaka. Who knew how life would be in Dhaka? I understood the anxiety of my parents. My concern was something else. I lost so many good friends in one shot, will I make any more? Who knew where we'd end up living? Would there be other boys? The joyous and carefree life that I was leaving behind, would I ever get it back? Milky was two years old. He ran around and spoke many words. He fondly called out for me 'Bhaiya! Bhaiya!' and flanked with me all the time. I liked it very much. I truly enjoyed the feeling of having a little brother.

Our train ran past a beautiful mountainous region ... march on... march on... march on... march...march...march...I heard the melody of a famous song by Nazrul. I had already

memorized a few of his melodious songs and poems. I sang out loud as the rhythmic sound of the moving train became my music

March on, march!

The drum resounds in the sky above,

The earth below is all agog,

You the corps of the youth of the scarlet dawn

March on, march on!

Milky would join me in enjoying every bit of it so much that he couldn't wipe off the babyish smile from his cute face. Rushi sat in Mom's lap hanging dearly to her doll through this musical extravaganza. She had become very close to Milky as well. She even let him play with her favorite dolls. If anybody else had done so all hell would break loose.

Chuga... chuga... chuga... chuga... choo... choo...we advanced through the series of ridges and valleys, rolling hills, dark caves, drylands, green fields...all of it seemed like the words of a lullaby... so melodious that it reverberated into the ears. Our parents were getting a little bit impatient on the long trip. On our way to Quetta from Karachi, we were given first-class accommodation. This time we were traveling in regular compartments, and the comfort wasn't there. Mom had brought food for the way which was all we were eating. Dad had very little money left with him. We would need that once in Dhaka. He didn't want to spend even a penny unless absolutely necessary.

Once we went past Quetta the hills started to disappear. The natural plain land of the province of Sindh unfolded a different view in front of our eyes. The greeneries constantly fell behind us as we zoomed through green fields and occasional dwellings. Milky and I joined forces to run inside the compartment. Mom reprimanded but we continued. There was a sense of liberation in the air as if this magical chariot of ours were carrying us away from the worldly limitations and bindings to a new dimension.

During long stoppages, we hopped out to the station platform. Mom had also packed some rice and lintel like many others. She along with several other women lighted up small kerosene stoves and quickly cooked something up. It felt like a picnic. We were a happy bunch. Even Rushi was so excited that she went on to ask Mom, "Are we having a picnic, Mom?"

Mom snapped at her. "Yes, picnic my foot!"

None of us could figure out why she was in such a bad mood. Dad tried to lighten the situation up by playing with us. Bashar and Ratul were traveling in a compartment at the other end of the train. We bunched up on the station. However, Dad and Uncle Jafor did not speak to each other. Many other kids joined us on the platform as well. We played 'tag' noisily. Even Milky joined us in the game though he kept on falling on his butt. I was amazed to see him running around. He was just a tiny baby on our way to Quetta! Everybody in Bangladesh would be so surprised to see him.

The train started its journey again. We ate hot Khichuri made with rice and lintel. Mom seemed to get touched by our enthusiasm. She lightened up with a smile. "You kids are acting like this is some kind of festival."

We laughed cheerfully. How would Mom know the pleasure of riding a train into the unknown? Could it be that the aging process took away the sense of magical feelings from Mom? Slowly the sun disappeared in the horizon and came down the dusk like a mysterious sheet and the dark sky opened up the magical door to the moon and the stars. Soon, full and tired, we fell asleep. The train kept on going like a dark horse constantly humming in our ears ...sleep on...sleep on...I dreamt about my loved ones...Great-grandma, Grandpa, Grandma, Aunt Rafia, Uncle Ahmed, Aunt Banu, Uncle Nawsher, Rani Apa, Minu Apa...so many others...even in the dream I felt eager to see them once again. I sent waves and waves of thoughts in the air ...we are coming Rani Apa. Just a little longer.

