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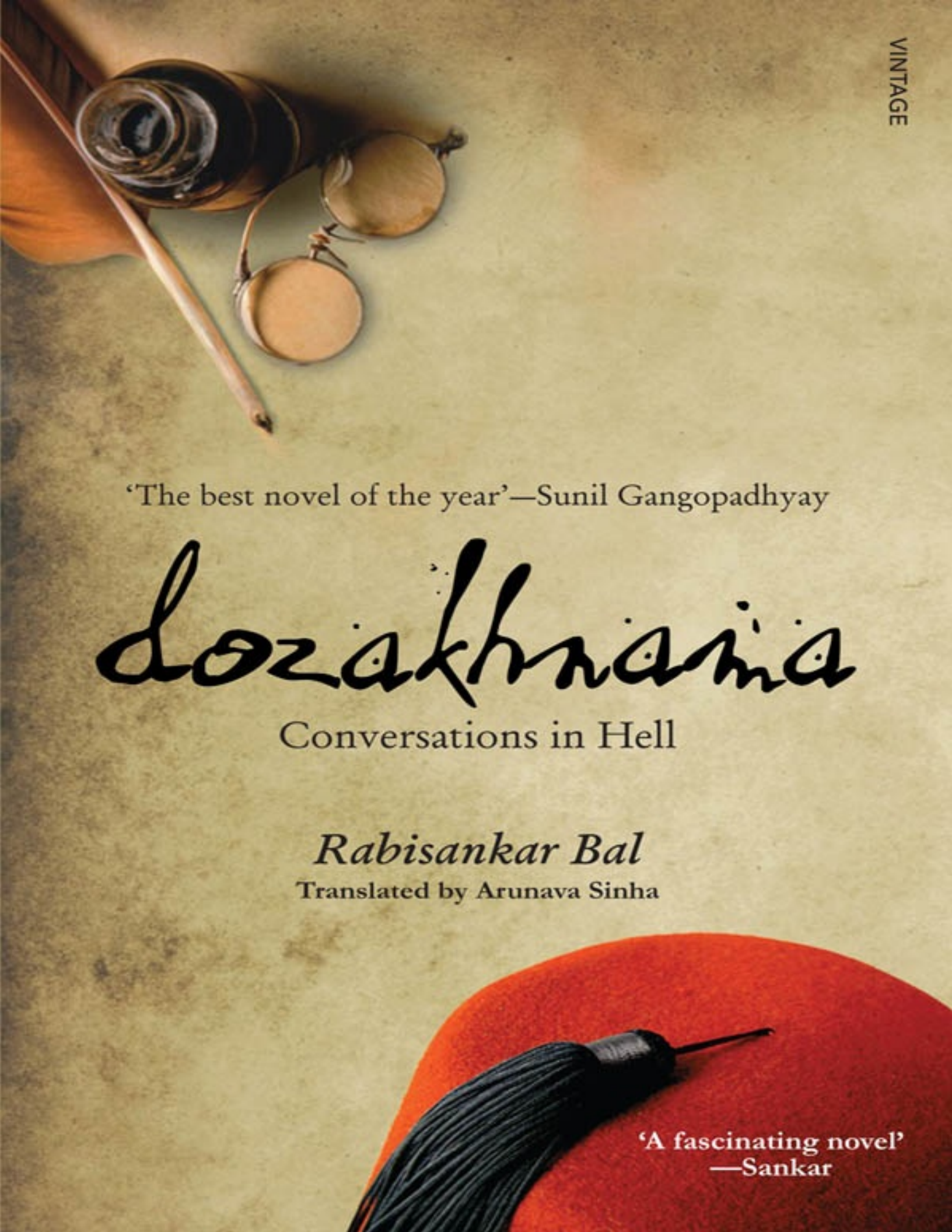
dozakhnama

Conversations in Hell

Rabisankar Bal

Translated by Arunava Sinha



'A fascinating novel'
—Sankar


dozakhnama

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To the memory of Syed Mustafa Siraj,
the author of Unreal People

1

y life has often been assailed by events that cannot be explained. I have given up after repeated attempts to understand or explain them. It seems to me that there can be no deeper meaning than the fact that they arrived uninvited in my life. Wandering aimlessly on the streets, if you happen to spot someone whom you do not expect to see except in a dream or in a picture, if you actually come face to face with them for a moment, what will you conclude? Will you not feel as though a door has been opened intriguingly for you?

Just such a wondrous door had opened for me on my last visit to Lucknow. I'm an ordinary pen-pushing labourer at a newspaper, who was in Lucknow to research a piece on the courtesans, the tawaifs, of the city. The first person I met there was Parveen Talhar, a senior government officer. She made the history of Lucknow come alive, as though it were taking place before her eyes. You will no longer find the tawaifs you read about in Shair's old book about Lucknow or in the novel *Umrao Jaan*, she told me. Indeed I didn't. So I noted down in my diary all the stories that different people told me, which were no less colourful. I for one cannot consider stories that have been passed down through generations in a lesser light than history.

Winding through the tales told by the people I had met, I ended up in old Lucknow, at the house of Farid mian in dusty Wazirganj. Despite the strong sun, it was so wrapped in shadows that you could almost call it a forgotten neighbourhood. From a distance I saw the house, the enormous mahal, named Adabistan, home of the Urdu writer Naiyer Masud. I really wanted to meet this writer who had been hounded by destiny, but how was I to pour out my rapture over his stories without knowing Urdu? I could have told him in Hindi or English, but would it be possible to fathom the mystery of Naiyer Masud's dialogue unless I spoke to him in Urdu? All this was my imagination. No writer matches the image his writing suggests.

Farid mian sat back on his ankles with folded knees, as though he were reading the namaz. He stayed in the same pose through our entire conversation. After telling me several stories about tawaifs, he asked, 'Do you write stories?'

— Sort of.

— So did I, once.

— Don't you write anymore?

— No.

— Why not?

— Writing these stories, these qissas, makes you very lonely, janab. Life becomes hell for those whom Allah commands to write stories.

— But why?

— You live only with shadow people.

— So you have given up writing?

— Yes, janab. My life was turning into Karbala. You know Karbala, don't you?

— The story of Muharram …

— Yes. But what is Karbala? Is it just about Muharram? Karbala is what happens when this life becomes an expanse of death. That is the destiny of the writer of stories, janab.

— Why?

— You're always surrounded by shadow people, they talk to you, they drive you to madness. Hasn't it ever happened to you?

— It has.

— Hasn't your wife asked, why did you write this story?

— She has.

— My wife has asked me too, more than once. What do I tell her? She'll laugh at whatever I say, she'll tell me, you've gone mad, aap paagal ho gaye hain, mian.

— And so you gave up writing stories?

— All I could offer you was a cup of tea, janab. I cannot afford a meal, a dawat, for you. That's all a writer of stories is capable of.

He sat in silence for a long time. I drenched myself in the sounds of the pigeons wafting in from the inner courtyard. Suddenly his voice percolated through the greyness of the pigeons' cries. 'There's a story that's troubling me greatly, janab.'

