

SA‘ADAT HASAN MANTO

Humiliation*

DOG-TIRED AFTER THE DAY’S WORK, she lay down on her bed and immediately fell asleep. The Sanitary Inspector of the Municipal Committee, whom she called Seth, was drunk when he left for home a little while ago after jouncing her bones and ribs. He could have stayed the night but he was concerned about his faithful wife who loved him dearly.

The money Sogandhi had received from the Inspector for the physical exercise was protruding from under her tight, saliva-covered bodice. At times, her breathing would make the silvery coins tinkle and the sound would blend in with the asynchronous beats of her heart, as though the molten silver of these coins was dripping into the blood of her heart. Her chest was burning inside, partly because of the brandy which the Inspector had brought and partly because of the wine which they drank with water after the soda was finished.

She was lying on her stomach on her spacious teakwood bed. Her bare arms were spread like the spar of a kite which had separated from the paper after getting wet with dew. The wrinkled flesh of her right armpit was bulging out. It had turned bluish from regular shaving and looked as if a clawed piece of chicken-skin had been placed there.

It was a very small room with countless things scattered all around. Under the bed, a dog suffering from scabies was sleeping with his face resting on three or four pairs of decaying, rotted flip-flops. While asleep he was taunting something invisible. Because of the scabies, the dog had bald spots all over his body and from a distance he looked like a folded rag meant for cleaning shoes.

Her cosmetics were sitting on a small shelf: blush-on, lipstick, talcum powder, a comb, and some metallic hairpins which she probably used for her bun. Nearby, the cage of a green parrot who was sleeping with his neck buried in his feathers was hanging from a long peg. Slices of unripe guavas

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and rotted peels of oranges filled the cage. Tiny black mosquitoes and moths were hovering over these stinking slices. By the bed there was a rattan chair with its back extremely dirty as a result of people resting their heads on it. On the right side of the chair there was a small table on which a portable His Master's Voice gramophone had been placed. The black cloth covering the gramophone was worn-out. Rusted needles were scattered over the table as well as in all corners of the room. Right above the small table four frames containing photos of different men hung on the wall.

A short distance from these photos, in the corner of the wall to the left when one entered the room, there was a photo of Ganesh-Ji in bright colors, heavily garlanded with fresh and dried flowers. The photo had probably been taken from a fabric roll and then installed in the frame. Next to the photo, on a small, greasy shelf, there was a cupful of oil meant for the lamp. Nearby was the lamp whose flame was standing upright like a tilak on a forehead due to a lack of wind. There were also some wicks on the shelf.

When she would start the day's proceedings, she would, from a distance, have the money blessed by the statue of Ganesh-Ji and then she would touch it with her forehead before putting it inside her bodice. Since her breasts were fairly large, the money she kept in her bodice stayed safe. However, when Maadhu would come on vacation from Pune she had to hide some bills in a small indentation which she had dug especially for this purpose under one of the bedposts. Ram Lal, the pimp, had taught Sogandhi this method for keeping her earnings safe from Maadhu. When he learned that Maadhu came from Pune and attacked Sogandhi, he asked her, "Since when have you taken this son-of-a-bitch as your lover? This is a strange love affair. The son-of-a-bitch doesn't even spend a single penny and still enjoys you. And besides the pleasure, he's even able to obtain some cash from you before going off. I've been in this business for the last seven years. I know all the weaknesses of you girls."

Ram Lal pimped a hundred and twenty girls for anywhere from 10 to 100 rupees in different parts of Bombay. He said to Sogandhi, "Bitch, don't squander your money like this. He wouldn't even leave a stitch on your body, that motherfucker. Dig a small hole under the bedpost and stash all your money in it. When he comes, you tell him, 'I swear on your life, Maadhu, I haven't earned a single dime since morning. Please order a cup of tea and some *Plato* biscuits. I'm starving.' Got it? These are troubled times, my love, this damn Congress has screwed up the market by getting liquor banned. You're able to get something to drink somehow, but when I see these empty bottles at your place and smell the booze, I swear to God I feel like screaming just the way you do."

The part Sogandhi liked the most on her own body was her breasts.