Chapter 16

After we reached Karachi we stayed overnight in the Cantonment of Mali. We could not stay with Ayesha Apa and Jaman Bhai this time. They were preparing to leave too. Their flight date was to be set later as they were civilians. Dad took permission to leave the cantonment to see them. Our flight was scheduled for the next day. This time we were allowed to fly over India cutting short the total travel time by quite a bit. The last time we flew Milky was only a baby and had screamed our heads off, however, this time around things were just the opposite. He must have mistaken the plane as a playground. It became really difficult to keep him constrained in his seat. He climbed down and ran up and down the aisle causing a considerable amount of annoyance among some passengers. Rushi threw up twice. Dad was ready for something like this and no accidents happened. I was surprised to notice that I had grown some sort of fear of heights. This wasn't something that I was aware of before. Not sure how I got it but I couldn't even look out the window for most of the flight.

I was about to doze off when the plane landed at Dhaka International Airport. As I opened my eyes a glimpse of a series of brick buildings and matured trees greeted me. It all felt so beautiful and personal. Even though I had never lived in Dhaka still I had this amazing feeling of belonging to this city, this land. Mom was tearful. Not sure why. Dad smiled and said, "Finally back home."

In Dhaka, we didn't have any close relatives. Doctor Asfak of Khulna had several brothers living in Dhaka. One of them was Uncle Mustak, who was a reputed engineer. He and his family came to receive us at the airport. We were very eager to go to Khulna and see our relatives but Dad had to join in his job first. Once things settled down for him at work he could take a few days off and we would be able to make the trip to Khulna. I was eagerly counting the days.

We stayed with Uncle Mustak's family for a few days in their house. They had three children. Six kids in the same house – our days just flew by.

Dad applied for vacation almost immediately after joining his job. His application was accepted and he was given a month off. We packed up our stuff again and got on a bus to Khulna the next day. We planned to stay in Khulna briefly and then go to Satkhira. After staying there for one or two days we would go to the village.

It took us more than twelve hours to reach Khulna. The familiar view of the beautiful town dotted with coconut trees came as a big relief. Spending days on a train never felt boring or painful but sitting in the cramped space of a bus for so long was unbearable. Especially the smell of Rushi's vomit was sickening. Considering our long travel plan I sort of felt pity for her. Throwing up wasn't a pleasant thing to do. The only person who showed no sign of tiredness or annoyance was Milky. Every few seconds he came up with all these absurd questions and mercilessly bombarded us with them. We took two rickshaws from the Khulna bus stand. The pullers knew where Uncle Ahmed lived. In a town of this size reputed doctors, lawyers, and politicians were known by almost everybody.

Our arrival in Aunt Rafia's house stirred things up. We found half the neighborhood had gathered there. Mom hugged her sister and broke into tears. Rushi, scared of the crowd, grabbed Mom and started crying as well. I only saw Milky for a moment since we climbed down the rickshaws before the waiting crowd snatched him away. He was born in this house. Naturally, everybody had a special soft corner for him.

The house hadn't changed much in the last few years. Though Uncle Ahmed hadn't been a supporter of independence, he didn't actively act against it either. He was given credit for saving many lives during the war, directly or indirectly. Possibly that's why he escaped retribution after the war. Also, when Roni Bhai returned in one piece after the war ended the honor of this family went sky-high.

Roni Bhai didn't look much different. The card games went on as usual in the rooftop den. Moni Bhai was back to being himself. He cracked jokes now and then and everybody burst into laughter. Parvati's mom didn't like the extra effort that she had to put in to serve tea and snacks for the gang. She was complaining all the time. I found out Yunus did join the war. Roni Bhai saw him in one of the training centers. However, he did not come back after the war ended. Uncle Ahmed checked with his parents in the village. He did not go back there either. Nobody knew if he was killed in the war.

We stayed only one day in Khulna. My parents were anxious to see their folks. They were eager to go to the village as soon as possible. Even I felt a strange pull for the meandering dirt roads, the huts with thatched roofs, and the tree-lined cool ponds. Never before had I felt such strong feelings for the village. The urge that I felt to see my grandparents, great-grandma, and everybody else that couldn't be expressed in words. I could still hear the melodious tune that Alek played in his bamboo pipe. How was he? When he sees me he come running as always, hug me, and say, "How are you Khoka? Why so late?"