— What story?

Without answering, he rose to his feet slowly, and then said, 'Can you wait for a few minutes?'

— Of course.

— Then let me show you the story.

— Did you write it?

— No. Farid mian smiled. —Wait a bit. This too is an amazing story, janab.

He sauntered off into the inner chambers. There was a mermaid above the door leading inside. Suddenly someone ran into the room. A dark, hirsute creature, who said, kneeling by my side, 'Don't you know mian went mad once?'

— I do.

— Well then?

— I'm here to talk to him.

— For what?

— Who are you?

— I am his servant, huzoor, his naukar. Mian will go mad again.

— Why?

— He will start talking to himself again.

— Why?

— Whenever anyone talks about stories …

When he heard the sound of approaching footsteps, the dark man ran away, saying, 'Go away now, huzoor.' My eyes began to roam over the mermaid's body again. A little later Farid mian parted the curtain and entered. It seemed to me that he was bathed in a glow of satisfaction. Just a short while earlier he had appeared rather restless. He was clutching to his chest a bundle wrapped in blue velvet.

He resumed his position as though he was reading the namaz, putting the bundle down on the floor as though it were a newborn baby. Then he looked at me and smiled.

— What I will show you now will make you think you're dreaming.

What dream would Farid mian show me? I have dreamt my way through fifty years of my life. And I also know that this life of ours, describing which as real life makes most people happy, is itself someone else's dream. I feel that I am but a picture, which became visible for only a moment before disappearing again. Someone had once dreamt of a butterfly. When he awoke, he wondered whether it was actually the butterfly that had dreamt of him.

Unwrapping the velvet cover brought an ancient manuscript to life under the light. Parts of it were termite-eaten. As I looked at it, I was reminded of a poem:

But I came from the other side of the river
If you don't believe me ask
The unpublished novel. Ask the silverfish
That have picked at its flesh
Ask the brown cockroach eggs, ask the
Rivers cut into the body of the manuscript
By termite—all those rivers that die
Even before they can reach the sea.

Who wrote this poem? I couldn't for the life of me remember. It must have been someone not famous enough to be memorable. Maybe it was a poet who only etched our wounds in poetry before disappearing effortlessly one day.

Farid mian picked up the manuscript as though he were caressing a baby. Offering it to me, he said, 'Take a look.'

I took the manuscript from him the way people accept flowers from the priest for their prayers. There was a rustling sound. Were the pages crumbling even at this slightest of touches? Putting the manuscript down on the sheet, I turned its pages. It was in Urdu, a language I didn't know. I stopped after a few pages, entranced by the beauty of the script. All I knew was that I was now holding several lost moments in time. Eventually I asked Farid mian, 'Whose manuscript is this?'

— Saadat Hasan Manto's. Have you heard of him?

I leaned over the manuscript, hearing my own trembling voice, 'Saadat Hasan Manto.'

— Stories used to seek him out.

— How did you get this?

— My father gave it to me shortly before his death. He did not tell me how he got it.

— What has Manto written?

— A dastan. What you people call a novel. But you know what, a dastan is not exactly a novel. In a dastan the story never ends, whereas a novel has a beginning and an end.

— But Manto never wrote novels.

— Just this one.

— Why wasn't it published, then?

— No one believes it, you see. I have told many people. Some of them have compared scripts to say, this isn't exactly Manto sahib's handwriting. But the novel matches his life perfectly. Will you see if it can be published?

— Me?

— You work for a newspaper, after all. Why don't you try? Must Manto sahib's work be destroyed

this way by termite?

I ran my fingers over the manuscript. Was this really Saadat Hasan Manto's unpublished manuscript before me? I couldn't believe it. But I couldn't take my hand away either. This was the writer who had asked these words to be engraved on his tombstone—who is the greater storyteller: God or Manto?

— Have you read it?

— Of course. I've lost count how many times.

— What has Manto sahib written?

— He's written about Mirza Ghalib. Manto sahib used to dream of writing a novel about Mirza. They had made a film about Ghalib in Bombay. Manto sahib had written the script. Did you know this?

— No.

— Manto sahib was a film scriptwriter in Bombay at the time. The film he wrote about Ghalib was a hit. But sadly, he had gone away to Pakistan by the time it was made. Suraiya Begum acted as Mirza Ghalib's lover. The film even won a national award. It was the first Hindi film to win a national award, you know. Manto sahib could not forget Mirza all his life. Mirza's ghazals used to drive him mad, Mirza's life too. There were many similarities between them. Mirza's ghazals used to be on Manto's lips all the time.

— So he wrote this novel in Pakistan?

— Exactly. The dastan of Manto sahib's dreams. Take it, see if you can have it published.

— Doesn't anyone want to publish it in Urdu?

— They refuse to believe it's his. How long can I bear this burden? My days are numbered. It will be utterly lost after I die.

Farid mian clutched my hands.

— Relieve me of this dastan. Everyone calls me mad now. They say stories have consumed me.

Manto's unpublished novel about Mirza Ghalib—none of us knew whether it was real or a fake—arrived with me in Calcutta. I didn't know Urdu, so I only glanced at the manuscript from time to time. Had it really been written by Manto, or by someone else? Then I thought, if we're all someone else's dream, then a Manto from a dream could well have written a novel about a Ghalib from another dream. Did the question of authenticity even arise?

I had to consider learning Urdu simply to read the novel. My friend Ujjal arranged for a teacher. Her name was Tabassum Mirza. But within a few days of starting classes with her, I realized that I had lost both the patience and the application needed to learn a new language. One day I told Tabassum, 'I don't think I can ever learn Urdu.'

'Then how will you read the novel?' she asked.

— If you read it out and translate it, I will take it down.

— I may make mistakes in places. How will you know?

— Is anything possible without mistakes, Tabassum?

— Why?

— It was my mistake to have come to you to learn Urdu.

— What do you mean?

— You're getting married soon. I wouldn't have come if I'd known. After your wedding you will translate orally, I will take it down. Life is a sort of translation, Tabassum, you know that, don't you?

Like the revolving beam of a lighthouse, Tabassum's eyes dissected me.

On a rain-swept evening I went to Tabassum for the first time to learn Urdu. Walking down a long, dark road, I stopped at a shop to mention her father's name and ask, which way is the house?

Whom do you want to meet?

I gave Tabassum's father's name.

Looking at me in surprise, the shopkeeper said, 'But sahib is dead. Don't you know?'

— Tabassum Mirza …

— His daughter. The shopkeeper called out loudly, 'Show sahib the house, Anwar.'

I followed Anwar to a locked door. The silent two-storied house was soaking in the rain. Anwar began to knock on the door. Eventually the door was opened, but no one could be seen. Only a voice was heard, 'Who is it? Kaun hai?'

— It's me, sahib, Anwar.

— What is it?

— A visitor, sahib, mehman.