Once Jamna had said to her, “You must keep these juicy little apples tied up. If you wear a bra, you’ll be able to keep them in good shape.”

Sogandhi laughed at this, “Jamna, you think everybody is as big a fool as you are. People claw at your flesh for ten rupees and you think everybody is the same. Let any bastard touch me like that ... Hey, let me tell you what happened last night. Ram Lal brought a Punjabi at 2:00 am. Thirty rupees for the night. When we were about to go to bed I switched the light off and, you know what, he got scared. You listening? All of his pomp vaporized the moment it got dark. He was scared shitless. I said, ‘Come on, let’s do it. What are you waiting for? It’s almost 3:00 a.m. and the day will start soon.’ He said, ‘Light ... light ...’ I said, ‘What’s with the light?’ He said, ‘Light ... light ...’ I couldn’t help laughing at his muffled voice. ‘Well, I won’t switch the light on.’ And then I pinched his fleshy thigh. He quaked and sat up and then switched on the light. I quickly covered myself with a sheet and said, ‘Shame on you, you cursed bastard.’ When he returned to the bed, I got up and switched the light off in a flash. Again he got nervous. It was fun the whole night. Dark ... light ... light ... dark. When he heard the sound of the tram nearby he slipped on his trousers and fled. The son-of-a-bitch must’ve won the money gambling and then he just blew it. Jamna, you’re too naïve. I know a lot of tricks to put these people in their places.”

In fact, Sogandhi did know a lot of tricks which she had shared with a couple of friends too. She would share these tricks with everybody: “If a man is a simpleton and doesn’t talk much, play the devil. Talk endlessly, irritate him, tickle him, fondle him. If he wears a beard run your fingers through it and while you’re at it tug some of his hair too. Pat him on his tummy if he’s potbellied. Don’t let him make himself at home. He’ll leave a happy man and you’ll stay unharmed too. Men who remain uncommunicative and unexpressive are very dangerous. They’ll even crack your bones if they’re able to have their way.”

Sogandhi wasn’t as clever as she pretended to be. She had very few clients. She was a very emotional girl and that was the reason all the tricks she knew slipped from her mind down to her abdomen, which had stretch marks due to childbirth. At first glance it appeared as if the dog suffering from scabies had clawed these marks. When a bitch would pass by her dog without noticing him, he would scratch marks like these on the ground to overcome his humiliation.

Sogandhi was a contemplative sort of a person, but the moment someone talked to her affectionately in soft, tender tones she would melt and it would spread into the other parts of her body. To her mind, the physical union of a man and a woman was completely worthless, but the rest of her body craved it. They longed to get fagged out, a fatigue that beats them to

sleep. How sound one sleeps after becoming dog-tired! The unconsciousness which overwhelms after being pounded upon is full of tranquility. At times you feel as if you exist; at others you feel as if you don't. And between these two extremities, sometimes you feel as if you're hanging high in the air. Air above you, air below you, air to your right, air to your left. Air and just air. And then there's a peculiar kind of joy in getting choked in this air.

When she was a kid she used to hide in her mother's big trunk while playing hide-and-seek. How exciting the combination of feeling suffocated and her heart beating rapidly from fear of getting caught was.

Sogandhi wanted to live her whole life in a trunk like this with people outside looking for her. At times they would find her so she could also try to find them. The kind of life she had been living during the last five years was indeed hide-and-seek. At times she sought someone; at others someone else sought her. This was how her life was going. She was happy because she had to stay happy. Every night there would be a man on her spacious teakwood bed and Sogandhi, who knew countless tricks of the trade, and even after having decided firmly that she would not cave in to their demands and would deal with them dryly, would get swayed by her emotions only to be left dissatisfied later.

Every night her visitor, new or old, would say to her, "Sogandhi, I love you." And Sogandhi, despite knowing that he was lying to her, would melt and feel as if she was really being loved. Love ... what a glorious word it is! She wanted to melt it and massage herself with it so that it permeated all the pores of her body. Or, maybe, she could go inside of it. Squeeze herself inside of it and then close the lid. At times, when the desire to love and be loved would grow too intense inside of her, she would feel like putting the man lying next to her in her lap, to pat him, to sing him lullabies, to lull him to sleep.