The distance between Khulna and Satkhira wasn't too much but it took six hours due to the terrible bus service. That was the only service available on this route. The bus stopped every few minutes to pick up and drop off passengers. Dad objected a couple of times but was ignored. When we reached Satkhira it was late afternoon. Uncle Nawsher was informed about our arrival. He and Minu Apa were waiting for us at the bus stand. Dad climbed down the bus and hugged Uncle Nawsher, his eyes welling up.

"How are you, brother?"

"We are fine. Never thought we'd see you guys again. What a war it was!" Uncle Nawsher couldn't hold his tears as he replied.

Minu Apa observed me with a surprised look. "You grew up so much!"

"Do you expect me to be little always?" I proudly said.

She put her attention to Milky. "Who is this little boy? Where did you find him?"

Milky giggled and won over her instantly. Soon she was completely taken by him. I felt a little jealous. Looked like all the love and attention I used to get before had to be shared with Milky now. Growing up wasn't as trouble-free as it seemed. Anyway, when Dad told me, "Khoka make sure that all the stuff is loaded in the rickshaws" I had a different type of feeling. I was now someone that my father could depend on. It felt pretty good.

There was an even bigger crowd waiting to greet us in Uncle Nawsher's house. The whole neighborhood had gathered there. It was common knowledge that we were confined in West Pakistan during the war and two years after the independence. They all were very curious to know about our lives. The questions came in incessantly. Where do we live? What did we eat? Did they put us in jail? Finally, when everybody returned home we all sighed in relief. My parents were aiming to leave for the village the next day. There was no need to carry everything with us. Hence they needed a little time to repack some essentials for the trip. We chatted very late into the night. We were to start around noon the next day. Minu Apa was coming with us too. Kaliganj was only about twenty miles from Satkhira. On a bus, it could take more than a couple of hours. Dad decided to travel in a motorized three-wheeler called a scooter, which would surely save us some time. I could barely sleep in excitement.

The next morning it started to rain lightly. The rain was pretty common in Bangladesh. It was part of life. It didn't stop anybody from traveling. Nobody seemed worried. But everybody agreed it was a nuisance. Six of us were planning to ride in one scooter, a vehicle built to carry only four. Aunt Banu pressed us to have lunch before starting. We quickly ate and climbed into the scooter that Uncle Nawsher had fetched walking to the scooter stand with his umbrella. Mom sat in the back seat with Minu Apa, Rushi, and Milky. Dad and I squeezed into the driver's seat flanking him on both sides. This was a common practice and the scooter drivers did not object.

Sitting comfortably in Mom's lap Milky curiously looked around and drove cheerfully. Where were we going? Why? What was a grandpa? Were there any cows? Could he ride a cow? We had to chuckle at the rate and manner of his questions. The rain stopped but the road was wet forcing automobiles to go slowly. Not ours though. The driver shot through the road overtaking whoever came ahead, totally disregarding the road conditions. It was a narrow one-lane road, overtaking meant moving into the lane with oncoming traffic. The roads were busy and overtaking seemed like a risky business. Several times we narrowly made it back to our lane. But the driver didn't seem to be concerned at all. This was part of his regular chores. We were, however, a little afraid and uncomfortable. Mom warned the driver every other minute, "Son, drive carefully. There's no need to rush."

There was a bus coming at us, overlapping on both lanes. This was enough to terrify us but not our driver, who patiently smiled at my Mom for her non-stop warnings and moved to the shoulder to pass by safely. Something seriously went wrong at this point. It happened quickly, almost in a blink. The bus bumped into us, forcing the small scooter to roll on its side and thrown into the paddy field next to the road. I tried to move but couldn't. My leg was stuck somewhere. I saw Dad jerking himself out from under the scooter. There was a lot of blood on him. He had cut but the location was not clear. The driver had serious head injuries. He looked weak and lethargic. His wound could be deadly. I looked back to check on Mom. She had numerous cuts on her forehead with blood spraying out. She must have sensed the accident was going to happen because she sheltered Milky with her body wrapped around him. Milky was unhurt but was howling at the top of his voice. Minu Apa looked unhurt. I saw blood on Rushi's forehead suggesting she probably had a cut. Panicked,

Rushi jumped out of the scooter and ran into the paddy fields, crying. Dad called her out several times but she didn't seem to hear and continued to run away.

