Ripped Apart.

‘Here they come ‘– Inder shouted, as he ducked for cover and headed for our usual haunt.

We crouched in the corner - Rafi, Inder and I as we watched the heavy footsteps of the soldiers marching on through our village. Uncle Kartar went out to greet them as the head of the soldiers gruffly addressed a gathering of the village elders.

‘We ask you again, are you sheltering any dissidents? ‘He asked menacingly.

‘We are a peace – loving village, we shall never get involved with them, ‘Uncle Kartar said. ‘Please leave us alone ‘.

It was a time of great turmoil. In my short life of 13 years I felt I had seen it all. Gandhi was leading the ‘Civil Disobedience Movement ‘ and a few years back had mobilised the entire country , all of 300 million people with his cry of ‘ British – Quit India ‘ and the entire country was holding their breath and quivering in anticipation of independence from the British Raj . Subhash Bose had dented British egos with his military aggression through his Indian National Army and the British were finally realising that India was ready for independence.

Back in my village, my elders would tell us heroic tales about our freedom fighters and let us dream about an independent India as we looked up at the stars lying on a mat on our rooftop. The gentle wind caressed our faces as we - Rafiq, Inder and I held hands and listened to the stories of Savarkar, Gokhale and Tilak.

The trains continued to come rumbling in. Where were all these people going? Train after train – compartments filled with families taking everything they could with them. Women wailing and children crying but the trains kept on coming.

This was 1947. I did not understand much but just knew that food was scarce the last few years and our school had shut down. We had to go to the school in the neighbouring village which was much bigger. Cycling the ten km each way to school was fun and Rafiq and I used to race each other. He used to win mostly but one day I drove my cycle into his and we both fell on top of each other, crying and then laughing. We held each other tight and promised to fight off the bigger, meaner boys in our new school.

The furrows were gradually deepening on Uncle Kartar’s face. He was the village chief and all the grown-ups listened to him. But why were the grown-ups meeting so often? What were they discussing? Our school teacher was talking about a lot of riots in Bengal and other parts of India and said that Hindus and Muslims were fighting each other. I held Rafiq’s hand tightly as we heard stories about how houses were being burnt down and people were killed. My head was spinning and Rafiq and I ran out of the class and started cycling back to our village.

Halfway down, a group of boys blocked our paths. We stared back at them – neither Rafiq nor I were afraid of a fight. Their leader advanced and asked, ‘Hey, what are your names? ‘We thought for a while whether to answer, then I defiantly said, ‘Ravi ‘.

‘And yours?’

‘Rafiq’ – came the bold reply.

‘Get him ‘, shouted the boy. We whirred around and I picked up a stone and threw it at the boy. It struck his forehead and sent him reeling backward. By now, Rafiq was ready with another stone and directed his missile at another boy. This was enough to make them flee with their tails between their legs.

We came back and went straight to our favourite haunt. This was a deserted building at the edge of our village. Nobody came to this building as it had a reputation of being haunted. This was our little secret place where Rafiq and I spent many days together – reading, talking and running away from the grown-ups in the village. We talked about all the heroes that we heard about – Rama, Arjuna from the holy texts and the valour of Guru Teg Bahadur. We talked about Emperor Akbar and his courage and saw in our mind’s eye the beauty of the Taj Mahal.

Hoshiarpur, Punjab. This is all I have ever known and is where my village is. Inder, Rafiq and I thought this was our world. Inder’s father was a farmer and Rafiq’s family had a haberdashery in the village. Rafiq’s father, Uncle Aslam, was the best tailor in the whole world and I had 2 shirts done by him last year! Hoshiarpur had the greenest fields and the best football team. The swallows had the sweetest voice and we had learnt to wake up to both the ‘Azaan ‘and the rendition of the hymns of the ‘Guru Granth Sahib’ on those slightly chilly mornings when our mothers had wrapped us warm.

Nehruji was again on the radio. We were crowding around the only radio that there was in the village. The whole village was silent as he announced that the Mahatma had gone on ‘hunger strike’ to death if the riots did not stop. Mr Suhrawardy was trying to unify Bengal but faced huge opposition from the ‘Noakhali riots ‘. My aunt from Lahore had come down with her family and I was ecstatic to see my 2 cousins , although the boy , Arjun , did not play football as well as I did . My uncle came from Tarn Taran and immediately started telling the elders that we had to move.

