

After page 10

village through Assam and settled near the Khowai river and married the only daughter of a businessman in the area and in turn inherited four elephants, a large piece of land, a big pond and many betel nut trees.

With those elephants, Syed's father would cross the river and go off to do business in Tripura—trading in cotton, spices and other valuable items.

All of those stories seemed out of a folklore to Moni. She also learned how her mother-in-law would take the weekly boat that would arrange trips to Assam by crossing the river Khowai. It was easier to get to the Indian side rather than try and go to the main marketplace in Habiganj. Once in Assam, she would buy the herbs and pills from the local 'Ojha' that she believed would help calm her possessed husband.

Moni often thought back to those days and always wondered of the strength of her mother-in-law and also thought of her helplessness. How could she not leave? Now, with her daughters all grown up, Moni also wondered why she, too, could not find the courage to leave. She could manage to survive, with the help of her daughters. She could try. She had lived through hell every day of her married life. Sometimes living in the fear of getting beaten up, sometimes scurrying around the house trying to hide all the knives and hammers so that he could not

harm her or her daughters.

In the early days, when she first saw her husband lose his mind and swing like a pendulum between lucidity and madness, she too considered talking to a "hujur" or an "ojha" to find some way out of this madness. She vividly remembered the first time he left her in the Middle East and visited Bangladesh. That was the time, it had first happened. Her husband had visited the country almost after two decades of living abroad. That is when he first, in a very decisive move, maneuvered his thoughts and slowly but surely crossed over the bridge and transformed into a raging madman.

She was left abroad with her three children while Shafiq back in the country continued to get worse. Moni could not believe her ears when he first refused to recognise her, tried to walk stark naked through the dirt roads of the village, tear apart photographs of their wedding, the ones he found in the steel almirah of the room where they first lived after he brought her home as a new wife.

She called the family at their village home in Bangladesh almost every day back then. It took months for him to get better and return to the Middle-East. But things never really got back to normal after that. They eventually had to return to Bangladesh after her husband failed to manage the business and slowly slipped into debt.

When she thinks of it now, it feels like a lifetime ago. The marriage, the

madness, the mood. He had a temper, sure, but at least she had never felt the need to hide all the knives, screw drivers and everything else deemed potentially risky, the moment he appeared to have a nervous fit.

In between that first episode years ago and now, she too had grown up. From being a subdued young woman from a faraway village near the pitch dark Kalenga Hills to a woman now navigating Dhaka, almost on her own, she lost all her naivety and innocence. Yet within her, she carried those old beliefs too: that maybe, just maybe, if they consulted a religious person, they would find some answer to this crisis.

Day 29

The familiar sound of a car horn rang in the background.

Shafiq stirred from his evening slumber. He was supposed to be released today from this enclosure. At least that was the buzz in the building. He wore his long robe, crinkled and full of sweat stains. He even found some perfume in the black Asus laptop bag his wife had packed that night.

The reunion with his wife was simple. No frills. No tears. He walked out after exchanging cursory niceties with all the people who had brought him his daily meals.

Day 29

Moni felt restless the whole day. The next day, they would let her husband go. And she would have to bring him home.

Although Shafiq's temper had dissipated quite a bit in the last few years, Moni had heard the stories of her husband's childhood. His hair always stood on an edge—a testament to his rowdy temper. The second oldest among eight siblings, he would spend the entire day running around in the village. He was also tender and loving. She knew this because as a kid, Shafiq would always pick wild *borois* from the tree near the pond and take back home to his ill father.

She tried to shake these thoughts from her mind and readied the house. Sporadically she also tried to console her youngest daughter over the return of her husband, while internally fretting about the days ahead.

Each return from the mental health clinic was followed by a few good days before her husband started acting up again. Her daughters, by this point, had started to detest him. His sloppy eating habits, his snoring and watching TV on full volume, his tiniest comments, they hated them all.