A face called out into the rain, 'Who is it? Who is it, Anwar?'

Anwar glanced at me.

— Is Tabassum Mirza in? I answered to the invisible face.

— What do you want with her?

— I was supposed to be here this evening.

— Student?

— Yes.

— Come, come inside, why didn't you say so earlier …

Entering, I was drenched even more. The inner courtyard was open to the skies. The person who had invited me in, whom I could not see, began to shout, 'Open the door, Tabassum, open the door, it's a student, a student …'

The door opened. She stood in the darkness and the shade of the rain, Tabassum, my teacher, head covered. Her voice came to me like the whistle of a train in the dead of night, 'Come in … come in … it's raining so hard, I thought you wouldn't come today.'

Ignoring the fact that my shoes were sopping wet in the rain, I walked across a veranda shaped like a slice of melon to enter the room. A huge bed in a small room, a dressing table, a fridge—you couldn't take more than a couple of steps around the room.

— You'll have tea, won't you?

— Please don't bother …

— You're soaked to the skin.

— Never mind.

— Sit down, please, have a cup of tea first.

Tabassum went into the small adjoining balcony to make the tea. I thought I had blundered my way into a maze. In my quest for tawaifs in Lucknow I had become entangled with Saadat Hasan Manto's unpublished novel, and to prepare to read this novel I had come to be present in Tabassum Mirza's room in a dark, central Calcutta lane. What a coincidence! I had not realized this earlier. I was going to learn Urdu from Tabassum Mirza so as to be able to read a novel about Mirza Ghalib. Lost in such thoughts, I suddenly found myself diving into a mirror of demonic proportions. I hadn't even noticed the mirror hanging on the wall, nearly four feet in height, with an intricately carved teak frame, made of expensive Belgian glass. It had captured almost the entire room, with me inside, staring at myself,

unable even to blink. The mirror seemed to draw me in. The spell was broken when Tabassum entered with the tea.

— What were you looking at? Tabassum's lips held a smile like a crescent moon.

— This mirror, where did you get it?

— Do you know whom this mirror belonged to?

— Whom?

— To one of Wajid Ali Shah's begums.

— How did it get here?

— My dada—paternal grandfather—got it.

I looked at the mirror again. Where was this wife of Wajid Ali Shah now? In the mirror stood Tabassum Mirza, her head covered.

Tabassum was astonished to hear of my reason for learning Urdu.

— Just to read a novel? Not for anything else?

— What else can I use it for?

— I believe you're a writer. You could write ghazals.

— The days of the ghazal are over.

— The days of the ghazal will never be over.

Looking at Tabassum in the mirror, I listened to her. The days of the ghazal will never be over; her words seemed to float overhead like a passing cloud.

— Do you know this ghazal? Tabassum asked.

گلی تک تیری لایا تھا ہمیں شک
کہاں طاقت کہ وہ پھر جائے گھر تک

The words cascaded from Tabassum's throat like a waterfall. Smiling at me, she said, 'Do you know whose ghazal this is?'

— Whose?

— Mir's. Mir Taqi Mir. See what Mir sahib is saying. My desire brought me all the way to your door, where's the strength now to go back to my own? Will you still say the days of the ghazal are over?

— But still …

— Forget it, these things are beyond argument. Tell me about your novel.

Her head bowed, Tabassum listened to all I had to say about the manuscript I wanted to read, about its writer and its subject, and about how I had chanced upon it. The way she paid attention was akin to meditation. She was not like the majority of the people in this city, who had forgotten how to listen, which was why the very idea of waiting had vanished from their lives. After I had finished, Tabassum allowed the silence to deepen before she said slowly, 'And why did you suddenly feel the urge to read this novel?'

— Manto is my favourite writer. I had no idea that he'd written a novel, and that too about Mirza Ghalib.

— Is Ghalib your favourite too?

— Yes. To tell you the truth, I've long been thinking of writing a novel about Mirza Ghalib myself.

— When will you write it?

— Let's see. I cannot do anything very quickly. If it were just a historical novel, I could have written it quite easily. But I …

Tabassum did not speak. Nor did I. I kept gazing at her and at myself in the mirror.

After this my Urdu training began. Alif … be … pe … te … She took my hand to teach me to write, sometimes she said, 'How nice! You've learnt to write so easily.' But one day I announced that at my age I no longer had the patience or the application to learn. After a great deal of argument, Tabassum said, 'But I know you could have done it.'

Tabassum accepted my suggestion. She would translate the novel as she read it and I would take it down. When sufficient time had passed after her wedding, I began to visit her every evening. I discovered Manto's Ghalib afresh through her diction, and like a dutiful scribe I began to write a lost, unpublished novel in my own language.

In the course of taking down Tabassum's translation of Manto's novel, I realized that I would never be able to write a novel about Mirza Ghalib.

What you will read hereafter is the translation of Manto's novel about Mirza Ghalib. Tabassum and I might return now and then.

2

Who has written this dastan, really? Is it I, Saadat Hasan Manto, or my ghost? All his life, Manto hankered for conversation with just one man. Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib. Mirza was particularly fond of a ghazal of Abdur Kadir Bedil, which he often used to quote from. My story is echoed around the world, but I am only an emptiness. Bedil seemed to have written the lines specifically for Mirza. Did he have me in mind too?

I've always felt that Mirza and I are two mirrors facing each other. Within both the mirrors is an emptiness. Two voids staring at each other. Can voids have a dialogue between themselves?

Many a time have I held solitary conversations with Mirza. He has always been silent. How can he respond from the grave anyway? But now that I have waited so many years, I am sure that Mirza will talk to me. I am in my grave too. I realized soon after coming to Pakistan in 1948 that I would have to make arrangements for my own burial now, so that I could soon lie down in the deep darkness under the earth. On my gravestone it would be written: 'Here lies Saadat Hasan Manto in eternal rest. With him have been buried all the mysteries of writing stories. Under tons of earth he lies, wondering who among the two is the greater writer of stories—Allah or He.' They have no idea that since Manto came to earth with Khuda's madness in his own head, stories sought him out all his life. Manto never went seeking stories.

Mirza will talk to me now, we will converse continuously. All those things that Mirza hasn't been able to tell anyone, that I haven't been able to tell anyone, all—we'll talk of them all as we live in our graves. Mirza is lying far away in Dilli, in Sultanji's graveyard near Nizamuddin Aulia, and I, in Lahore, in Mian Saheta's. It was the same country once, after all; no matter how many barbed wires there may be on the surface, in the depths of the earth, it's one country, one world. Has anyone ever been able to prevent the dead from talking to one another?

What is autumn? And what do they call spring, for that matter? We survive in our cages round the year, still we sing our laments, we could fly once upon a time. Mirza had written all this in a ghazal. Mirza had never succeeded in flying; nor did I. But now we'll grow wings in the darkness within our graves; friends, we will tell you all those stories that you've never heard before. We'll draw aside all those curtains which you've never peeped behind. There's no Manto without Mirza, perhaps there's no Mirza without Manto either.

