

SA‘ADAT HASAN MANTO

Smell*

IT WAS A DAY DURING THE RAINY SEASON—a day just like today. Outside the window, the leaves of the peepal tree stood drenched in the rain. A young woman from the hills, a *ghatan*, was lying curled up against Randheer on the spring mattress of this very same teak bed, which had now been moved away from the window a bit.

Beyond the window, the leaves washed by the rain quivered like earrings in the milky darkness of the night, very much like the shivers the girl clinging to him sent coursing through his body.

Randheer had been reading an English-language newspaper the whole day and had been through not just every news item but practically all the ads as well. Toward evening he stepped out onto the balcony to amuse himself a bit and spotted the girl under a tamarind tree shielding herself from the downpour. She probably worked in the neighboring rope factory. He cleared his throat and coughed a couple of times to draw her attention and, after a while, he motioned to her to come up.

He’d been feeling quite despondent for the past several days. With the war going on, nearly all the Christian girls of Bombay, who could be had at a bargain price, had enlisted in the Auxiliary Force. Some had moved to the Fort area and set up dancing schools, which only gora soldiers were allowed to enter. Randheer was feeling quite miserable. One reason was that the Christian girls were no longer readily available. Another was the color of his skin: although enviably suave and well-mannered, educated, in good health, and quite a bit more handsome than most young men, he was barred from practically all the brothels of the Fort area. After all, he was not a gora.

Before the war came along he had physical relationships with umpteen Christian girls around the Nagpara and Taj Hotel areas. He was far more adept in matters of the flesh than any of the Christian boys with whom

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those girls conducted fleeting affairs just to appear chic until eventually settling down with some dumbo or other.

He had called the *ghatan* over to get even with Hazel who had recently acquired this air of mannered haughtiness. Hazel lived in the flat below his. Every morning, outfitted in her army uniform, her khaki cap set at a rakish angle over her short-trimmed hair, she marched out of her place with such a swagger, as if everyone should roll themselves out as a carpet for her to walk on.

Why in the world did he feel so drawn to Christian girls?—he'd often wondered. Well, yes, they did show off all the seductive assets of their bodies to good effect, spoke unabashedly of their irregular periods and even their former love affairs, and swayed their legs the minute some dance tune or other drifted into their ears—but any woman could just as easily boast of these qualities, couldn't she?

When Randheer gestured to the *ghatan* to come up he had no thought whatsoever of getting her into bed with him. Noticing how thoroughly soaked she was, he feared the poor thing might catch pneumonia so he said, "Take off those wet clothes! You'll catch cold."

She thought she understood what was implied and blushed. When Randheer took out a fresh, white dhoti and handed it to her, she hesitated for a moment and then undid her *kashta*, its grime made more visible by the rain. She pushed it aside and quickly threw the white dhoti around her hips and started to undo her tight-fitting choli, the two ends of which she had secured with a tight knot that had disappeared in the faint but grimy cleavage of her shapely breasts.

With her worn down nails she struggled with the knot for quite a while but couldn't manage to loosen what the rainwater had tightened so firmly. Eventually she gave up and muttered something to Randheer in Marathi which meant, "What shall I do? It just won't open."

Randheer sat down beside her to give it a try but he couldn't make the knot budge either. In exasperation he grabbed the two ends and tugged at them so vigorously that the knot came undone. His hands lurched from the force of the pull, baring two trembling breasts. For a moment he felt as though, with the dexterity of a master potter, his own hands had shaped a lump of soft, moist clay into a pair of exquisite cups on the girl's breast.

Her youthful breasts had the same rawness and allure, the same moist freshness and cooling warmth that oozes from vessels just fashioned by a potter. A strange glow was implicit in the earth-color of those pristine young breasts. A diaphanous layer of a sort of muted luminescence beneath their darkish complexion was giving off that strange glow, which was almost not

a glow. The two swellings on her chest looked more like a pair of earthen lamps set afloat on the muddy waters of a pond.

Yes, it was a day during the rains—a day just like this one. The leaves of the peepal were trembling outside the window. The *ghatan's* dripping-wet, two-piece dress was lying on the floor in a messy heap, while she herself was wrapped around Randheer. The warmth of her naked, unwashed body produced the same sensation in his own that he felt in the hot, filthy hammams of the barbers during blustery winters.

She had clung to his body all night long, as if their two bodies had melded together. They hadn't exchanged more than a couple of words. They had no need to. Their breath, their lips and hands conveyed all that needed to be communicated. With the tenderness of the gentlest breeze, his hands caressed her breasts all through the night—and however light the touch, her tiny nipples, in the middle of their large, dark, coarse areola, responded, sending a wave of tremulous pleasure through her body that never failed to produce the same in his own.

Such tremors were not something Randheer hadn't experienced before. He had, many times, and he was familiar with the pleasure they gave. Hadn't he, after all, spent many nights with his chest pressed against the soft or firm breasts of some girl or other? And even spent time with such capricious girls that they had no qualms about sharing the kind of intimate stories about their families that are usually kept from strangers? He'd had sexual relations with women who took the initiative and did all the work themselves without encumbering him in any way. But this girl from the hills whom he'd beckoned to come up—she was something else again. So unbelievably different!

A strange smell wafting from her body flooded his senses all night—a smell at once pleasant and nauseating. It flowed from every part of her body: under her arms, around her breasts, her hair, her belly, and it permeated every breath he took. All night long he wondered about this smell: without it creeping into every crevice of his mind, crowding out all his thoughts, new and old, could he have felt as close to this *ghatan* as he did now? Absolutely not!