Her capacity to love was so extraordinary that she could love each one of her visitors and stand firm in it too. She had been standing by the four men whose photos hung on the wall. She always thought that she was a nice woman. But why was this niceness not there in men? She wasn't able to understand this. Standing in front of a mirror once, she found herself saying, "Sogandhi, the world hasn't been fair to you."

The days and the nights of the last five years were associated with every facet of her life. Although she had not achieved the kind of happiness she was desirous of, yet she wanted things to remain unchanged. She didn't bother about the money. She didn't have to build palaces. Her normal rate was ten rupees out of which Ram Lal would deduct two-and-a-half for pimping. She would get seven-and-a-half rupees daily which sufficed for her needs. And when Maadhu would come from Pune to, in

Ram Lal's words, attack her, she would give him ten or fifteen rupees too. Sogandhi had taken a fancy to him. The pimp, Ram Lal, was right. There was surely something in him which Sogandhi loved. Why hide it now! Why not divulge it! When Sogandhi met him for the first time he said, "Don't you feel any shame selling your body? Do you know what you're trying to sell me? And why have I come to you? Tch, tch, tch ... ten rupees. And as you have said, two-and-a-half for the pimp, the rest is seven-and-a-half. Isn't it? Now, in these seven-and-a-half rupees you promise to give me something which you can't, and I've come here to buy something which I can't. I need a woman, but do you, at this very moment, need a man? Any woman would do for me, but do I suit you? What's our relation after all? Nothing ... only these ten rupees are ringing between you and me, out of which two-and-a-half will be deducted for pimping and the rest will be squandered here and there. You're listening to their sound and so am I. There's something else in your heart and something else in mine. Why don't we work out an arrangement where you need me and I need you. I'm a Havildar in Pune. I'll visit you once a month for three or four days. Leave this business, I'll support you. What's the rent for this apartment?"

Maadhu talked about many other things which had such an enormous effect on Sogandhi that for a moment or two she started fancying herself as a Havildar's wife. After the conversation, Maadhu arranged the scattered things of her room and, without even asking her, tore off the pornographic photos Sogandhi had hung on the headboard. And he said, "Sogandhi, well, I won't allow you to keep photos like these here, and this water pitcher ... look how dirty it is, and these rags ... how they stink. Throw them out the window. And you've ruined your hair." And after a conversation of three hours, Sogandhi and Maadhu melted into each other. Sogandhi felt as if she had known the Havildar for years. Until now, nobody had thought about the presence of these stinking rags, the dirty pitcher, and the pornographic photos; nor had anyone given her a chance to realize that she had a home into which some domesticity can be brought. People would come and go without even noticing the filthiness of her bed. Nobody said to Sogandhi, "Look how red your nose is getting today, you mustn't catch cold. Let me bring some medicine for you." How nice Maadhu was. Everything he said was perfectly right. He gave her a piece of his mind and Sogandhi felt as if she needed him. This was how they started a relationship.

Maadhu would come once a month from Pune and before leaving he would always say to Sogandhi, "Look Sogandhi, if you resume your business again we'll break up. If you ever let a man stay at your place, I'll tug your braid and throw you out of the window. Look, as soon as I reach Pune I'll send you the money for your monthly expenses. Yes, what's the

rent for this apartment?"

Maadhu never sent her any money, nor did Sogandhi stop her business. Both of them knew perfectly well what was going on. Sogandhi had never said to Maadhu, "What the hell is this you keep talking about? Have you ever given me a single damn farthing?" Nor had Maadhu ever asked her, "Where do you get this money from since I don't give you anything?" Both of them were cheats. Both of them were living ersatz lives. But Sogandhi was happy. Those who are unable to have pure gold make do with fool's gold.

Exhausted, Sogandhi was sleeping. The light bulb which she had forgotten to put out was hanging above her head. The intense light of the bulb was pouring down on her closed eyes but she was fast asleep.