Let the conversation begin from the graves. Adaab.

Saadat Hasan Manto

January 18, 1955

Once the introduction was translated, I looked at the date beneath Manto's signature. It reared its head like a conundrum. A long still silence, and I was turned to stone. Was winter here? Tabassum's

voice came from somewhere far away, 'Aren't you writing any more today?' Looking at her, I saw a cloud of fog.

— What's the matter?

— Hmm …

— Aren't you writing any more today? You're very lazy, you're such a shirker.

— You're right.

— About what?

— Lazy, shirker.

— What's wrong with you? Tabassum's voice held the fortissimo notes of a violin.

— This date …

— Yes, that's when Manto wrote the introduction.

— How is that possible?

— Why not?

— This is the date on which Manto died.

— This date? Tabassum seemed to be speaking from a cavern.

— Yes. Considering the way he died, Manto couldn't possibly have written anything on this particular day.

— In that case …

— This is a forgery.

— Meaning?

— Someone else wrote it, claiming to be Manto.

Tabassum laughed. —That's excellent.

— What!

— A forgery will be published with Manto's name.

— How can that be allowed?

— Why not?

— But is it right, Tabassum?

— Forget about right and wrong. You want to read a novel about Mirza Ghalib written by Manto, don't you?

— I do.

— Then just assume this is the novel that Manto wrote.

— Why should I?

— Do you know for sure that everything Manto wrote was really his? Maybe someone just claimed they were written by Manto. Just the way I'm telling the story and you're writing it. You, I, Mirza Ghalib —one day none of us will be here, not even our names, but the stories will still be floating about. That's not insignificant, is it? Now come on, start writing.

مہرباں ہو کے بلالومجھے چاہو جس وقت ہو
میں گیا وقت نہیں ہوں کہ پھر آ بھی نہ سکوں

Be kind enough to call me any time you want
I'm not the past which cannot come back

I can see you across this enormous distance, Mirza sahib, sometimes you're on your back, staring upwards, sometimes you're curled up as though the grave is your mother's womb. Now and then you sit up and rock back and forth, muttering to yourself; at other times I watch you pacing up and down, your head bowed. But as for me, I prefer lying down most of the time, here in the darkness. You've been in your grave since 1869, it must have become your home by now, mustn't it? I have only just arrived from the world above, it's been a tempestuous life, which is why all I want is some rest now. You must have felt the same way in the beginning. I know only too well that you couldn't bear your life at the end anymore. You expressed your hurt and your unhappy existence in a letter to Yusuf Mirza. 'I'm a man, after all, not a demon or djinn,' you wrote.

Eventually who you were became irrelevant to you. And yet this was the key question of your life; but towards the end everything seemed meaningless, you only spoke of death and of Allah over and over again. You never read the namaz or kept rozas, you laughingly called yourself a half-Muslim, and you were forced to drift away from Umrao Begum because of this; and yet the same person focused his eyes only on God in the final years. In letter after letter you wondered why Khuda did not do you the kindness of taking you away from this earth. I knew you couldn't keep up the fight, the ghazal had deserted you much earlier, Munirabai's memory was nothing but a set of bones, even your favourite wine was no longer available regularly. Whom can a man turn to in such a situation but Allah? When I think of your last days I am reminded of this ghazal:

یا رب زمانہ مجہ کو مٹاتا ہے کس لئے
لہو ح جہاں پہ حرفِ مکرر نہیں ہوں میں

Why does time erase me thus, O Lord?
I'm no redundant letter on the page of the world

But was it your destiny to be obliterated this way, practically starving, ailing, blind?

When I think of your life, I picture a dust storm. They're riding across the river on horseback from Samarkand. The whirling blades in their hand glint in the sunlight. They have covered such vast expanses, traversed so many Karbalas of bloodshed and slaughter, on their way to India. It feels as though I'm seeing them in a dream, or are they on a cinema screen? These ancestors of yours, their days go by just riding, riding. If they come across human habitation there's killing and looting, and then pitching tent in the desert at night to rest. A fire has been lit, the meat is being roasted, the rabab or the dilruba is being played. Some of them are sitting at a distance, singing the songs of desert nomads to the infinite sky. In some of the tents, festivals of flesh are underway with plundered women. You were quite proud of your martial forefathers, Mirza sahib, even if you never picked up a sword yourself. But despite your pride you knew in your heart that taking other people's lives and giving up their own was all there was to their existence. Interspersed by the company of women, wine, and the arrogance of power. I know that the lives of these fighting forbears of yours were like a dream to you. 'There are two Ghalibs,' you said once, 'one of them is a Seljuq Turk, who consorts with badshahs, and the other is homeless and humiliated, weighed down by debt.' The Ghalib who moved about with kings, the descendant of Turkish soldiers, was the Ghalib of your dreams. But with the sun about to set on the Mughal Empire, where were you to find that Ghalib of yours? And there was destiny too, your personal destiny, which had sowed the seeds of poetry in your life. The French poet Rimbaud had said, 'I am the other'; you were born with this 'other' as your constant companion. Such a person can only die like a mangy dog.

I've heard that your great grandfather used to work in the Samarkand army. Your grandfather Kukan Beg Khan arrived in this land with this storm of riders. Have I got it right, Mirza sahib? Please correct me if I'm wrong. What's this, why do you sit up to stare at me in surprise? I know very well you enjoy hearing these tales. Doesn't your blood boil, Mirza sahib? You get to see that first Ghalib, don't you? The one who used to associate with kings. I am not mocking you, nor am I joking. I was no less proud of being Kashmiri. That I even dared to write to Jawaharlal was out of that same Kashmiri pride. We're sons of the soil, Mirza sahib, the particles of grit in the soil are also God's creation. If Khuda had not been as magnanimous to me as he was to you, do you think I could have been lying here in my grave so soon? Like you, I rejected him too, but to him all his sons are equal.

I shall remind you of everything afresh, Mirza sahib. You may have forgotten a great deal during the long time you've spent in your grave. Naturally. There's so much we cannot remember even when alive, and death comes down like a curtain, behind which you can see nothing. In 1947, I saw how the curtain of death wipes out everything. By the grace of God you did not have to see this. You saw 1857. But if you had seen 1947, Mirza sahib, you would have killed yourself. Or, perhaps, the sword would have flashed in your hand, too, as it did in your ancestors'. The world has never seen so much killing, so many rapes, such treachery, all of which began in 1947 on the pretext of there being two nations; today, you lie in a grave in one of those countries, and I, in a grave in the other.

I cannot speak in an orderly fashion, Mirza sahib, I stray from one subject to another. Even in this cold grave a fire seems to smoulder somewhere within. That's why I have been ranting. But I was talking of your grandfather Kukan Beg Khan, wasn't I? I mustn't be distracted, although I haven't sipped Johnny Walker in a long time. When I moved to Pakistan I had no choice but to get used to country liquor. You were fond of French wine, weren't you, though eventually there was no option but to drink rum. But I must get to the point, Mirza sahib, to the story of Kukan Beg Khan. Oh my, I can see you stirring again. You do love hearing about your ancestors, don't you? Do you feel the drumbeats of galloping horses in your blood? You cannot forget that you're a beggar, a convict? And what was it that people called Ghalib? Muskhil-pasand. The lover of adversity. Remember? Muhmal-go, some people used to say. The poet raves. Do you remember this ghazal?