Move! I had only gone out of Hoshiarpur once – to visit my uncle in Delhi. Delhi was such a big city and so full of buildings and forts, but why didn’t they take me to Agra then, to see the Taj? I will never forgive my uncle for that.

The trains kept coming. The warm summer air would be cut with the shouting of people and gradually the trains kept overflowing. Initially they did not stop in our village but the first train stopped in June. A little child was flung from a compartment and men with open swords ran from one compartment to the next while the train pulled away amidst visceral cries from the men and women.

I could not sleep that night. A voice in my head kept telling me that something bad was about to happen. I was sleeping on a mat in the rooftop of my house. Rafiq’s house was less than half a block away and we could always talk to each other from our rooftops. Suddenly, I heard a commotion and sprung to my feet. I could see some flickering lights in the dark and some muffled sounds. My heart was in my mouth. I quietly raced down the stairs and climbed up the drainpipe to the rooftop of Rafiq’s house and eased myself into his bedroom. He was asleep and was completely unaware of what was happening. By this time the lights had come closer and some of our elders had woken up. Suddenly, I heard the most vicious cry of ‘Waheguru ‘and saw that there were people with swords, rods and knives charging into the village. They were breaking down doors and shouting – Oh, the shouting! They charged into Uncle Aslam’s house and I heard the most piercing cry from within. My heart just stopped beating!

I had no time to lose. I rushed to Rafiq’s parents’ room and saw his parents cowering in one corner and his little sister Amina hugging his mother tightly. I led them quietly out of the house and ran with Rafiq and his sister to our secret haunt. Amina kept stumbling, so I lifted her up and continued running. Rafiq’s parents followed behind but were slowed down by his mother’s arthritic knees.

‘Hey you, stop! ‘ roared the voices behind us . It was dark but they had glowing lights in their hands and were running towards us. Our legs became nearly airborne and we gained the strength to fly across the fields to our deserted house where we knew they would not come for us. Rafiq started looking back for his parents but I turned his head forward forcibly to focus on reaching our spot.

Once in, Rafiq was uncontrollable. His parents had not made it. I hadn’t seen this side of humanity before. We knew that staying was not an option. Rafiq knew of a distant relative in Kapurthala and we started walking. We were numb and could not speak. Amina was sobbing uncontrollably – huge sobs racking her little body. We walked all night and in the morning reached Kapurthala and knocked on his relative’s door.

The relative, Mr Baig, listened to the whole story. He told us about the riots all over India and our beloved Punjab. He told us of people turning against each other, Hindus and Muslims, with murderous intent. People who had lived for generations next to each other, ate the same food, tilled the same soil and told the same stories. Hindus and Muslims, who were the very fabric of India, who were brethren for centuries, now intent on spilling each other’s blood. We listened with dismay as Gandhiji had failed to negotiate with the Muslim League and was continuing his fast. We heard that the trains that were a frequent sight to us were now carrying corpses from Delhi to Lahore and the country has been torn asunder by communal riots.

My thirteen year old mind was unable to process such a catastrophe. I had to go back to my parents. Mr Baig had no children and with his wife he was planning to move to Lahore the next day. He agreed to take Rafiq and Amina with him. Although my heart was crying out for Rafiq, I knew instinctively that Hoshiarpur would no longer be safe for him and Amina. I felt I was leaving a part of me in Kapurthala. After hugging him tightly for what seemed to be like an eternity and kissing Amina on the forehead, I returned with a heavy heart to Hoshiarpur, but not before Rafiq and I made a pact that in future, wherever we were, we would find each other and resume our friendship.

That one night changed my life forever. We decided to remain in India and witnessed one of the largest massacres in human history. It had seen the largest exodus of people along religious lines and millions of people massacred along religious lines. It divided a nation that had been together for centuries and ripped apart many families, divided communities and turned the country into a warzone.

That night, the partition ripped apart my friend Rafiq’s family and instantly created two orphans. To this day, I cannot imagine the human cost of the partition of India. That one night, I felt that God had turned His face away.

Aditya Bhattacharya

Goulburn Valley Grammar School

Year 6

02.06.2019