There was a knock at the door. Who was this at 2:00 am? The sound of the knock reached Sogandhi's dreamy ears like a buzz. The pounding on the door shook her awake. The mixture of two different wines and the fish particles wedged in her teeth had produced a sour, icky saliva. She wiped the stinky saliva with the hem of her dhoti and rubbed her eyes. She was alone in her bed. She bent down and saw her dog sleeping under the bed with his face resting on the decaying flip-flops. And he was, in his sleep, taunting something invisible. And the parrot was sleeping with his head buried in his feathers.

There was a knock at the door. Sogandhi got up from her bed. She was having a severe headache. She poured herself a bowlful of water from the pitcher and gargled. She gulped down a second bowlful and opened the door slightly and said, "Ram Lal?"

Ram Lal, who had by now gotten sick of knocking at the door, said peevishly, "Were you dead or what? I've been knocking at the door for the last hour. Where the hell were you?" Then he lowered his voice and asked, "Is there anyone inside?" Sogandhi said, "No." Ram Lal increased his volume again, "Why don't you open the door? This is too much. What a sound sleep you've got. If I have to waste a couple of hours on one girl I'm done for. Now why are you looking at me? Hurry up, take this dhoti off and wear that sari with the floral patterns on it. Put on some makeup and come with me. A rich businessman is waiting for you outside in his car. Come on, hurry up."

Sogandhi sat down on the chaise lounge and Ram Lal started combing his hair in front of the mirror.

Sogandhi reached over to her small table and picked up the bottle of balm. While she removed the cap she said, "Ram Lal, I'm not feeling well."

Ram Lal placed the comb on the shelf, turned, and said, "You should have told me before."

Sogandhi rubbed some balm on her forehead and temples which deflated Ram Lal's hopes.

"It's not like that Ram Lal, I'm just not feeling well. Drank way too much."

Ram Lal started salivating. "If there's anything left, bring it. Let me have a little taste too."

Sogandhi placed the bottle of balm on the small table and said, "If I'd left some I wouldn't be having this goddamn headache. Look Ram Lal, bring him in, the one who's sitting outside in the car."

Ram Lal said, "No, he can't come inside. He's a gentleman. He even felt uneasy parking his car in the street. You slip on some clothes and come to the corner of the street. Everything will be all right."

It was a matter of seven-and-a-half rupees. Sogandhi, with a severe headache, would never have agreed to it but she desperately needed the money. A Madras woman lived in the apartment next to hers. Her husband had been crushed to death by a car and she had to go out to the countryside with her daughter, but since she didn't have any money for the fare she was stuck here. Only yesterday Sogandhi had consoled her and said, "Sister, don't worry. My man is about to come from Pune. I'll get some money from him and arrange for your departure." Maadhu was about to come from Pune, but the money had to be arranged by Sogandhi herself. So she got up and started changing her clothes hastily. She took her dhoti off, donned the sari with the floral patterns on it, put on some makeup, and within five minutes she was ready to go. She drank another bowlful of cold water and left with Ram Lal.

The street, a bit wider than the bazaars of small cities, was totally quiet. The gas lamps hanging from the street poles emitted a dim light. Due to the war the glass globes of these lamps had been darkened with mud. At the far end of the street a car was visible in this hazy light.

The hint of a shadow from a black car in the dim light and a silence pregnant with mystery at this late hour of the night ... Sogandhi felt as if her headache had permeated the atmosphere. She felt bitterness in the air as if it too was getting heavy with the smell of brandy and wine.

Ram Lal went ahead of her and said something to the man sitting inside the car. When Sogandhi reached the car, Ram Lal stepped aside and said, "Here she is, she's a very nice girl. It has only been a few days since she started working." Then he said to Sogandhi, "Sogandhi, come here. The seth is calling you."

Sogandhi moved forward wrapping the hem of her sari around her finger and stood by the door of the car. The seth switched on a torch near her face. For a moment the light dazzled her drowsy eyes. There was a sound of pressing a button and the light was turned off. An "oonh" escaped

from the seth's mouth. Suddenly, the engine of the car came to life and then it was gone in a flash.

Sogandhi couldn't comprehend anything and the car was gone already. Her eyes were still dazed by the piercing light of the torch. She couldn't even see the face of the seth properly. What had happened? What did that "oonh" mean which was still buzzing in her ears. What? What?

Ram Lal's voice was heard, "Didn't like you. Okay then, I'm leaving. Wasted two full hours for nothing."

