

SA‘ADAT HASAN MANTO

Open It!*

THE SPECIAL TRAIN left Amritsar at two in the afternoon, taking eight hours to reach Mughalpura. Quite a few passengers were killed along the way, several received injuries, and some just wandered off to God knows where.

At ten in the morning, when Sirajuddin opened his eyes on the ice-cold ground of the refugee camp, he saw a surging tide of men, women and children all around him and even his small remaining ability to think and comprehend deserted him. He stared at the murky sky for the longest time. Amidst the incredible din, his ears seemed to be firmly plugged against any sound. Seeing him in this state anyone would have thought he was deeply engrossed in thought. That, of course, was not the case. He was totally numb. His entire being seemed to be suspended in space.

Gazing blankly at the murky sky his eyes collided with the sun and a shaft of intense light penetrated every fiber of his being. Suddenly he snapped back into consciousness. A series of images flitted across his mind—images of plunder, fire, stampede, the train station, gunshots, night, and Sakina.

Sirajuddin jumped up with a start and made his way through the interminable tide of humanity around him like a man possessed.

For three full hours he scoured the camp calling out “Sakina! Sakina!” but found no trace of his only daughter, a teenager. The whole area was rife with ear-splitting noise. Someone was looking for his child, another for his mother, still another for his wife or daughter. Finally Sirajuddin gave up and plopped down off to one side from sheer exhaustion, straining his memory to retrieve the moment when Sakina had become separated from him. However, each effort to recall ended with his mind jammed at the sight of his wife’s mutilated body, her guts spilling out, and he couldn’t go any further.

* “K̤h̤ōl Dō,” from the author’s collection *Manṭō Kabāniyān* (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 1995), 11–14.

Sakina's mother was dead. She had died right in front of Sirajuddin's eyes. But where was Sakina? As she lay dying, Sakina's mother had urged him, "Don't worry about me. Just take Sakina and run!"

Sakina was with him. Both of them were running barefooted. Her dupatta slipped off and when he stopped to pick it up, Sakina shouted, "Abba Ji, leave it!" He retrieved it anyway. Thinking about it now, his eyes spontaneously drifted toward the bulge in the pocket of his coat. He plunged his hand into the pocket and took out the piece of cloth. It was the same dupatta. There could be no doubt about it. But where was Sakina herself?

Sirajuddin strained his memory but his tired mind was muddled. Had he been able to bring her to the station? Was she with him aboard the train? Had he passed out when the rioters forced the train to stop and stormed in? Was it then they carried her off?

His mind was bursting with questions, but there were no answers. He needed sympathy, but everyone around him needed it too. He wanted to cry, but couldn't. His tears had dried up.

Six days later, when Sirajuddin was able to pick himself up a bit, he met some people who were willing to help him. Eight young men equipped with a lorry and rifles. He blessed them and described Sakina for them. "She is fair and exceedingly pretty. She takes after her mother, not me. She is about seventeen, with big eyes and dark hair. She has a beautiful big mole on her right cheek. She's my only daughter. Please find her. May God bless you!"

The young volunteers assured old Sirajuddin with tremendous fervor that if his daughter was alive he would be reunited with her in a few days.

The volunteers didn't spare any effort. Putting their lives in harm's way, they went to Amritsar. They rescued several women, men, and children and brought them to safety. Ten days passed but they found no trace of Sakina.

One day they were heading off to Amritsar on their rescue mission aboard the same lorry when they spotted a girl trudging along the road near Chuhrat. The sound of the lorry startled the girl and she took off in a panic. The boys stopped the lorry and ran after her. Eventually they caught up with her in a field. She was stunningly beautiful and had a big black mole on her right cheek. "Don't be afraid," one of the boys tried to reassure her. "Are you Sakina?"

The girl turned deathly pale. She didn't reply. When the boys, all of them, reassured her gently, her fear subsided and she admitted that she was indeed Sakina, Sirajuddin's daughter.

The young men tried every which way to please her. They fed her, gave her milk to drink, and then helped her to get into the lorry. One of

them even took off his jacket and gave it to her because she was feeling quite awkward without her dupatta, making repeated but futile attempts to cover her chest with her arms.

Several days went by without Sirajuddin receiving any news of Sakina. He spent his days making the rounds of different camps and offices but had no success in tracing his missing daughter. At night he prayed for the success of the volunteers who had assured him that if she was alive they would find her in a matter of days.

One day he saw those volunteers at the camp. They were sitting inside the lorry. Just as the lorry was about to take off Sirajuddin rushed over to them and asked, "Son, did you find my Sakina?"

"Oh, we will, we will," they said in unison and the lorry took off.

Once again Sirajuddin prayed for the success of these young men, which took some of the weight off his heart.

That evening he noticed some hullabaloo close to where he was sitting. Four men were carrying a stretcher. Upon inquiring he was told a girl was found lying unconscious by the train tracks. He followed them. They handed the girl over to the hospital staff and left.

For a while he stood leaning against the wooden post outside the facility and then he walked slowly inside. There was no one in the room. All he could see was the same stretcher with a corpse lying on it. Sirajuddin advanced toward it taking small, hesitant steps. All of a sudden the room lit up. "Sakina!" he screamed spotting the big black mole gleaming on the blanched face of the dead girl.

"What is it?" the doctor who had turned on the light asked him.

"I ... sir, I ... I'm her father!" the words came out of his raspy throat.

The doctor glanced at the body lying on the stretcher. He felt the pulse and, pointing at the window, told Sirajuddin, "Open it!"

Sakina's body stirred ever so faintly on the stretcher. With lifeless hands she slowly undid the knot of her waistband and lowered her shalwar.

"She's alive! My daughter is alive!" Old Sirajuddin screamed with unbounded joy.

The doctor broke into a cold sweat. □

—Translated by Muhammad Umar Memon