Moonlight Shadows

[Excerpt; first appeared in *The Chiron Review*]

Save for an occasional murmur or a cough, no one spoke. They were waiting for a sign from Gopal.

Squatting on a rock under a mangrove tree, its branches dry and gnarled like an old hand with many fingers, Gopal pulled out his crumpled pack of *beedis* without looking down, his gaze fixed on a spot in front of him. Gopal's jungle shoes were covered in wet mud. There were only three *beedis* left, wrapped in a paper roll, and two of them were crushed. He shook his head and lit one with a match that he pulled out of his dirt-stained trousers. The pungent smell of miry swamps, mix of rust and rotten wood, filled the air. Three long-tailed shrikes sat on a low branch, their heads bobbing, scanning the scene. Like an army of toy soldiers, air-breathing roots of the mangrove tree stuck out of the mud around Gopal. In the twilight, the tip of the *beedi* glowed and turned into a fingernail of ash in his hand, sweat dripping slowly like sap.

Diagonally across from Gopal, sitting on a low abandoned shack that was half-destroyed by a cyclone from two years ago was a tiger, his breathing heavy, demeanor surprisingly calm for an animal being chased down by angry men.

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