یا رب وہ نہ سمجھے ہیں نہ سمجھیں گے میری بات
دے اُن دل اُن سے جو نہ دے مجھ کو زباں اور

She doesn't understand my words, O Lord, she never will
Change her heart, and if you don't, change my tongue

This is the madness that talking begets. As for me, I couldn't stop talking once I started. Do you know why? I would wonder whether people understood what I was saying. When I read your letters, I understood how addicted you were to words. In letter after letter you kept talking. It was by reading your letters, Mirza sahib, that I started hearing your voice one day. Do you remember what you said?

نہ گل نغمہ ہوں نہ پردۂ ساز
میں ہوں اپنی شکست کی آواز

I'm not the flowering of a song, nor the flow of melody
I am the echo of the shattering sound of my defeat

That was the first time I saw a convicted, defeated man. You'll never know, Mirza sahib, how many of my stories they have appeared in—these people who have been reduced to the echoes of the sound of their own defeat, I will tell you some of their tales too in the course of our conversation. Who is Manto without them? Nothing but a gust of wind.

But now I simply must talk about Kukan Beg Khan. I know you're waiting for the story. Just as the earth in the grave covers and erases everything, stories such as these have also probably been spent now. Kukan Beg Khan, your grandfather, arrived here in this country to take a job in the army of the nawab of Lahore. This particular nawab didn't live very long. What was a mercenary like Kukan Beg Khan to do, then? He would have to seek out another nawab or badshah or, at the very least, a maharaja. Mercenaries survive this way, after all, just like whores, no matter how their swords glint. You knew what the life of the mercenary was like, Mirza sahib, which was why you put the sword aside. Am I right? You cannot fool a son of a bitch like Manto.

And so your grandfather reached Dilli. But when, ya Allah? Just as Dilli was on the brink of bankruptcy. Aurangzeb had destroyed everything, and then came one invasion after another. Badshah Alam's Dilli was nothing but the skeleton of the Mughal Empire. The Mughal court was panting like a rheumatic horse. Although Kukan Beg Khan received a jagir as the general of fifty of Shah Alam's cavalry troops, he realized that there was no hope of advancement here. After that he even joined the army of the Maharaja of Jaipur. But he couldn't amass any wealth. I believe he died in Agra.

Now your father, your walid, Abdullah Beg hurried to Lucknow, where he got a job in Nawab Asaf-ud-Daula's army. As is inevitable with mercenaries, he had to move from one state to another. Abdullah Beg's credo was to keep the ruler happy and, whenever his crown appeared shaky, look for a different nawab or badshah to work for. Like those women, Mirza sahib, whom I've seen standing in Amritsar's Kachha Ghania, in Lahore's Hira Mandi, on Dilli's GB Road, on Bombay's Foras Road. Their battle raged through the night. I'll tell you their stories, Mirza sahib, the stories of their flesh, the stories of their hearts, the stories of the blood and sweat and toil and tears. Their stories were in search of me for years altogether, and in my journey through these stories I came to believe in Allah one day; only he was their lifelong companion—Rahim, Bismillah. No one was willing to believe those stories; they accused me of making them up. I was called a whore's writer, a pornographer, because I wrote about them. But how could I remain silent, Mirza sahib? Did so many, so many thousands of women line the pavements of Hira Mandi and Foras Road out of choice? Forgive me, Mirza sahib, Shafia Begum, my wife, also used to say, why do you digress so much, Saadat sahib?

Gustakhi maaf, huzoor, I beg your pardon, let me rush through the history. When storytelling gets the better of me, I do not know myself what paths I will wander off on. I quite enjoy tiring people out by leading them through labyrinths. Once upon a time I floated a rumour that America was going to buy the Taj Mahal. What did I mean? Everyone began to ask how it could buy the Taj Mahal. And even if it did, how could it take the Taj away? I said that the Americans are capable of anything, they have built a new machine with which they will take the Taj Mahal away. Many people believed me, Mirza sahib. And why shouldn't they? Everyone believes America can do anything it likes, it is a magician. Do people realize that you cannot do anything you like just because you have a machine for it?

Oh yes, as I was saying, you're staring at me expectantly, so I'd better finish the story now. Your father did not hold his commission in Lucknow very long, he had to move to Hyderabad, to Nawab Nizam Ali Khan's army, where he became the general of a battalion of three hundred foot soldiers. He spent several years in the Nizam's forces. But something went wrong—not everything is written down in history, Mirza sahib, and what if it is, anyway—Abdullah Beg moved to Alwar, to the army of Rao

Raja Bakhtawar Singh. History has not recorded how and in which battle your father died. History never writes about mercenaries, after all; but it is mercenaries who are used to create the wondrous episodes of history. As you must remember, you were five years old.

You became an orphan, a yateem, at five. He who is without a walid is necessarily a yateem. Not just you, but also your brother Yusuf and your sister Chhoti Khanum. Your father did not have a house of his own. You didn't have one either in all your life. Your brother, sister and you spent your childhood and adolescence in Agra's Kale Mahal—your maternal grandfather's enormous haveli, but can you tell me when you realized that your family had no house of its own? I would love to know how you spent your days in Kale Mahal. Your mother, your grief-stricken mother, must have spent all her time quietly in a corner of the women's quarters, the zenana mahal. I can picture the three of you going up to her, she would wrap her wings around all of you; maybe she would mutter, 'Allah, be just to my children.'

Sometimes I see you tossing and turning in your grave, groaning for your mother, 'Ammi … meri ammijaan …'

I hear her voice, the begum whose name none of us knows. Your mother says, 'Asad … jaan … my son …'

— Take me home, ammi.

— Where?

— Anywhere.

Why do you lie down again, Mirza sahib? Are you not enjoying what I'm telling you? Then you had better say something, Mirza sahib. Forget my nonsense, my bakwas.

