

Without a name, without a tribe

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THE man got off from the afternoon train. It was early winter, yet he had a thick tweed coat on. The foxy colour of his coat went well with his bronze complexion. He sloppily wore an old but fancy tie and his faded trousers showed a few fat stitches near his thigh.

With daylight fading, he looked unmindful; he stared at the platform's southern corner. Shadows were fast disappearing. As the red glow of the sunlight was dying down over the tall houses and trees, darkness was about to descend.

From the station he looked straight at the dust-filled road, its tarmac rutted in places. He saw the big, tin-shed go-downs along the road were all empty. Dark alleys managed their ways through them. He looked as far as his eyes could see, but not a single soul was in sight.

The rail carriages were moving slowly with hissing sounds. Are they moving all by themselves in this desolate place? He thought to himself. Even the engines were not in a hurry, nor seemed to have any destination. On the eastern side of the station, low-roofed houses were sinking into darkness – only their brick-coloured chimneys were still visible.

He stepped out of the station gate, listlessly swinging his leather folio bag. He could not remember later if he saw anyone at this time except for a few soldiers sitting huddled in a small room next to the



ILLUSTRATION: DIBARAH MAHBOOB

Then he heard the sound of approaching boots. Sound of a legion of boots. Emanating, as though, from the deepest core of a silent night. "Who's there?" someone shouted in Urdu. A shot from a rifle shattered the silence. The pit-a-pat of the boots was petering out when another shot was fired.

station gate. They were conversing, their rifles placed over their knees and caps pulled over their eyebrows. They had fixed him with a cold look but did not say anything; they only exchanged a few loud words among themselves. One of them had aimed a rifle at him when he was walking out the gate. "No, not yet," said another in Urdu. The soldier lowered his weapon and gave a wide laugh, his big teeth all revealed in a wide grin.

On the outside, there was a circle at the centre of which was a dusty patch of grass. He walked round the circle with a tread and looked all around again, but no living soul could be seen anywhere.

A number of roads led off the circle into different directions. Some of them were

tarred and potholed, some strewn with brickbats, some filled with dust. The one which led to the village was a dirt track. Houses along the village road looked empty too, deserted perhaps months ago.

After a little while, he caught hold of a tin-walled restaurant. He walked straight into it as he was starving. It was very cold and hazy inside; the only bulb emitting some light was enveloped in smoke. Only the dirt-smearred chairs and tables were somewhat visible. Everything else inside blurred at first but in the red flame of the stove, he saw a man resting his chin on a counter beside the door. The man lifted his eyes to squint at him and the stranger -- as if in response -- rubbed his hand lightly over his flaxen stubble.

"Is there any food?" the stranger said.

"No, nothing," the man behind the counter replied in Urdu with a clear hint of disgust.

"There's nothing at all?"

"No, nothing," the restaurant man repeated, his hand moving in impatience as if he was keeping a swarm of flies away.

Unsatisfied, the stranger passed his cracked fingers on the blotchy stitches of his coat over the chest.

"Can I have some tea, at least?"

"I told you already. There's nothing. Leave us alone!"

Back on the street he found himself swathed in darkness. All street lights were out. His shoes thudded on the dust as he trudged down the wide road. He wondered how this path had become so denuded of trees! He recalled there was a shop here that painted signboards; over there stood a small homeopath chamber which shone luminously in the evening. The shrivelled doctor sat facing the north. His usual

companions, a few old men all skin and bone, would read newspapers holding them as close to their nose as possible.

Like bolts of lightning striking across a dark sky, memories flashed across his mind. He used to shave and read newspapers every morning. Tears rolled down his cheeks when he had read the death news of Patrice Lumumba. One afternoon he had read a Ho Chi Minh poem: 'Bells ring from up the hills/ While youthful lasses/ climb down the valley/ unhurriedly'. Or that day when he, a child of seven or eight, had dug out clumps of earth to discover big, oval potatoes, the main seed at the centre all dried up.

The road was still empty, no one coming or going. He turned left and disappeared through the go-downs into a narrow alley. His feet sunk in dense patches of wet grass. He touched the dew-drenched tin wall of a godown: it felt terribly cold. It was only when he reached the riverbank that this place looked a little familiar to him.

The paved riverbank had gradually become a road. Rows of shops, which were all closed now, stood on both sides. Those along the bank stood on bamboo or log stilts because the soil beneath them had long been eroded by the river. He pricked his ears up to take in the splashing sound of water. It seemed the waves were lashing against the bank right beneath his feet. Gazing to his left through a cluster of shops, he saw a stunned river flowing quietly, hiding all its might in a thick haze. A few streaks of dim light he spotted soon, away into the river. Only then did he register the existence of fishing boats and realise dense fog had swallowed up the whole river.

Back in the past, people had paved this

road with black stones to tame the river. The stones were uneven now, quite a few of them ejected here and there. He was stumbling over the surface but did not bother. He rather found himself obsessed with the fact that nobody came forward to greet him or even to talk to him. There were no lights on, neither on the streets nor in the houses. All front doors were closed. As if everyone was jaw-locked in fear of some horrendous happening!

Then he heard the sound of approaching boots. Sound of a legion of boots. Emanating, as though, from the deepest core of a silent night. "Who's there?" someone shouted in Urdu. A shot from a rifle shattered the silence. The pit-a-pat of the boots was petering out when another shot was fired. He jumped to his feet, his bag under his arm, and warily trod ahead -- like a centipede crawls on with a hundred legs -- through rows of closed shops, down empty streets and numerous alleys which uncomfortably crossed one another to form a veritable maze.

After a long while he made it to the main road and walked past many turns to reach a neighbourhood which too was shrouded in darkness. Suddenly he started climbing up a duplex staircase. In the dim glow of a light bulb -- whose source he could not locate -- he surveyed the wet, peeled-off plaster of the wall. He felt choked by a musty smell. The staircase was suffocating, letting air in only from one side. He touched the rough surface of the wall: a chill passed through his fingers to his whole body. A woman's face was drawn on the wall, close to which was piled a mound of red bricks. He got all

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