After listening to this, Sogandhi felt like moving her arms and legs violently. Where was that car? Where was that seth? So "oonh" meant that he didn't like me. That ...

The curse word sprang up from her stomach and stopped at the tip of her tongue. Whom could she curse? The car was gone. Its red taillight was sinking into the darkness of the bazaar and Sogandhi felt as if this red ember was the "oonh" which was boring a hole in her chest like a drill bit. She felt like screaming, "Hey seth, pull over for a minute." But the seth, may a curse fall upon him, had gone too far.

She was standing alone in the deserted bazaar. The sari with the floral patterns on it, which she would don only for special occasions, was fluttering in the breeze of this late hour of the night. Sogandhi hated the sari and the creeping sensation caused by its silk. She wanted to tear it apart because its fluttering was repeating "oonh, oonh."

She had worn some blush and lipstick. When she realized that she had done the makeup to make herself likeable she started sweating with shame. She thought all kinds of thoughts to overcome her embarrassment. "I didn't do the makeup for that fat man, it's my habit. Not only mine but everybody else's too, but ... but ... two o'clock at night and Ram Lal, the pimp, and ... this bazaar ... and that car and the light of the torch." And soon after this thought blobs of light were swimming in the air as far as she could see. And she started feeling the sound of the car's engine in the gusts.

The coating of balm which had faded away while she did her makeup started entering the pores of her sweaty skin and Sogandhi felt as if her forehead belonged to someone else. When a gust blew past she felt as if a piece of an icy-cold tin had been pasted on her forehead. The headache was still there, but the spate of her thoughts and their cacophony had suppressed it. Sogandhi tried many a time to bring her headache up from under her thoughts but didn't succeed. She wished all her limbs were aching: her head, her legs, her stomach, her arms. A pain so severe that she could only think of it and nothing else. She felt something in her heart while she was thinking these thoughts. Was it pain? For a moment her heart contracted and then expanded. What was that? Damn! This was the same "oonh" which

kept contracting and expanding in her heart.

Sogandhi had just started walking towards her home when she stopped and started contemplating. Ram Lal, the pimp, thinks he didn't like my face. He didn't mention my face. He said, "Didn't like you." He ... he ... didn't like my face ... so what if he didn't like my face? I also don't like the faces of many a man. The one who came on the night of the new moon. How pathetic his face was. Wasn't I pissed off? Didn't I feel disgusted when he went to bed with me? Wasn't I about to vomit? All right, but Sogandhi you didn't refuse him, you didn't shun him. The seth in the car, in fact, spat on your face. Oonh. What else could this "oonh" mean? She's not fit to hold a candle to. Ram Lal, where did you find this lizard? You were speaking so highly of this girl? Ten rupees and this woman ... why not a mule?

Sogandhi was thinking, and her whole body, from head to toe, was simmering. At times she got annoyed with her own self, at others with Ram Lal, the pimp, who had disturbed her at 2:00 a.m. But after realizing that both of them were blameless she would instantly think of the seth. With this thought, her eyes, her ears, her arms, her legs, every part of her body would twist and she would ache to see that seth again. She desperately wanted whatever had happened to be replayed. Just once. She would move slowly towards the car, inside the car a hand would bring out a torch to throw light on her face. There would be a sound of "oonh" and then Sogandhi would claw his face fiercely with both of her paws. She would pounce like a wild cat and bury her fingernails, grown long according to the latest fashion, in the seth's cheeks. She would tug his hair, drag him outside, and then she would start punching him furiously. And when she got tired of it she would start weeping.

The feelings of rage and helplessness brought tears in her eyes and made her think of weeping. Sogandhi then asked her eyes, "Why do you weep? Why are you dripping wet? What has gone wrong with you?" For a short while the question posed to her eyes was held in the tears which were now trembling on her eyelashes. Through these tears Sogandhi kept staring, for quite a while, at the space in which the seth's car had disappeared.

Phrr ... phrr ... phrr ... Where did this sound come from? Sogandhi looked around in surprise but didn't find anything. Oh, this was the sound of her heart. She thought the engine of the car roared. Why would her heart start racing all of a sudden? Like a record stuck under a stylus repeating "Spent the night counting stars" ad nauseam.