3

بادۂ کدہ میں معنی کا کس سے کرے سوال
آدم نہیں ہیں صورتِ آدم بہت ہیں یہاں

In this kingdom of puppets whom can I ask about the
mystery of the universe?
There are no men here, although there certainly are many
with the appearance of men

Can you possibly hear me across this enormous distance, Manto bhai? Your obstinacy has forced me to speak again after all these years. It is true that I lived another twelve years after 1857, but I did not care to talk to anyone. But still I had to speak, for selling words was my livelihood. But other than what was absolutely necessary to earn a living, speech had become haraam to me, it was profane. I would only lie back, supine, in the ramshackle hall, the diwankhana. Kallu would arrive to deliver two meals a day, a little paratha and kebab or bhuna gosht, and my liquor. Just sleep, and more sleep. Not a single ghazal came to me. How could it, tell me, how could it? I was rotting away at the time, my body pervaded by an infernal odour, I could smell it even if no one else could, the stench of putrefaction. One evening, unable to bear this smell anymore, I visited the mahalsarai. Usually, wild horses could not drag me there. Umrao Begum busied herself all day with the namaz and the prayer beads—whether I was alive or dead made no difference to her. Just imagine, Manto bhai, two people living alongside each other for over fifty years, never conversing, never even getting to know one another. This is nikah, this is marriage, who needs mohabbat, who needs love? Don't you go thinking I'm putting all the blame on Umrao Begum, I am nothing but a heathen myself. Like Mir sahib said in his sher, I did not know how to bring her closer; she never came to me, but that was not her fault.

At the mahalsarai I discovered Begum solemnly explaining something to Kallu's mother and Madari's wife. I paused outside, trying to eavesdrop. Begum was telling them, 'Hazrat had many wives. But Nabi did not neglect any of them. He used to take turns with each. Only Suda had given up her share to Ayesha. Even though he didn't live with five of his wives—Suda, Shafia, Zubira, Ommahabiba, and Maimuna—he made sure none of them was deprived. How many people are as impartial as Hazrat?' When Begum paused, I cleared my throat and entered. Kallu's mother and Madari's wife veiled themselves at once and left. Approaching me, Umrao Begum said, 'Take a seat, Mirza sahib.'

— Can everyone ever be treated equally, Begum? I asked her with a smile.

— Only by Nabi. But what brings you suddenly to the ladies' quarters? You could have sent your orders through Kallu.

— Orders? Have I ever ordered you Begum?

— Then what brings you to my chambers?

Grasping her hand, I said, 'Will you smell me, Begum?'

— Ya Allah! What are you saying, Mirza sahib?

Umrao Begum remained standing for a long time, her head bowed. Then I heard a voice like a coil of smoke. 'All that was a long time ago. What's the matter with you, Mirza sahib?'

— Do you get a bad smell, Begum?

— Bad smell?

— Now that I'm standing here in front of you, do I not reek of something?

— Why should you, Mirza sahib?

— Because I get a stench from my own body all the time. Of rotten flesh.

— Ya Allah! With a shriek she put her arms around me. Rubbing my back with both her hands, she said, 'What's the matter with you Mirza sahib? What's wrong? Have you had too much to drink? Did you have a bad dream?'

I began to laugh. —Bad dream? I am a nightmare myself. Never in his life has Allah had as bad a dream as me.

— Mirza sahib …

— Yes.

— Ask Allah for blessings.

— I do that all the time Begum.

— What do you ask for?

— *Hum hain mushtaq aur woh bazaar; Ya Illahi! yeh mazra kya hai?* I am desirous, and she, disgusted. What sort of mess is this?

— Who is it? Who is disgusted with you?

— Khuda, I answered, leaning my head on her shoulder.

— Come, Mirza sahib, let me take you back to the diwankhana.

— Why?

We gazed at each other for aeons. I sensed that we would not be able to bridge the gap between ourselves. Almost certainly, so could Begum. Her cheeks were wet. Who could take all this at our age, Manto bhai? What use are tears? I don't care for them anymore. Whenever I hear weeping I can see Karbala. The way Sakina had turned into an ocean of tears after Kasem's death.

Begum took me back to the diwankhana that day. Helping me into bed, she sat for a long time by my side with her hand on my forehead. Several times she called, 'Mirza sahib, Mirza sahib …' I didn't answer. What use would it have been? Everything had ended, our words wouldn't reach each other anymore. With my eyes closed I muttered an old ghazal …

وہ فراق اور وہ وصال کہاں
وہ شب و روز و ماہ و سال کہاں

Where is the sorrow of parting, the joy of love. Where are
the nights, the days, the months and years?

Eventually Begum put out the lamp and left. I lay in the darkness, like I did every night, within my prison cell, and I felt very cold. Sometimes it feels as though there is no season in my life besides winter.

As I was sinking into slumber I heard Kallu. 'Huzoor … if you please … huzoor … Mirza sahib …'

Kallu never forgot the time, he always brought me my medicine at the appointed hour. He kept the key to the chest himself, and always gave me the right dose. He would never give me even a drop extra. As I drank, I listened to the stories that Kallu told. He liked nothing better than to tell stories. That evening I said, 'Kallu, tonight let me tell you a story instead.'

— Very well, janab.

— Do you know how many worlds there are?

Kallu looked at me with widened eyes.

— There are two worlds. One in which Allah lives with Gibrail and the angels. And the other is ours, this earth, this world of land and water. The master of both these worlds asked one day, 'Whom will the world belong to on the day of the qayamat, on judgment day?' Who was it that answered? The master himself. Who else but he could have answered anyway? The master said, 'Everything, everything is Allah's.' And, how funny, only Allah talks to Allah. Who can talk to him, after all? Allah is very lonely, Kallu.

— Ya Allah! Kallu wailed.

— What's the matter?

— Allah …

— Forget about Allah. Listen to my story first. Those who sin in this world obviously have to be punished in Allah's court. Even in Allah's kingdom there are people who commit transgressions. Do you know what Allah does to them? He sends them to this world as punishment. I had sinned in Allah's kingdom, Kallu.

— Janab …

— That's why Allah sent me to this world. After thirteen years in prison, Kallu, I was given a life sentence. Do you know when? The day I was married to Begum. And then sent to Dilli. This is a frightening prison, Kallu. Who will ever unchain me? Who … who will? You'll never understand, Kallu, what a punishment it is to have to keep writing all your life.

Kallu was an excellent storyteller, Manto bhai. He would run off to the Jama Masjid whenever he could, listening to the stories of the dastangos. These dastangos are strange people. They spent the entire day in the courtyard of the mosque, telling their stories—that was how they made their living. Bagfuls of stories that never ended, as though they had combed the world for these tales. They would tell their stories whether people could pay or not, it wasn't for their livelihood alone. They would sink into their own dreams as they told their tales. Our era was nothing but a fabric woven with the thread of stories, Manto bhai. You couldn't tell the skein of real life apart from the skein of stories. The British, the goras, took over Dilli after the sepoys rose in mutiny, those were terrible times, Manto bhai, all of Dilli seemed to have become a Karbala, and the dastangos were lost forever too. There was no room for stories anymore in the Englishman's Dilli; as you know, the goras don't want fiction, they want history. The emperor had ordered me to write a history—how tiresome it was. I have heard of the history of the British from one or two people; it seemed to me like suffocating inside a black hole.

Since you wrote stories, you will understand. How many people can really tell stories? How many have the actual ability to write? Anyone can write history. All it needs is memory. But to write a story you must have the power to dream. Isn't that so? Could the story of Laila and Majnu have been born without a dream? If you have never dreamt, how will you accept the tale of Yusuf and Zuleikha? Is it a lie just because it's a story? Stories like these have survived for centuries. And Sikandar? People only know his name, where is his kingdom today? History turns to dust, Manto bhai, stories live on.

