

Title (up to 20 words) - **The Tea Stall of Sylhet**

Strapline (up to 40 words) - A story of the road to Bangladesh's independence told through a 15-year old boy named Saleem, working at his father's tea stall at the heart of Sylhet

Copy (between 900 and 1000 words) -

Saleem woke from the bustling of his neighbours getting ready for the day. His back ached from lying on the concrete floor, with nothing but a grass mat between them. The line for the communal washing area was busy, so Saleem washed his face with the water from the drinking bucket his mother left the night before. He made his way through the narrow alleyway lined with small tin houses with leaking roofs and stray dogs looking for food. Saleem didn't mind living in the slum, his parents taught him to be grateful for everything he had- from the smallest grain of rice to the new sandals his father bought him on his 15th birthday. He walked to a neighbour's house where he found his mother cutting betel nuts. "Assalamualaikum Amma," greeted Saleem. "Walaikum Salaam," replied his mother. "Have you eaten anything yet?" "No, I'm going to Abba's for some chai," said Saleem. "Okay, be safe my love".

Saleem made his way to his father's tea stall. The roads were busier than usual, as Eid drew closer. He always had anxiety when crossing the roads after his cousin died from a careless driver. He made it to the other side and spotted his father serving tea to local customers. Saleem fastened his pace, he found himself smiling.

"Assalamualaikum Abba," greeted Saleem, slightly out of breath.

"Walaikum Salaam son," replied his father, playfully ruffling Saleem's overgrown hair. His father's tea stall was the most popular in the city. He specialised in chai infused with masala and all sorts of spices. The friendly buzz of the townspeople had always circled around the stall.

"Busy today isn't it?" asked Saleem, whilst helping himself to a cup of chai and rusk biscuits. His father nodded in agreement with a straight and serious face.

Saleem knew exactly what he meant and feared the worst. Tensions had been growing between Pakistan and Bangladesh, especially after the latest election.

A poster had been put up on the town hall's notice board. It read, "SOLDIERS WANTED. AGES 14-30. FIGHT FOR FREEDOM". The mass killings scarred Saleem's mind. He struggled to sleep at night, remembering the women and children screaming for mercy. There was a line of

young boys and men waiting to sign up. A boy similar to his own age stood behind him, reading the poster. He looked at him, smiling awkwardly. "Are you thinking of signing up?" asked Saleem.

"Yes I am," replied the boy as a film of sadness covered his face. He shook his head, almost as if it would get rid of his thoughts. "My name's Mustafa".

"It's nice to meet you Mustafa, I'm Saleem".

Mustafa nodded and walked away towards the que. Saleem thought about it for a while before signing up. He talked about it with his parents the night before. They were largely supportive, although his mother was riddled with worry. They just wanted Saleem to be safe, but also wanted liberty. He knew what he needed to do, the conflict needed to stop. Saleem walked to the line, standing behind Mustafa. "So, have you made up your mind?," asked Mustafa, looking at Saleem curiously.

"Yeah," said Saleem, letting out a deep sigh.

Saleem made it through training and was officially now a soldier. Tomorrow would be the first day of fighting. He slept in a room filled with 10 men. He felt confined in such a tight space, but he has never felt more alone. Saleem would never hurt a fly, let alone kill a man. But he felt he was doing the right thing. Too many had died and far too long he helplessly stood watching.

Morning came quicker than he anticipated. They made their way to the battle. Troops from India arrived in support. Gunshots echoed in the distance, his heart beating heavily against his ribcage. His captain gave orders as well as words of encouragement. The time had finally come. A group of Pakistani soldiers charged towards them, their green flag tied against the arms of their uniforms. Saleem found himself holding the trigger of his rifle. Mustafa stood beside him and had already opened fire. The bullet moved in slow motion in the humid air, then pierced through an enemy. Splats of blood escaped from his chest as he fell violently to the ground. Another was running closer to Saleem. Beads of sweat fell from his forehead as melanin disappeared from his face. He opened fire. He felt the pressure release from his hand as the bullet left the cannon. He shot the man in the head. A small gasp of exasperation left Saleem's mouth. More of them came and more of them died. His allies came with tanks and grenades. Saleem had been doing this everyday for 9 months. Operation Searchlight carried out by Pakistan resulted in mass killings in the streets of Bangladesh. Smoke poisoned the air as deafening booms shook the earth, until there was silence. Complete silence.

Saleem laid on the floor, among his dead brothers who fought beside him. Medics rushed retrieving the injured. He looked at his body frantically, searching for injuries. He was okay. He got up painfully and limped towards the base. The hospital wing was full of injured bodies, some of them unrecognisable, blown to bits. The radio played in the background. Saleem hoped there would be news of a victory. It was too loud to figure out what was being said. He walked to the cafeteria, the same channel playing. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was speaking, "I am proud to say that with the help of our Indian allies. Pakistan has surrendered. But we are still on the road to be recognised for our independence. We must also remember our fallen brothers in Chittagong. I thank you for all your strength. I hereby announce Bangladesh is free". The moment froze in

time and so did Saleem. "We are finally free," said Saleem almost in disbelief, as tears rolled down his face.