This smell had fused them together for the night. They had taken possession of each other so totally, plunged into each other's depths so fully that they were carried away into pure human ecstasy—fleeting yet somehow immutable, in motion yet frozen, like a bird soaring so high in the sky's limitless azure that it appears perfectly still.

Even though he was familiar with the smell radiating from every pore of the girl's body, he couldn't quite describe what it was. It was like the smell of fresh earth just sprinkled with water. But not exactly. It was dif-

ferent somehow. And it didn't have the artificial aura of lavender or attar. It was something primal and timeless—like the relationship between man and woman.

Amazingly, though Randheer detested the odor of perspiration and routinely dusted his body with talcum powder and daubed his underarms with deodorant after every bath, he found himself madly kissing the *ghatan's* hairy armpits over and over—yes, over and over—and felt no revulsion; instead he found it strangely pleasurable. Damp with sweat, her soft, underarm hair was releasing a scent that was very conspicuous and yet completely unfathomable. He felt that he knew it, was familiar with it, and even understood what it signified, but couldn't explain it to anyone.

It was a day during the rains—just like today.... He was looking out the same window. The peepal leaves were trembling in the pouring rain, their rustling sound blending into the atmosphere. It was dark outside, but the darkness was suffused with a soft fluorescence, as though a little light had escaped from the stars and descended to the earth with the raindrops....

Yes, it was a day during the rains. His room had a single teak bed then, now it had two—the new arrival next to its mate—and a brand new dressing table stood in one corner. It was the same season, the same weather, and a barely discernible light was coming down from the stars along with the raindrops, but now the atmosphere was filled with the overpowering scent of henna.

One bed was empty. On the other, Randheer lay with his head down watching raindrops dancing on the fluttering leaves outside the window, and lying next to him was a fair-colored girl who seemed to have fallen asleep after her futile attempts to cover her nakedness. Her red silk shalwar lay bunched up on the empty bed, the tasseled end of its dark red waist-cord dangling. Her other clothes were also on that bed. Her shirt with a golden floral pattern, her bra, underpants and dupatta were all of a deep red color—a garish, dark red—and saturated with the strong scent of henna.

Flecks of glitter were scattered in her dark black hair like specks of dust, and glitter, together with a heavy layer of powder and rouge, gave an unbelievably strange color to her face—pallid, as though all the life had been squeezed out. The dye from her bra had bled, leaving reddish stains on her fair chest.

Her breasts were milky white with just a hint of blue and her underarms were shaved clean, leaving behind a grey shadow. Randheer glanced at her several times, and each time he would find himself thinking that

he'd just pried open some crate and taken her out—as if she was a consignment of books or china. Her body had marks in several spots just like the marks and scratches left on books and china from packing and shipping.

When he undid the strings of her tight-fitting bra Randheer noticed that it had creased her back and the soft flesh of her bosom. And the cord of her shalwar had been done up so tightly it left a mark around her waist. The sharp edges of her heavy, jewel-studded necklace had apparently grazed the delicate skin of her bosom in many places, as if unforgiving nails had scraped it.

Indeed, it was just like that other day. The rain was producing the same sound as it pelted down on the tender leaves of the peepal—the same pitter-patter that had filled his ears that other night long ago. The weather was divine. A cool breeze was blowing softly ... but it was laden with the pungent scent of henna.

Of course his hands had roved over the girl's milky-white bosom for a long time, like the breath of a gentle breeze; he'd felt her body quiver in intermittent waves under his touch, and even felt the suppressed passions stirring within her. When he pressed his breast to hers every pore of his body heard the notes rising from her body—but where was that call: the call he had sensed in the strong odor emitted by the *ghatan's* body, more compelling than the cry of an infant thirsting for milk, the call that had gone beyond the limits of sound and needed no words to convey it.

Randheer was looking out through the grillwork of the window, somewhere far beyond the trembling leaves of the peepal, farther into the distance where he could make out an unusual subdued glow enmeshed in the dark grey of the clouds, the same glow he had seen radiate from the breasts of the *ghatan*, hidden like a secret, but discernible all the same.

The girl was stretched out beside him. He looked at her inert body, as soft and white as flour kneaded with milk and butter, the scent of henna leaping from it now faded a bit. He found it immensely revolting—this exhausted smell in the throes of death, somewhat tangy, oddly tangy, like the sour belches of indigestion. A pathetic, sickly smell!

He again looked at the girl lying next to him. The femininity in her being seemed strangely compressed ... the way white globs float listlessly in colorless liquid when the milk has gone bad. Actually, the smell that flowed from the *ghatan* so naturally, unbidden and without effort, still pervaded his senses. It was a smell infinitely more subtle and far-reaching than the perfume of henna, not at all anxious to be inhaled. It had flowed into him quietly and settled into place.

In one last attempt, Randheer ran his hand over the girl's milky-white body but felt no tremor. His new bride, the daughter of a distinguished

magistrate, with a bachelor's degree, the heartthrob of countless boys at her college, failed to rouse her husband's passion.

From the dying scent of henna he desperately tried to retrieve the smell that had wafted from the *ghatan's* unwashed body and flooded his senses on just such a rainy day when the leaves of the peepal outside the window were bathed in a downpour. □

—*Translated by Muhammad Umar Memon*