It was a starry night. Sogandhi looked at the stars and said, "How beautiful they are!" She wanted to divert her attention but the moment she uttered the word "beautiful" a thought came to her mind: "Stars are beautiful but you're ugly; did you forget that, just now, you were rejected?"

Sogandhi wasn't ugly at all. She recalled all the images she had seen in her mirror during the last five years. Granted she wasn't as shapely and beautiful as she used to be five years ago when she lived a carefree life with her parents, but she hadn't gone ugly. She looked like those ordinary women who were stared at by men in passing. She had, to her mind, all the qualities a man would want in a woman with whom he would like to spend a night or two. She was young and had a nice figure. At times, when she looked at her thighs while bathing, she would appreciate their shapeliness and ripeness. She was soft-spoken. During the last five years there had hardly ever been a dissatisfied customer. She was very friendly and kindhearted. Last Christmas when she used to live in Gol Petha a young man visited her. The next morning he took his coat off the peg and found his wallet missing. Sogandhi's servant had stolen it. The poor guy got really worried. He had come on vacation from Hyderabad to Bombay and now he didn't even have the fare to return. Sogandhi felt for him and returned his ten rupees. "What's wrong with me?" Sogandhi asked everything in front of her this question: the dim gas lamp, the metallic pole, the stone lying on the footpath, and the concrete on the road. She looked towards these things one by one for the answer and then turned towards the sky which hung over her. But she didn't get an answer anywhere.

The answer lay within her. She knew she was a good human being, but she wanted someone to praise her. Someone should place a hand on her shoulders and tell her, "Sogandhi, who says you're a bad person. The one who calls you bad is bad himself." Even this wasn't necessary. Just "Sogandhi, you're a very nice person" would suffice.

She started thinking about why she wanted to be praised. She had never felt the need to be praised so badly before. Why did she look at inanimate things as though she wanted to overwhelm them with her goodness? Why was her existence turning into a "mother"? Why was she ready to take everything on earth in her lap? Why did she want to embrace the metallic pole and suck all its coldness through her warm cheeks?

For a while she felt as if the dim gas lamp, the metallic pole, the stone lying on the footpath, and every other thing around sympathized with her. And the sky that hung over her like a thick brown sheet with countless holes in it also seemed to understand her. And Sogandhi also felt as if she understood the twinkling of the stars. But what had gone wrong inside of her? Why was the weather inside of her overcast? She wanted every pore of her body to open up so that whatever was boiling inside of her could be released through them. But how could it be done?

Sogandhi was standing by a letter box at the corner of the street. A gust blew past and the metallic cover of the letter box fluttered. Sogandhi

immediately looked where the car had disappeared but she couldn't see a thing. How badly she wanted it to return just once. And then ...

“To hell with it. Why bother! Let's go home and sleep it off. What's the use fighting! An unnecessary bother. Let's go home Sogandhi. Drink a bowlful of water, rub a little balm on your forehead, and sleep it off. You'll have a sound sleep and everything will be all right. To hell with the seth and his car.”

With these thoughts Sogandhi felt relaxed, as if she'd taken a bath in a pool full of cold water. She felt as relaxed as she would feel after praying. Due to the lack of thoughts on her way home she faltered a lot.

When she approached her home a painful sensation brought back the memory of the whole affair and overwhelmed her entire existence. Again her steps got heavy and she realized that, just now, a man had called her from her home in the bazaar and humiliated her by slapping her with his light. With this thought she felt as if someone was examining her body with his fingers the way sheep and goats were inspected to see if they were fleshy enough or just hairy. May God ... She wanted to curse him but then thought otherwise. What would have satisfied her was if he was there and she could write her curses on each and every inch of his being. She would have said to his face words that would be a source of distress throughout his life. She would have torn her clothes apart, stood in front of him naked, and said, “This is what you wanted! Isn't it? Be my guest and take it. But whatever I am and whatever is inside of me nobody can put a price tag on that.”

She was thinking of different ways to avenge her humiliation. If ever she came across the seth she would do this ... not this ... But then Sogandhi would realize that it was impossible for her to come across the seth and she would satisfy herself by abusing him. Just a tiny little abuse which should stick on his nose forever like a fly.