A few farmhands were working in the fields nearby who had seen the accident and came to help us. They brought back Rushi from the paddy fields. Rushi looked possessed and kept on kicking and screaming making it difficult for the poor farmer who was holding her in his lap. The bus that hit us continued to charge ahead. However, to our relief, soon it slowed down to a total stop a few hundred yards away from the accident spot. We later found out that the passengers of the bus had forced the driver to stop.

Several of the passengers came running at us to offer their help. If it wasn't for them we wouldn't be able to get to the hospital quickly and get the necessary treatment. A few men pushed the scooter on its wheels. I was still stuck inside. My left leg was caught under the gear. I could not pull it out as I had no strength or feelings there, not even pain. As three men pulled on the gear it loosened a little, enough for Dad and a volunteer to quickly free me. I tried to stand on my legs but couldn't and fell helplessly on the ground. I could not put any weight on my left leg. Dad picked me up in his lap and carried me into the bus that had now backed up near us.

As we all boarded the bus the floor turned red with the blood that streamed out of the injuries. Looking at Mom my heart sunk. Her face was covered in thickened red blood and sprinkled with white material, possibly tissues from her cuts. I wasn't sure about my injuries yet but as there was no pain I felt pretty normal. We were driven directly to the Satkhira Central Hospital. After initial checkups, we got the full damage report. Mom had two cuts on her forehead; each required four to five stitches. None of them were serious! Thank God! Rushi needed three stitches as well. Dad's cut was on his thigh. It was deep but fortunately missed the vein. As for me, my upper left leg bone was broken into two pieces.

The same evening I returned to Uncle Nawsher's house with my leg plastered in thick white mold. A separate bed was set for me in a conveniently located room on the first floor. The plastered leg went up on a sling attached to the frame of the bed and stayed there full-time. I had never felt so miserable in my whole life. The most painful was the itching inside the plaster. Sometimes I felt like going crazy with multiple spots begging for a scratch, places where even the ruler wouldn't reach. Who knew such misery was waiting for me on my return to Bangladesh? I wept in despair day after days.

However, not everything was bad. Soon I started to see some good sides of it too. Everybody in the household took turns to take care of me - feeding me, cleaning me, and giving me company. Relatives and family acquaintances traveled from far to see me. Dad, Mom, and Rushi healed up quickly. If my leg didn't break we could have made the trip to the village. They didn't want to go without me. As a result, folks from the village came to see us. Grandpa, Grandma, and Great-grandma came first. Shocked to see me lying on my back with my plastered leg hanging from a sling Great-grandma broke into tears. "Oh my God! What you guys have done to my Khoka?"

The few days she stayed she barely moved from my side. Unfortunately, they had to leave soon as the laborers were working back in the farmhouse and they needed to be present. I was hoping Rani Apa would come soon but news came that they won't be able to

come now. Uncle Daud was very busy at school. Final exams were approaching fast. He had many duties to perform. They were planning to come after the exams. Maternal grandpa also sent news that he would come as soon as possible. Both mentioned that whoever came first would bring Rani Apa with him. I sighed. I wasn't going anywhere. Doctors said it could take me a few months to heal.

In the meantime, talk of us going back to Dhaka came up. There was little chance of me getting proper treatment in such a small-town hospital. I felt disappointed. The hope of seeing Rani Apa and Alek this time around shrunk considerably.