After Dilli had turned to Karbala, I would often see Kallu weeping in a corner of the diwankhana. What is it, Kallu? His sobs would quicken, he would look like a hunted beast, at the mercy of death. What is it, Kallu?

Kallu would scream like a man dying. —Aren't the dastangos coming back to Dilli, janab?

— I'm afraid not, Kallu.

— Why not, huzoor?

— The badshah has driven them away. How will they return?

Something strange happened one day. I was sitting in the veranda outside the house in the morning. Suddenly a man in a tattered robe, with bloodshot eyes and matted hair, appeared from nowhere. He came directly up to me and squatted at my feet.

— I haven't eaten anything for days, Mian sahib.

— What can I do? I snarled like a street dog.

— If you could give me something to eat, huzoor …

— I barely get a square meal a day myself.

— Please give me some food, huzoor. I will tell you a dastan.

Kallu arrived suddenly. 'Dastan?' he asked, his eyes widening.

Exposing all his yellowed teeth, the man said, 'Telling stories is my job.'

Sitting down by his side at once, Kallu said, 'Tell us a story, then.'

— Give me something to eat first.

Kallu ran off into the house, and emerged a few minutes later with some kebab and scraps of paratha. Who knew where he had got hold of them? Wolfing down the food, the man smiled at us.

— Come on now. Kallu prodded him. —Whom is the story about, mian?

— Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib.

Kallu stared open-mouthed at me and then at the man.

— Do you know Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib, mian? I asked him.

— No, huzoor.

— Where did you hear the story then?

— In Agra.

— Do you live in Akbarabad?

— Yes, huzoor.

— But Mirza left Akbarabad for Dilli long ago, mian.

— I know, huzoor. We tell stories about Mirza in Agra. Lots of people gather around to listen.

— Tell us then, we'll listen too. I smiled at Kallu, a mischievous smile played on his face too.

The man started with a masnavi on flying kites. I had written it when I was nine, Manto bhai. That was the time my pseudonym was Asad. You know, don't you, that Nawab Husamud-Daulah had shown my ghazals to Mir sahib in Lucknow? Mir sahib had said, 'If this boy finds a suitable teacher who points him in the right direction, he will grow up to be a peerless shair. Otherwise he will spout nonsense.' That was what Mir sahib had said about me, just imagine.

ابتدائے عشق ہے روتا ہے کیا
آگے آگے دیکھئے ہوتا ہے کیا

Our love has just begun, and you're weeping already?

Ishq. Mir sahib was made to lose his mind because of love, he was passed off as a lunatic. Mir sahib was mad with love for somebody else's begum, someone in his own family. He was tormented continuously for this, getting no respite even after fleeing Agra for Dilli. Eventually he did go insane, and as locked up in a tiny cell. His food used to be thrown to him. What agony Mir sahib was made to bear under the guise of medical treatment! He used to fall unconscious, bleeding through his nose and mouth. But even after all this Mir sahib bounced back. Unable to live in Dilli any longer, he went to Lucknow. That's where he died in 1810. I was thirteen. And at that age of thirteen I was pinioned in Umrao Begum's chains.

— Oh, but tell us the real story. Kallu shook the dastango by his shoulders.

— It was an enormous house. Kale Mahal. Khwaja Ghulam Husain Khan's house. A huge gate, a vast terrace for birds within, packed with cages. Be it peacocks, be it deer, they were all there, hundreds of varieties of birds, apparently there was even a hoopoe in one of the cages.

I burst out in laughter. —Hoopoe. But this bird is mentioned in the Quran, Sulaiman had one. You saw the same hoopoe in Khwaja Ghulam Husain Khan's residence, mian?

— I didn't see it. But many people said they did.

— Very well, and then?

— Khwaja Ghulam Husain Khan's daughter was married to Abdulla Beg Khan. He divided his time between Lucknow, Hyderabad and Alwar—he was in the king's army, you see. He had no home of his own. Mirza Asadullah was born in Kale Mahal.

— Mirza was five, wasn't he, when his father died on the battlefield?

— You know, huzoor?

— I have heard some of it. It's Mirza Ghalib after all, stories about him swirl in the wind. And then?

— Mirza's uncle was Nasrullah Beg Khan. He …

— Bakwas bandh karo, I cried. Stop your nonsense. —What is your real line of work? Tell me, what is it?

— I'm a storyteller.

— You call this a story? Who on earth wants to know of Nasrullah Beg? Go tell all this to the historians. What use is it to me? Get out, get out of here.

— Huzoor! Kallu and the man screamed in unison.

— I know what actually happened, I told the man, laughing.

— Yes, huzoor. He wrapped his arms around my legs.

— I know how Asadullah lived in Kale Mahal from the age of five till the time of his marriage.

— Tell us, huzoor. Now Kallu clutched my hand.

— Mirza wrote a ghazal much later. Listen, it's about those days in Kale Mahal …

نا امیدی ما گردش ایام نہ دارد
روز کہ سیاہ شد سحر و شام نہ دارد

The flow of time is halted in the depth of my sorrow
When the day is black, how can morning and night be different?

I don't feel like talking anymore, Manto bhai. Let me lie here for some time. Later I will listen to what you have to say. Who knows how much longer I have been condemned to these dreams here inside my grave.

4

ایک دن مثلِ پتنگِ کاغذی
لے کے دل سر رشتۂ آزادگی

Like a kite, my heart had once
Yearned to fly to freedom

Let us allow Mirza sahib to sleep a little. All you other dead, who are lying all around us, who are listening to us, let us all fly away now to the Ballimaran mohalla. We'll scatter around Mirza sahib's house in Kasem Jaan's lane, come along now, get up, let's listen furtively to the story that the dastangos had told Mirza sahib and Kallu. To tell you the truth, we don't even need to hide, who can see us, after all? But Mirza sahib just might, I've been told he used to talk to the dead all night in his sleep.

Clutching Mirza sahib's hand, Kallu kept pleading, 'Tell us, huzoor, it'll sound best coming from you.'

— No. Let this mian tell us. But I still don't know your name, mian.

— Your servant's name is Abid, janab.

— Tell us then, Abid mian. Let us hear Mirza Ghalib's story in your words.

— This is Asad's story, huzoor.

— Asad?

— Yes. He wasn't Mirza Ghalib yet. Everyone in Agra called him Asad. Forgive my impudence, huzoor, but Nasrullah Beg Khan …

— Him again?

— But after Asad's father died it was his uncle, his chacha Nasrullah, who took responsibility for him, huzoor. How can I forget that? This uncle of Asad's fell from the back of an elephant and died. Asad was orphaned yet again, huzoor.

— What nonsense you spout. Mirza Ghalib grimaced in annoyance. Look, Mirza Ghalib was born an orphan in this world. How could he be orphaned again?

— I don't understand, huzoor.