Sogandhi reached her apartment on the second floor while thinking thoughts like these. She took the key out of her bra and approached the lock. But it wasn't locked. The door creaked when she tried to open it. Someone undid the bolt from the inside. The door yawned. Sogandhi entered her apartment.

Maadhu laughed and said to Sogandhi after closing the door, “At last you're convinced. A morning walk is very good for one's health. If you keep on doing it regularly you won't remain lazy any longer and the backache you often complain of will go away. You must have touched Victoria Garden, haven't you?”

Sogandhi didn't answer him, nor did he desire to be answered. She didn't have to participate in a conversation with Maadhu. He spoke because

something had to be said.

Maadhu sat down in the rattan chair, crossed his legs, and started stroking his moustache. His well-oiled hair had left a big blob on the back of the chair.

Sogandhi sat down on the bed and said to Maadhu, "I was waiting for you."

Maadhu was puzzled, "Waiting for me? How did you know I was arriving today?"

Sogandhi opened her tightly pressed lips. There was a faint smile on them. "I dreamt about you last night. When I got up there was no one around and then I thought of taking a walk and ..."

Maadhu got excited and said, "... and here I am. Great people have rightly said, like minds think alike. When did you dream about me?"

"Around 4:00 a.m.," Sogandhi replied.

Maadhu got up from the chair and sat down next to Sogandhi. "I dreamt of you at exactly 2:00 a.m. You were standing near me wearing exactly this sari. What was in your hands? Oh, yes, a bag full of money. You placed the bag in my lap and said, 'Maadhu why do you worry? Take the money. Whatever is mine is yours too.' Sogandhi, I swear, I got up immediately, bought a ticket, and came here. I've run into some trouble. Someone has filed a case against me. If I had twenty rupees I could have bribed the Inspector and gotten rid of it. Are you tired? Lie down on the bed. Let me massage your feet. If you're not in the habit of taking a walk in the morning it makes you tired. Lie down on the bed with your feet towards me."

Sogandhi lay down on the bed, made a makeshift pillow with her hands, rested her head on them, and said to Maadhu in a tone which wasn't hers, "Maadhu, who is this bastard who has filed a case on you? Let me know if you're afraid of getting locked up. If one has to bribe the police with even fifty or hundred odd rupees one must. It's for your own benefit. Nothing is dearer than one's life. Leave it now, I'm not very tired. Tell me the whole story. My heart started racing when I heard about the case. When do you plan to return?"

The smell of whiskey on Sogandhi's breath convinced Maadhu that it was an opportune moment so he said to her, "I'll have to take the afternoon train. If I'm able to buy off the Inspector for fifty or hundred odd rupees by evening, I don't think anything else will be necessary. I think fifty would do."

"Fifty," said Sogandhi, and got up from her bed. Very slowly she approached the four photo frames hanging on the wall. The third from the left contained Maadhu's photo. He was sitting on a chair against a floral background with his hands on his thighs. He was holding a rose in one of

his hands too. There were a couple of thick books on a side table placed nearby. The thought of being photographed was so overwhelming for Maadhu that it appeared as if every part of his body was screaming, “We’re going to be photographed, we’re going to be photographed.”

Maadhu was looking towards the camera with his eyes wide open and appeared to be in a lot of pain.

Sogandhi burst out laughing in a way that made Maadhu extremely uncomfortable. He got up from the bed and walked up to her. “Whose photo made you laugh so hard?”

Sogandhi pointed towards the photo on the extreme left, which was of the Sanitary Inspector of the Municipal Committee, “His. The Inspector of the Municipality. Look at his ugly face. He says a *rani* has fallen in love with him. Oonh. He’s not fit to hold a candle to him.” Then Sogandhi pulled on the frame so violently that even the nail and the plaster came off with it.

Maadhu hadn’t yet recovered from the shock when Sogandhi threw the frame out the window. The frame fell from the second floor and then the sound of its glass shattering could be heard. Sogandhi said, “The *rani* sweeper will take my *raja* along when she comes to collect the garbage.”