After about three weeks I was taken back to the hospital for another check-up. An x-ray revealed that the bones were not placed properly and if left alone could join slightly overlapping. That meant I might end up having to hobble all my life. A decision was taken to cut down the plaster and try to set the bones in the right place. The next day I was carried to the hospital again. The nightmare that took place after that was something that I could never describe. Five – six adult men held my broken leg from two ends and started to pull in the opposite direction. The pain was so excruciating that I screamed and moaned vehemently trying to get away from the stronghold. Dad had grabbed my torso tightly to the bed. "A little longer, dear; just a little longer." He continuously pleaded. The pulling went on for about five minutes. It felt like an eternity. Finally, when it stopped I wept in joy. A new plaster was put on. The doctors didn't look happy. They were doubtful if the approach worked. Dad decided to return to Dhaka as soon as my new plaster dried up. This took four to five days.

The day before we started for Dhaka, Grandpa Shahar, Uncle Daud, and Rani Apa showed up in Satkhira. Rani Apa looked sad at my immobile, helpless condition. Every time we got together we ran around, climbed trees, swam in the ponds – all the kiddie things. This was an unusual situation for us. She had grown up a little bit, the childish restlessness seemed to be gone, replaced by a slightly mature demeanor, though not like an adult. She brought me some tamarind seed biscuits from Uncle Jobbar's store. I ate them with great pleasure. Milky seemed to like them too and returned for more. Later it turned out he was more interested in feeding the chickens that Aunt Banu kept.

Rani Apa mentioned since the liberation the overall situation in the villages had turned even worse. Uncle Daud was seriously pondering about moving to Khulna. He was looking for a job there. If things worked out then he would make the move. He would have to employ somebody to take care of his farmland back in the village, but that was a minor obstacle. I voiced my total approval in anticipation that I could see her whenever we visited Khulna.

Dad rented a microbus to take us to Dhaka. With my leg in plaster, I couldn't have traveled on a bus. We started pretty early the next morning. Mom hugged her father and cried for a long time. For the first time in my life, I understood why she cried. Under her tough and angry personality, there was a helpless, emotional little girl who never fully grew up. Rani Apa held my hand. "You'll be alright," She said. "We'll pick mangoes again. When you can walk come back. Okay?"

I nodded silently. My eyes welled up. I had traveled this far for nothing. I couldn't even make it to the village. Once back in Dhaka Dad would return to work, and I'll eventually

have to go to school, once my leg is cured. Who knew when we would be able to come back again?

Rani Apa and others walked behind our microbus as it slowly rolled over the gravel road heading to the main street. I watched them as long as I could see. There was a lump stuck in my throat. I couldn't even swallow. Perhaps I was just as emotional as my mom was.

Chapter 17

As soon as Dad returned to work he was posted in Jessore. He felt he couldn't go there leaving me in that condition. He applied for reconsideration explaining my situation. He was reassigned to Dhaka Cantonment. We all sighed in relief. Dad rented an apartment in Mirpur 1. There were several multi-storied apartment buildings there. We moved to the building numbered 'E', on the fourth floor. There was no chance of us getting suitable housing in the army quarters. We tried to get settled in our new apartment.

A lot of families lived in these buildings. Most apartments were quite small. Ours was a one-bedroom unit. We placed a bed in the living room and converted it into a second bedroom. The one good thing was that every renter also received a small piece of land for gardening behind the building. Mom didn't waste any time. She prepared the soil and quickly planted varieties of vegetables. In my absence, Rushi gave her a hand. Lying down on my bed I got a progress report from her daily. There were kids in plentiful, which was something that both Rushi and Milky appreciated. There was a girl about the same age as Rushi who lived right next door. Soon two of them became best friends. The good part about it was that Rushi's crying and nagging were reduced to a comfortable level.

The broken bones in my leg were on the way to healing. After coming back to Dhaka the plaster was reopened. Some additional tests were conducted and my unfortunate leg was wrapped up in plaster again. The highly qualified doctors who examined me opined that even though the bones were not fully aligned and would probably attach slightly overlapping, it wouldn't have much impact in the long run considering my young age. Over time I would be able to use the leg in a way as if nothing had ever happened. Dad's primary concern was whether one of my legs became shorter than the other. He was told such concern was unfounded. We all hoped for the best, especially me. Would I be able to play soccer with a leg shorter than the other?

