



ILLUSTRATION: NAHFIA JAHAN MONNI

stories in enchantment. He told me his father had abandoned him. He and his mother were passing days of dark despair. These stories of hope gave him the desire to live. Our unique friendship lasted a long time. My life was given renewed vigour. After work, I would bask in his company."

"One day, they went away in the middle of the night, without telling anyone. I was once again reduced into that former half-dead being. My days were filled with endless darkness and numerous untold incidents. What can I tell you? I looked for him everywhere, but did not find him.

After a long time, I have met that boy tonight, but he is now a young man."

Omar begins to tremble. He had noticed the old man's ugliness after it was pointed out to him, and now, in a trance, Omar realises he is that boy from the past. He knows all about the old man. This is why these eyes, this voice, is so familiar to him. He knew the man's wife, his crippled child, and can now remember all the other events.

The old man resumes speaking: "I killed my son. After the boy went away, I began to feel the first emotions of confused love for the child. His laughter, his playful hands, the two helpless legs threw me into a strange plight."

"My personality had also changed. Perhaps due to my wife's rejection, I became attracted to other women. No one paid much attention to me. However, in the presence of my wife and those whom I feared most, I appeared sober and correct. In public, I did not want to express desire for other women. This is the way with all men; in the presence of his wife and friends, a man pretends to be a saint. But privately I became licentious, a libertine. I was besotted by female flesh, pouncing on any female, but satisfaction was only possible in desire aroused by the beauty I alone saw in physically ugly women. I tried to live again in carnal pleasure, a secret pleasure which did not

because we were his parents, but his life's journey forward would be horrifying and unbearable. As a result, one night, while my wife was sleeping soundly, a strong animal instinct overpowered me. I strangled my son in the darkness."

The moonlit night bears down upon Omar. His dry clothes flutter in the cold howling wind. The noose of light is excruciating.... Yes, yes, by throttling, this is what he had heard.

Omar is numb and silent. The old man howls with laughter: "You know, the funny thing is that after my son's death, when the beast controlling me had fled, when the loving, blameless father had begun to sob, the police came with handcuffs. They knew that the ugly baby's death was society's gain, but they dragged me away simply to uphold their law. They tortured me mercilessly, a father who was grieving for his child. But they did not think at all of looking for the beast who had fled once the deed was done."

"They tortured me endlessly... to extract a confession for murder. Tell me, how could I confess to killing the child? I did not kill him. If I had done so, would I have wept, desolate at his loss, everyday, inside that barred cell? Deep into the night, I would clearly see him walking on healthy legs. He would sit by my side. I could see a strange light upon his face. His glance was never accusing. He alone knew my truth. Still, one fact remains. I felt a deep sorrow at his death, but there was no remorse."

"Lying in that barred cell, in severe bodily pain, I kept having a dream: I have gone far from human habitation. I am standing, while God appears from the fading western light. He descends, step by step. Misty white darkness engulfs the lowest step. He vanishes as soon as He steps into it."

"I am still standing, far away, on a hillside knoll."

"In that painful time, I had many thoughts about God. But I never found Him through His touch, though He is said to touch one's soul. I only saw Him as a faint shadowy figure."

As if reciting verses of a prayer, the old man continues, "Now, in solitude, my self-confidence has grown four-fold. Animals and green trees do not bother about my shape. Unlike men, they have not learnt to spite, mock, or pity, which had diminished me since my childhood. I walk through open fields all through the day and night. I converse with the trees, with the hare, the deer and the leopard. Looking up at the sky, I limp along and tell myself stories, those false stories of God knocking on the door of a wretched blind man, and the man miraculously able to see again. Or a weary stone-cutter finding a pearl inside a stone, and the pearl-seed suddenly saying aloud: 'I am another manifestation of God.' Tired of story-telling, I fall asleep inside a rocky cave. Here, hunger and thirst do not erase my identity. Days and nights pass in this manner. The eerie solitude, however, is frightening. I am deep in meditation of nature one day, when suddenly, piercing the natural world, a maiden appears. She is clothed in green leaves. It is a moonlit night such as tonight. I gaze at her limpid soft eyes in awe. She is laughing, standing in a vast open field.

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"But then I thought, if instead of the child, I could die, the entire world would be spared. Another compelling thought began to haunt me, that even though I was able to ignore my deformity and carry on in the midst of hatred, what if I was bedridden, smeared with my own sweat and blood and shit and urine, would they throw my worthless living body on the river bank or in a deep pit? It would only serve to pollute the earth. This image of wretchedness evoked a demonic force in me. I resolved to leave the township to dwell in some distant, desolate place."

"You know, something wonderful happened at this time. I came across a young boy living in a house a few miles from my own. This boy was the first person to bind me with true human affection, instead of with loathing. The boy used to tell me everyday, 'Your gaze is extraordinary. I have never seen such affectionate eyes.' And he admired my work of words, my embroidered stories. For instance, the story of a beggar's hut turning into a palace; or a dead maiden being brought back to life by a flute-player; or, a man attempting suicide after defeat in battle finds a gold statue on a river bank.... He used to listen to these

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harm others. I believed that only evil deeds which are openly flaunted can corrupt society. Gradually, I came to realise that this abnormality, this deception, was pushing me further into sickness. I began to feel intensely that I had no value as a person anywhere in this wide world. My child's fate would be the same as mine. We would love him only

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