Sogandhi laughed again as if she was sharpening a knife with her lips. Maadhu tried hard to coax a smile and then tried laughing, “Ha Ha Ha ...”

Sogandhi pulled off the second frame too and threw it out the window. “What’s this bastard doing here? No one with an ugly face can live here. Right, Maadhu?”

Maadhu again tried to coax a smile and then managed to laugh somehow, “Ha Ha Ha ...”

With one hand Sogandhi took the photo of the turbaned guy off and with the other she approached the photo of Maadhu. Maadhu got scared and felt as if her hand was approaching him. In a flash the frame, along with the nail, was in Sogandhi’s hand. She burst into laughter, uttered “oonh,” and then threw both frames out the window. As the frames fell from the second floor and the sound of their glass shattering was heard, Maadhu felt as if something inside of him had been shattered. He could only manage to say, “Great, I didn’t like that photo either.”

Sogandhi approached Maadhu very slowly and said, “You didn’t like the photo, but what is there about you to like: this big, ugly nose, the swollen nostrils, your hairy forehead, your twisted ears, the smell on your breath, the filth on your body. You don’t like your photo, oonh, why would you? It’s hiding your defects. These days the one who hides your defects does you a disservice.”

Maadhu started retreating and, with his back to the wall, said emphatically, "Look Sogandhi, it seems to me that you've started your business again. This is my last warning to you ..."

Sogandhi interrupted him and started imitating his tone, "... if you resume your business again we'll break up. If you ever let a man stay at your place, I'll tug your braid and throw you out of the window. Look, as soon as I reach Pune I'll send you the money for your monthly expenses. Yes, what's the rent for this apartment?" Maadhu felt dizzy.

"Let me tell you," said Sogandhi, "the rent for my apartment is fifteen rupees and I charge ten. And, as you know, the pimp's cut is two-and-a-half rupees, which leaves seven-and-a-half rupees for me. Isn't that it? Now in these seven-and-a-half rupees I've promised to give you a thing which I can't and you've come here to buy a thing which you can't. What's our relation after all? None, whatsoever. Only these ten rupees are ringing between the two of us. We worked out an arrangement where you needed me and I you. Before, it used to be ten rupees, today it's fifty. You're listening to them ringing and so am I. What have you done with your hair?"

Sogandhi removed Maadhu's cap with a flick of her finger, which really annoyed him. He shouted, "Sogandhi."

Sogandhi took the handkerchief out his pocket, smelled it, and threw it away, "These rags stink. Throw them away."

"Sogandhi," Maadhu shouted.

Sogandhi replied in a sharp tone, "What have you come here for? Does your mom who will give you fifty rupees live here? Or are you such a handsome young man that I've fallen in love with you? You bastard, you try to force yourself on me. Am I dependent on you? What do you think of yourself, you bum? What are you, a thief or a pickpocket? Why have you come here at his hour? Should I call the police? Whether or not there's a case filed against you in Pune, I'll file one here."

Maadhu got scared. He could only manage to ask in a submissive tone, "Sogandhi, what has gone wrong with you?"

"Who the hell are you to ask me such questions?" Sogandhi's scabby dog who was sleeping with his face on the flip-flops got up because of her shouting and started barking at Maadhu. Sogandhi burst into laughter. Maadhu got frightened. He bent down to pick up his cap but Sogandhi shouted, "Leave it there. I'll send it to you by mail." And then she burst into a fit of laughter again. Her scabby dog barked Maadhu away. When the dog returned and sat down by her, Sogandhi realized there was a dreadful silence around her. A silence she had never experienced before. It seemed as if everything was empty and hollow. As if the passengers of

a train had all departed and now she was sitting in the shelter all alone. This vacuum which had suddenly been created inside of her was awfully painful. For a long time she kept trying to fill this vacuum, but to no avail. She would stuff her mind with a number of thoughts, but it seemed as if her mind was a sieve. She would stuff it full and the next moment it would be empty.

She kept sitting on the rattan chair for a long time. When she couldn't find a way to divert her mind, even after thinking long and hard, she lifted her scabby dog, placed him on the spacious teakwood bed and fell asleep next to him. □

—*Translated by Mushtaq-ur-Rasool Bilal*