Lying on my back I anxiously counted days. Dad bought me some books to help me pass the time. Slowly I started to get consumed by them. The translated children's books from Russian literature amazed me. Receiving the book *'Malachite's Basket'* as a gift I could barely stop my tears. I didn't know how many times I had read that book. Very soon I drifted from the reality of the world and started to fall in love with the magical realm of stories. Beside my bed books piled up like dwarf mountains. Finally, three months passed and the happiest day of my life arrived. The plaster was cut off my leg. Doctors examined my leg and confirmed that everything was fine. First few days I couldn't walk at all. I was even afraid to put any pressure on that foot. It didn't even feel like my own leg. Slowly the fear disappeared. In a couple of weeks, I was running.

Surprisingly, I found out that even though crowded, living in a colony wasn't so much of a bad thing after all. Within days I made dozens of friends. In the open fields of Mirpur, we roamed around in bunches, played soccer for hours, visited the nearby zoo, or ventured to the river, a tributary of Buriganga, which flowed not too far from our colony. Suddenly life presented me with all the gifts that I had always asked for. Whoever imagined that here in

the big city of Dhaka, I would get such a portal to nature? I slipped out of the apartment escaping Mom's watchful eyes at every opportunity I got. Finding a company was never an issue in the colony. We ventured in new directions every day. No matter how much Mom scolded or pleaded it never was enough to stop me. My boyhood and Milky's childhood together built a wonderful mixture. He loved me very much and followed me like a shadow. I didn't want to go anywhere without him either.

Dad admitted us to a private school located in Mirpur 2. I was in grade four, Rushi was two, and Milky was in the playgroup. An employee of the school walked us to the school and brought us back after school. I made some more friends. We played tag during recess in the playground. After returning from school I hurried through the homework and waited eagerly for the late afternoon when my friends would convene in the playground. As soon as I saw them I slipped into my shoes and ran out of the apartment. Milky knew things would happen too quickly so he usually had his shoes on. Before Mom even had a chance to stop us we would be way out of her reach. There were wide-open fields on the other side of the narrow uphill road that went into the zoo. That was where we, fifteen-twenty boys, played soccer until it was dark. We raced, screamed, yelled, and sometimes even fought, but above all had the time of our lives.

Upon returning home Mom would grab me by the ears.

"Didn't you hear I was calling out for you?" My distress was Rushi's pleasure. She would giggle cheerfully.

Very soon we had a bigger change in our lives. Dad didn't like to work in the army anymore. First of all, many of his junior officers were either senior to him or ranked the same as him. Secondly, freedom was limited. There was no telling when he would get transferred and where. Captain Sujon was subjected to an army trial. During the trial, he and some of his friends attempted to intimidate the witnesses. My dad was one of them. Regardless, he went on to testify against Captain Sujon. However, in the end, somehow the case got settled without the defendant being disciplined. Dad was disappointed. It might have influenced him to lose interest in serving in the army. The issue was how to get out with honor. He joined in 1970. Normally he wouldn't be able to retire before 1980. Fortunately in mid-1974, the Bangladesh government provided an opportunity for voluntary retirement from the army. Dad took it.

After retiring he started to work as a general practitioner. He was practically unknown as a physician in the area. The economic situation in the country was not very good either. People didn't have much to go on. Dad worked in a pharmacy in the mornings and evenings as a resident doctor. He got a few patients. We started to have difficulties in meeting ends. I had to beg Mom just for ten cents to buy a tamarind treat. However, that was hardly an obstacle. Good-hearted vendors gave us treats in advance. At an opportune time, I moved a quarter or two from Dad's wallet and paid them off. Sure I felt guilty but the lure of the cheap treats, especially the milk icecreams was too much to ignore. Also, I couldn't just buy for myself! I had to get something for Rushi and Milky as well. Being an older brother did come with some responsibility.

Life went on. We lived through bad and good times, made friends, played cheerfully in the open fields, and slowly but surely became an integral part of our independent and beautiful country.

The End