

# Seven Bodies on a Dirt road

**Shuja Rasheed**

**A**t fifty, Kamal looked older. He was small, barely five feet. His tanned skin and a mild face instantly revealed his South East Asian identity. As he walked through the bustling summer crowds in his faded jeans and half sleeve cotton tee shirt he appreciated the unusual warmth for late August. Coming from a country where the coldest nights were warmer than often chilling Canadian fall, he dreaded the winter. Immigrated to Canada twenty years ago he still struggled to cope up with the freezing northern cold. He would rather take the tropical monsoon, the scorching sun and the occasional deadly floods.

Kamal walked in exceptionally long strides for a person so small, his hands swung rhythmically beside his body, his head down in deep thoughts. He worked as a part time mechanic for a motor vehicle garage in the vicinity of his house, near the intersection of Warden and Eglinton Ave. in Scarborough. He had several part time jobs, which ranged from gas station to fast food. An experienced Mechanical Engineer, he had gone through all kinds of jobs since coming here, none had anything to do with his professional expertise. There was a time when he complained, wrote to every government offices he could possibly think of, rallied in front of parliament, posted innovative posters urging Canadians to protest and several other things that he couldn't even remember. After twenty years this had become way of life. He understood he had a choice. He could leave. He didn't. He settled down, bought a small house and raised two kids to their adulthood. His wife Mita worked in Wal-Mart, fulltime. Daughter of a judge back home it wasn't easy for her.

But she learned. Everybody learns when the situation demands. Kamal knew that. Just years ago he knew nothing about cars, now he could open the damn thing up and put it back together. No problem.

Raghu Sing gave him a long look. A Punjabi, he was quite tall and had lighter complexion. A charming man for a garage owner he was liked by his employees. He looked young but Kamal suspected he was in his late forties.

“Anything bothering you, boss?” Kamal inquired.

“You are early.” Raghu briefly replied in his characteristic calmness.

Kamal didn’t take offense. He was known for untimely arrivals. He was a good worker when he worked and definitely was an amicable person. Raghu ignored his lack of punctuality.

“I have to leave little early today, boss” Kamal said as he punched in.

Raghu usually didn’t ask too many questions unless he had to. Happy with Kamal’s informal excuse he moved on to check some recent news on the computer that sat on his large desk. The mechanics were all paid by the hour.

Kamal drank a glass of tap water. On a regular day he would just move on to the garage area and drown into his work. He was known for his quietness and devotion. Today he lingered in the office longer. Raghu sensed there was something else. “What are you up to buddy?”

“Today we have that meeting. “Kamal brightened up. “The one about the war crimes. I told you about it earlier.”

Raghu had good memory. He nodded. Yes, he remembered. This was something Kamal had been looking forward to for months. Kamal was an active campaigner to bring the war criminals of Bangladesh to justice. In 1971, when the Eastern part of unified Pakistan fought for sovereignty and freedom a minority group betrayed the general population in the name of religious integrity and collaborated with West

Pakistan. They actively assisted the enemy in seeking out and murdering the intellectuals and leaders of their own country. Later that year neighboring India had gotten involved and helped East Pakistan to defeat the invading army. That's how Bangladesh was born. Raghu, an Indian, was only in his preteen at that time but remembered some of it. Many mistakenly thought it was just another war between India and Pakistan, the two archrivals in South East Asia. Such negligence flared up Kamal like a matchstick. He had lost family in that war, several. He took everything about it damn seriously.

Raghu was careful about his choice of words.

"Oh, really!" He showed sufficient interest.

"An expatriate professor from Australia is coming as a chief guest. There will be hundreds of people. It's about time we put those murderers to justice." Kamal was uncharacteristically loud. "After all these years, the movement is finally starting to take shape. The meeting will be in a party center on Danforth Avenue. Why don't you come along, boss?"

Raghu shifted his weight to the other side of his body. For some strange reason Kamal had this impression that Raghu shared similar rage about the war criminals of 1971. He didn't. He had nothing to do with them. He carefully hid his feelings. "How can I? I got to keep the garage open. You go ahead. My blessings are with you." He chuckled just to ensure Kamal understood that he was joking about the blessings. Kamal didn't need his blessings. Not out of this garage.