Day 30

Today, Shafiq woke up in his home. In the streaming morning light, the green wall in his room appeared even more luminescent green. This was his favourite color. He decided to sleep in, choosing to spend the morning reminiscing about his life abroad. He remembered how, on his oldest child's seventh birthday, he had decided to renovate the house and paint everything from the sofa to the curtains to the wall and even a few plates and jugs for good measure, in varying shades of green. In the deserts of the Middle-East, Shafiq had often thought of his village home, the small black-green hills on the horizon, and the ombre-green rice fields that went on and on for miles. Now, back in the village, he could not forget his life

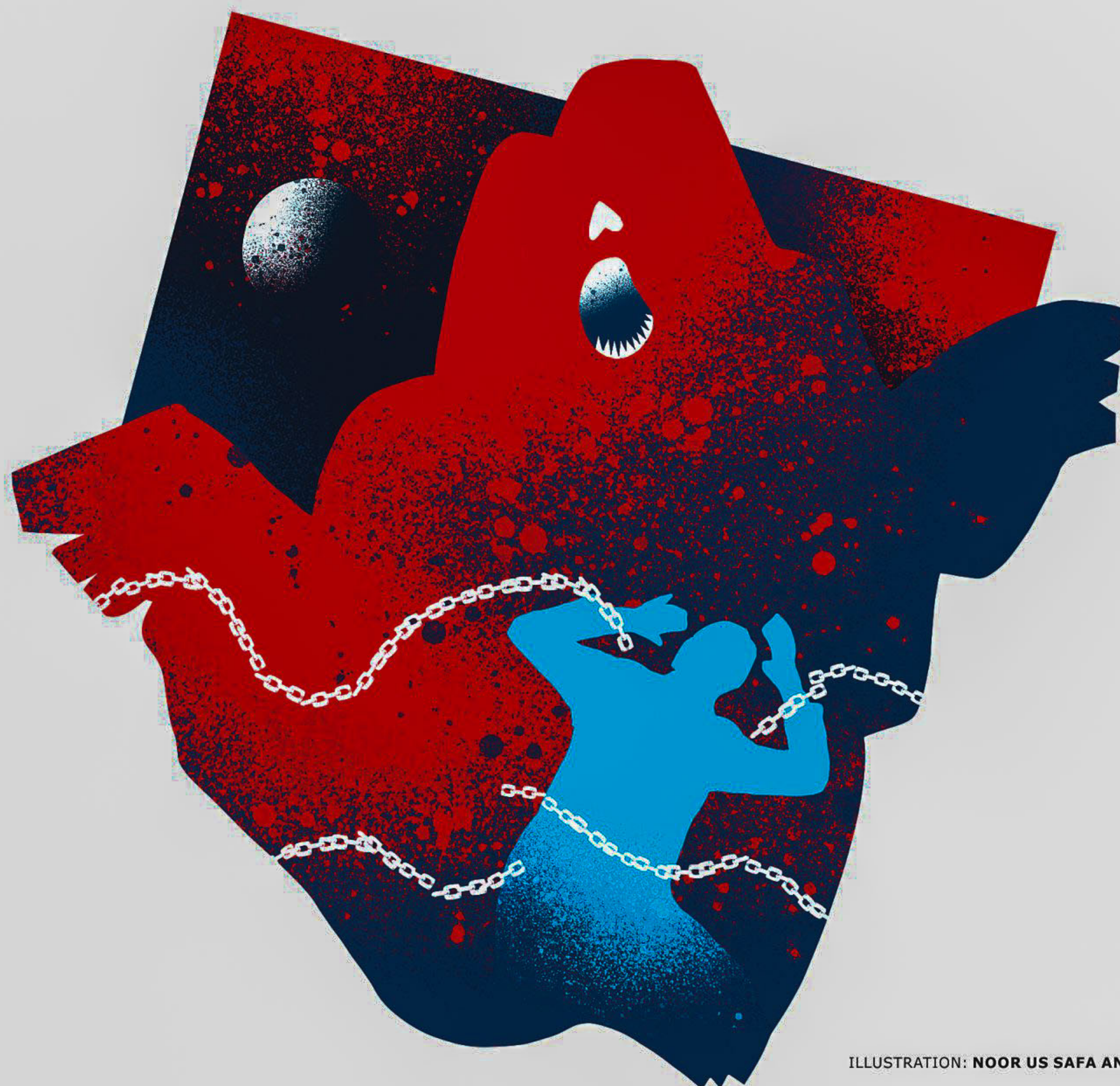


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Continued to page 12