



ILLUSTRATION: NAHFIA JAHAN MONNI

shallow pool. Suddenly, while steadying his foothold, he slips and splashes into the pool.

In knee-deep water, soaked and splattered, Omar clutches wildly at clumps of earth to crawl to the edge of the pit. Walking along once again on a pathway, it seems to him that the whole night-scene is charged with an eerie stillness. In the distance, he can see the village and dank, dark trees surrounding a vast field. Tired, he stops walking. Distant, scattered, twinkling lights appear surreal in the misty greyness. Omar looks back. He can see nothing else except a thick bamboo grove. He feels a twinge of fear. As he turns to step away and return to his friends, he sees a figure approaching from afar.

Startled, Omar stops.

Slowly, the distance between him and the figure diminishes. He can now see the outline of a person. First, the height, the hair, and the disheveled clothes. Then, the face. The shadowy figure finally appears before him as a complete being. Shocked, speechless, Omar sees the solitary man wandering across the vast desolate field, finally stand gauntly before him.

The man has bushy, greying eyebrows. His eyes are intense, with a dull sheen! Omar shivers. The figure exudes the

The sky turns grey as soon as the bullock-cart reaches the village lane. Rain shatters nature's luminosity, ruining the journey of the three friends through the rough backwoods. The jagged pillar of lightning is hidden behind dense dark fluffs of cloud.

All three are disturbingly drenched by raindrops filtering through the cart's sloping bamboo canopy. Cold air penetrates the thin fabric of wet shirts to touch the soul within the body. In the midst of this sudden chilly weather and unexpected rainfall, the three friends begin to blame each other for embarking on an adventure on such a cold, clammy, unhealthy night.

One of the friends takes out a damp cigarette from his pocket and hunts for matches. The black tip of the match is wet. Failure to light the cigarette makes

# A SIGH IN MOONLIT MIST

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the song but is unable to carry the high note; his voice breaks and becomes low and hoarse. At this, the three friends burst into laughter. In response, the rain-drenched driver says, self-consciously, shyly, "My voice is not as it used to be."

In the wake of the night's tumult, the bullock-cart meanders through the rain. The shadow of the bamboo grove spreads its dark dense mystery like a maenad's hair. In this chilly night, with three pairs of drowsy eyes, with the driver calling out "Het, het" to the galloping bullocks, with the driver's broken-voiced attempt at song, the cloud parts to drop from its lap the new crescent moon. It has climbed to its zenith in the sky.

The friends, Kaiser, Tulu, and Omar, descend from the cart. The rain-swept earth is as iridescent as burnished brass. The three walk along the grassy meadow. Behind them, the driver dozes on the still, silent cart. The journey itself is not delightful, as the damp matches refuse to light their cigarettes. In the middle of this lonely landscape, two friends try to light matchstick after matchstick in the warm sheltering palm of their cupped hands. Omar walks swiftly away from them, saying, "Nature's call...."

Behind him come sniggering sounds from the other two. "Come on, does one have to go so far for this? Are you a woman?" Then, the faint, receding voices. "Ah! These wet clothes make it hard to enjoy. You are right. Let us strip and wander naked, becoming one with nature."

Still a long way to go. Then, the sprawling bamboo grove. Omar looks back to see the other two lying, belly down. He walks along the left side of the grove, passing it. Getting away for "Nature's call" is a total fib.... Actually, a solitary yearning quest urges him on into the moonlit night. The continuous roar of crickets, the howling south wind, the path along the bamboo grove dipping steeply and then the incline upward after a space often or fifteen feet. There is a pool of water in the hollow gap. Moonlight is reflected on the water's surface. Entranced, Omar forgets that they still have a long way to travel. He had heard that Tulu's home is in a remote corner of a distant village.

But without any thought of the friends he has left behind, he loses himself in this exotic spot. He grips the hard earth of the slope to lower himself carefully into the

fragrant scent of crushed bamboo leaves. He can see a shadowy chin underneath hollow cheeks. It seems as if the old man has emerged from the white light. Alert, hypnotised, Omar stares. He senses he knows the face and the glance, knows the figure's stance. Curiosity now replaces fear in Omar. But, in that instant, a deep gravel voice rings out to break the stillness of the night. "Have you lost your way?" There can be several answers to the old man's question. Omar tries to respond, but he sees that the man is panting while gazing at the distant horizon. It seems to Omar that the man's skeleton is crushed; only his will power is keeping him alive. Omar asks, "Do you belong to this village?" With this question, Omar again looks at the enveloping darkness, but his fear subsides. It seems to him now that this old man is someone not unknown, and with his sudden emergence, the dark village also somehow seems familiar.

Looking away from the distant village, the old man uses a familiar tone, "Let's walk!" It seems the old figure is an inseparable part of the night. His call cannot be ignored.

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him frown. Another looks ahead for direction in the darkness. The third, who was the one most enthusiastic about this trip, throws his legs up in the air and, lying flat on his back, sings aloud the song soaring in his heart.

Under the mesmeric spell of the song and the night, the cart-driver tries to sing