Kamal nodded in agreement, poured a cup of coffee from the coffee pot placed on a small corner table. No milk no sugar, he liked his coffee black.

"We'll get them, boss." He said. "Ironically, many of those murderers are living right here. I don't understand the policies of Canadian government. Why allow these criminals to swarm this country? Aren't they supposed to do background checks?"

This question wasn't thrown directly at Raghu. It was

more like a monologue. Raghu refrained from making any comments. He expected Kamal to get to work. If he had to leave early he needed to start working on his assignment.

Kamal knew that as well. He left the office with the coffee in his hand and walked into the specious garage area right beside the office. Dozens of cars sat inside for servicing. Two Caucasian mechanics greeted him and expressed their astonishment in his early arrival. Kamal smiled at them, greeted back and walked to a Nissan Altima. This was his assignment. He did some work the previous day, but there was plenty of work left. It had issues from ignition to break pads. Practically no serious maintenance was done over the years. He had spoken to the owner when she came to drop it off. An eighty something black lady who just didn't realize even a new car had to be serviced in regular intervals.

Finishing his coffee in quick successive sips he opened the hood and unthinkingly poked inside. Everything needed maintenance. Cars, houses, countries, independence. Twenty years ago, he had to literally flee his country, the country he lost most members of his family for. A reputed engineer in a government job, he was threatened with dire consequences for not going along with bribery schemes. He played along for a little while, just long enough to arrange his immigration to Canada. He sighed. Life here wasn't without its own twists. He escaped the corruption, only to be dumped into embarrassment. He took it well though. Mita was strong, supporting. They walked the walk for the future of their kids – son Manju and daughter Rita. While he blocked Manju from his mind, thought of Rita filled him with pride and joy. A top student in her class she was midway through her Computer Science degree at McGill. Tears formed in his eyes. How much he wished Manju had stuck to his education instead of settling with a fast food job! At twenty-four he was equipped with a high school diploma, a useless goatee and couple of unsightly earrings. His mother found them funny,

Kamal didn't. He looked strange to him, foreign, someone Kamal couldn't relate to. But yet he hardly ever objected fearing that would trigger Manju to leave home. His mother and sister loved and cared for him, whether he knew it or not. Kamal let out a deep breath. Only if Manju had gone through what he did in his teen years! Manju was like a little kid, yet to be nurtured to his full potential.

As his hands and eyes coordinated on the subtle elements of the car, his mind somehow found a way to drift back in time. The war had started months ago, enemies pushed through villages after villages in search for the freedom fighters, many of whom were trained in bordering India and returned to join the overall resistance against the West Pakistan's aggression deep into its neglected Eastern part. Kamal's family had several fighters including his dad, two older brothers, one uncle and one cousin brother. His father Ajam, a regional commander of the resistance was idolized by young fighters. He had foresight, coolness and pragmatism. Even when the pro-Pakistani religious zealots joined forces with the ruthless enemy and hindered the progress of the freedom fighters with their betrayal and brutality, he still held high hope and morality. Kamal, a fourteen-year-old, would have done anything to be allowed to fight. Every time he held one of the rifles his family fighters had, this blazing anger rushed through his veins, his fingers tightened around the trigger, lips hardened. He was ready to kill the hyenas, the beasts that left trails of burned villages with rotting corpses of commoners and sexually violated women – young or old. Ajam dismissed his eagerness citing his tender age. He was told to wait. His time would come.

He remembered the day as if it was yesterday. It was early November, a Friday. The village market was buzzing with people wearing second hand sweaters and Indian shawls. The mild winter was refreshing after intense summer. Just days ago, the local fighters had ambushed a fleet of enemy soldiers in a

nearby village and killed majority of them. Everybody knew the enemy would come looking for the fighters. Ajam and his team moved out of their houses and took shelter in an underground cellar below the local mosque, something that they had secretly built. The enemy was Muslim in religion and wasn't expected to intrude a mosque without any solid information.

