

After page 12

They walk to the top of a green hillock and sit. The old man gasps for breath. Cold air pierces the tattered loose gown that drapes his body. Omar realises after a while that his clothes are wet. He begins to shiver. Suddenly, he remembers his friends. He stands up at once. He thinks of running away. But once again, that voice captivates him. "Do you not recognize me?" How incredible, thinks Omar. He has a feeling he knows the old man. Once more, he sits down on the mound with a thump. He peers at the old man, and asks: "Who are you?"

The old man coughs up phlegm. Behind them, tall *shimul* trees let loose a shower of leaves, and a few leaves fall on the old man's head. The old man shakes it, saying, "I'll tell you. Certainly, I'll tell you. I've found a person worth talking to after so long. I've been waiting for this day. Of course, I'll tell you." Amazed, Omar asks, "Why, don't you have anyone to talk with?" Gasping for breath, the man replies, "I did. Many years ago. I lived in the city then. The only thing I would do there was talk and talk. Almost no one listened, or if they did, they would do so without paying attention or without understanding. That is why I left the city. Here in the wilderness, I get equal pleasure in talking and listening. I carry on alone and I satisfy only myself." "Extraordinary! You lived in

the city? How can you survive in this isolation?"

Disregarding Omar's simple queries, the old man stares at the luminous night as if haunted. From the centre of a cloudless sky, the mighty moon generously keeps on pouring white light....Sparkling gems of light cascade from the surface of wet

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somewhat melancholy. "I saw her excitement upon sighting a healthy, handsome man. At a precise moment, she would flash her secret, coquettish smile. I have vivid memories of my wedding night. I was tense with arousal, trembling with anticipation of tasting the hitherto forbidden fruit. She was wooden and stiff. When I reached for her with my deformed ugly hand, it was the middle of the night. Recoiling, she stood up suddenly, and threw at me the same look of disgust that everyone else gave me at first sight. Pushing the door open, she rushed out of the room. Raising the shutters of the window, I could see her sit as if paralysed on the courtyard floor. Outside, it was extremely cold. But I did not go to her. I realized that the harsh night was more welcome to her than my body. She refused to come back into the room to me."

"Thus began our story. Though a couple, we spent each day bound by utter hatred. Wondrously, moments of sexual desire occurred, and my wife became pregnant. Union of two bodies, however brief, swept away my suffering. I forgot my sorrow. Such sensual pleasure taught me to forget the pain of years of neglect."

"Soon, our child was born."

Abruptly, the old man stops speaking. In the moonlight, Omar clearly sees the pock-marked, pitted face of the old man. He is brutally ugly; the distended lips hang below the chin. The tip of his nose is bent sideways to the left. Omar notes the extreme facial deformities but he feels neither fear nor disgust. It seems to him that the night's journey on the bullock-cart, a voyage initiated by him, was not really intended to take him to his friend Tulu's house, but to meet this particular man. He stands staring at the man's face.

The old man resumes speaking in muted, broken tones: "You know, what is so awful? My infant son was also deformed. His two legs were a replica of my arms. Amazingly, his face and mine were almost identical, as if my head had been cut off to be placed upon his neck. He was just a stump of flesh. My wife fainted at the sight of the baby. With a harrowing vision of the repetition of my own life's hateful curve in my son's life, I fled the room like a madman. For a while, I spent my days wandering. But without work, I suffered cruel pangs of hunger. The open road adopted me, making me desolate, providing no sustenance. An uncanny attraction pulled me homeward one day. In amazement, I watched the wife who had rejected my body in disgust nurse my son in her lap with deep maternal love, oblivious to his ugliness. The slow rhythm of home and hearth continued. But I became trapped in a new aberration. My head ached when I saw my beautiful wife sleeping next to my ugly child. An intolerable pain seared my body, rising from the soles of my feet to lodge in the centre of my heart; it was cold and numb."

"Once, in the middle of the night, I lit a lamp to look long and hard at the child. My wife was jolted awake, and pulling the child close to her, she looked at me. I saw fear in her eyes, which aroused in me a new emotion of cruel disgust. I thought I could kill myself in that moment by killing my child. I thought, at least one person in the world would be grief-stricken."

Continued to page 14



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leaves. There is desolation as far as the eye can see. Silence all around. The old man is carried away by a wave of voluble speech. Overwhelmed with a desire to know more, oblivious of place and time, Omar stares at the strangely familiar face. Omar's whole world is now circumscribed within this spot of earth. All material objects disappear to make this one man palpable, and Omar listens, entranced.

The old man begins, "I was born ugly and deformed." But stopping, he extends his two crooked arms from within the folds of his gown, revealing shrivelled fingers. In contrast to the moon's pure incandescence, he offers two deformed forelimbs having severely sagging skin. "One of my legs is also twisted and shrivelled." Incredulous, Omar inspects the leg. Strange! The man has walked a long way. Perhaps the uneven ground hid his deformity from him till now.

In the cosmic circle of silence, the old man exhales heavy, desperate gasps of breath. Inhaling the cold air, he says, "Because of my ugly face and shape, I have had to use use and strategy to survive each day. Also, to avoid arousing anyone's scorn, my manner became clownish and self-debasing. I read a great number of books. Actually, my profession was also directly related to salesmanship and the use of ready wit. But my deformity always conspired against my talent as a salesman. As a result, there was constant need to sharpen my wit, increase the flow of words, and maintain an even greater command of verbal marketing skill. I would gasp for breath after each prolonged performance. Perhaps, because so many women remain unmarried, I was able to find a healthy, beautiful wife. Not surprisingly, she was not in love with me or attracted to me at all. Since it was expected of her to maintain the image of the faithful wife, and because she wanted to have money to spend, she remained with me for a long time. "The old man's voice becomes