The soldiers came around noon. The buzzing subsided magically as the fleet of army vehicles carefully approached the crowded market. Many had left in hurry, others hid inside shops and the rest froze in their respective positions. There was no telling what was ensuing. Kamal went to get some cooking oil for his mother. Almost reflexively he slipped behind a nearby bush, his curious eyes peeking through the dense branches. The soldiers forced seven fighters on the ground from an army truck, blindfolded, unrecognizable in blood, broken bones and torn flesh. They were then shoved to the middle of the dirt road; lined up in a row and thrown on the dirt, face down.

Time stopped for Kamal. He looked at the determined faces of the fighters - his father, uncle, brothers and two other young men. Somebody had betrayed. The enemy was tipped off. He knew it. Everybody did. Nobody outside this village was supposed to know where the fighters were hiding.

Punched out, Kamal waited at the front of the garage. Manju was supposed to drop him at the meeting venue. The family had no car. Manju sometimes borrowed an old vehicle from one of his close friends. Kamal usually commuted using TTC - the bus and train combo. Today, considering the time constraint he had asked Manju for a ride.

The meeting would start at six. He had only twenty minutes in hand. Manju didn't show up. He wasn't surprised. He wondered how little he expected from his son, once a wonderful little boy with keen interest in being a spell bee champion.

Raghu, knowing how important the meeting was, offered

him a ride. Danforth Avenue was only a short distance away. His nephew could handle the shop until he returned. When they reached the venue, it was ten past six. Fortunately, the meeting hadn't started yet. It was a relief. Kamal didn't want to miss any part of it. This meeting was the effort of a whole lot of people who had been working on this for years with no outcome, as the political parties back home joined hands with the traitors to secure majority in the national assembly. Damn politicians!

The meeting started amid a large gathering in the medium sized auditorium. As the speakers after speakers spoke about the undeniable brutalities, the deaths, the massacres and the deadly betrayals Kamal did something that he hadn't done for very long time – he wept. Tears rolled down his cheeks. He wasn't ashamed anymore. The passing years couldn't smudge the vividness of the trauma that he bore deep inside. That dirt road! He came in this meeting with lot of anger but all he could do was shed tears.

What happened next was unthinkable. During the speech of the guest speaker a group of unruly youth invaded the center and went on a rampage. Instantly the place became a battleground as the crowd fought back. Thrown into total confusion Kamal didn't even know how he was shoved out of the center on the street. Punched and kicked he desperately crawled behind a dumpster. A swarm of cops came rushing. Chases and beatings were followed by several arrests. Stores closed, pedestrians gone, the place looked deserted.

Kamal, blood thickening on his face, couldn't collect the courage to step out. Sitting in a coiled-up position his mind went blank. Who would think here in Toronto such thing could happen? The current government back home had collaborated with the traitors. The supporters of government staged the trouble. He knew for sure. Damn politics! It eats up people's conscience.

“Dad!”

Startled, Kamal looked back to find Manju.

“Sorry dad,” Manju said, “I forgot about your meeting. I came to pick you up after the meeting. Come on.”

Manju towered over him, had strong, muscular hands. He helped Kamal to the passenger seat and wiped the blood off his face. “Just a minor cut. You’ll be okay.” He comforted.

On the drive back home silence prevailed, as always.

“Dad, it’s been thirty-six years!” Manju broke the silence, casually.

“So, what?” Growled Kamal. “They slaughtered them, right in front of my eyes. They kicked the heads like worthless sack of bones. They drove over the dead bodies. They were my family, for God’s sake! Don’t you understand?”

Manju gave him a sympathetic look. He understood more than he expressed. Silence followed.

Pulling the car in the narrow driveway of their house, he took a moment before breaking the news. “I am going back to college, dad. This fall.”

Kamal looked briskly at him before climbing out of the car. He felt feverish and needed to collapse on a bed. Nevertheless, a grain of hope sparkled deep inside him. Not all was bad today.