— Then listen to a story, mian. Mirza Ghalib smiled. Let's call him Hamaz. So one day, Hamaz knocked on the door of his love. 'Who's there?' came a cry from within.

— It's me, said Hamaz.

— There's no room for 'me' and 'you' here, came the response. The door wasn't opened.

After wandering about for a year, Hamaz came back to the same door and knocked. 'Who's there?' came a query from within.

'It's you,' answered Hamaz. The door was opened at once.

— And then, Huzoor? Kallu's eyes were round.

— That's it. Asad could not give the answer that Hamaz gave. So Al-Muqtadir sent him to the world an orphan. The door was not opened.

— Who told you this story, huzoor? Abid mian asked.

— A dastango like you. But it was Shaikh Jalaluddin Rumi who told this story long ago in his masnavi.

When he heard the name Abid mian stood up and began to twirl, while a melody rose in the air, 'Maula … mere maula …'

— Stop dancing, Abid mian. Start the story. Mirza Ghalib shouted.

— All right, huzoor.

After the ritual of kadambusi, touching Mirza's feet deferentially, Abid mian sat silently for a while. Then he said, 'Tears spring to my eyes when I see him, janab.'

— See whom?

— Asad mian.

— Why? Why do tears spring to your eyes?

— Only nine years old, fatherless, even the uncle who looked after him gone to his grave, Asad mian wandered around Kale Mahal alone.

— Alone?

— Yes, huzoor. I've been told he didn't talk to anyone. Even if people talked to him, he wouldn't respond. He used to wander about, waiting to see his mother. He used to run up and down the lanes of Agra all by himself. He would go to the Taj Mahal and sit there for hours. He would go up to the roof at night and count the stars.

— Asad didn't count the stars, mian.

— What did he do then? Do you know, huzoor?

— Who knows if not him? Kallu screamed. Who but huzoor knows, mian?

— What would Asad do?

— He used to look for one particular star.

— Which star, janab?

— The star from which Asad's love had tossed him to earth.

— Did Asad manage to identify the star?

— No, mian. Life on the stars was different from life on earth. Once on earth, the star could no longer be identified. How could it, after all? Do you know how dangerous stars are, Abid mian? The star that you'll see shining in the sky tonight has actually died millions of years ago. Only now has its light reached our world. Tell me, how will you know which star your home was on? You'd better tell the story instead, mian.

— Very well, huzoor. One day, Asad had wandered off to the banks of the Yamuna near the Taj Mahal. He hadn't met his mother for several days. He had to confine himself to the diwankhana—only if his mother called him to the mahalsarai could he visit her. Why didn't she ask for him? He spent most of his time hovering around the mahalsarai, earning rebukes for his behaviour. What are you doing here, Asad? Why are you loitering near the women's chambers? Don't you have anything better to do? He went up to the terrace, panting with rage, talking to himself, abbajaan, where are you, where have you gone leaving me behind, you'll never come back, you've abandoned me in this house … they don't

let me meet ammijaan, why don't they, abbajaan?

— Why didn't they, mian?

— Why, huzoor?

— You're telling the story, and you don't know? Mirza Ghalib burst into laughter.

— Asad's father didn't leave anything for him, janab. Abdullah Beg Khan didn't even have a home of his own. Only if he had a home would his wife have lived there, and only then would Asad have got his mother's company. What sort of marriage was it anyway between Abdullah and Asad's mother? How much time did they even spend with each other, tell me. Abdullah spent his days travelling from one battlefield to the next; Asad's mother only spent her days waiting, in Kale Mahal. Then came the news of Abdullah's death. Only the news, huzoor. Abdullah Beg seemed to vanish into thin air. No one knew where, in which alien land, he was buried. The Turks had a strange custom, huzoor, you know, don't you? When a man died, his sword was inherited by his son, and his property, by his daughter. Abdullah Beg was lost somewhere; Asad did not get his sword. And Abdullah had nothing by way of property.

— Abid mian …

— Huzoor.

— Have you forgotten what happened on that particular day?

— Which day, huzoor?

— Asad sat down by the Yamuna next to the Taj Mahal. What happened after that, mian?

— Gustakhi maaf, huzoor. This dastan has a mind of its own, I cannot control it. Huzoor, my uncle used to say, stories are unpredictable, you may have chosen a particular direction for it, but soon you'll discover the dastan taking you down a completely different path.

— He was right. Mirza Ghalib smiled. Only the history of the British is direct, treading a single path. A story has thousands of paths. Haven't you heard Amir Hamza's dastan?

— Yes, huzoor. Like they say …

مت سہل ہمیں جانو، پھرتا ہے فلک برسوں
تب خاک کے پردے سے انسان نکلتے ہیں

— Right you are, mian. Are we ordinary beings, after all? For billions and billions of years the galaxies have been rotating. Only after that time passed was the curtain of earth pushed aside to give birth to mankind. Can a story ever travel along a single road?

— Asad was sitting on the bank of the Yamuna, huzoor. I'm told he didn't particularly care for the Taj Mahal.

— Why should he, mian?

— Huzoor …

— Do you know where Mumtaz Mahal's grave is? It's in Burhanpur. Nobody goes there. A tiny grave. Why build the Taj Mahal, then? All these things are the whims and fancies of kings, mian. And if it's beauty you're talking about, the Taj Mahal is a trifle compared to Fatehpur Sikri. As for the Jama Masjid, it's a flower from heaven.

— A dervish surfaced from the blue waters of the Yamuna. Round-eyed, Abid mian recounted the story.

— Do you dream, mian? A dervish surfaced from the water of the Yamuna?

— Yes, huzoor. Is there any place on earth where a dervish or a fakir cannot appear?

— And then?

— The dervish asked Asad, why do you wander around alone, Asad? Would you like to be a bird?

— Will you turn me into a bird? Asad looked at the dervish in surprise.

— I will. The dervish put his hand on Asad's head. —You want to fly across the sky, don't you? Let me tell you the story of a bird. A merchant used to keep his favourite bird in a cage. He had to go to India on business. It was from India that he had brought the bird. Before leaving, the merchant went up to the cage to ask, 'What should I get for you?'

— Azadi, janab. Get freedom for me mian, the bird said.

— Azadi? The merchant laughed. —That would mean setting you free. How is that possible? Ask for something else.

— Then please visit the forest I used to live in. Tell the birds there about me. Find out how they are.

— All right. Don't worry, I'll get you all the news.

The merchant left. After he had completed all his business, he remembered that he had to enquire after his bird's family and friends. In the forest, he found a bird just like the one in his cage. The moment the merchant told the bird in the forest about the bird in the cage, the forest bird fell off the tree like a stone. The merchant realized that learning about his cousin after all these years had made the bird die of shock. He felt regretful too; the poor thing died only because of him.

Eventually the merchant returned home. When he went up to his birdcage its occupant asked, 'How are my friends? Tell me about them, mian.'

— What can I tell you? As soon as I gave the news about you to a bird that looked just like you, he fell off the tree and died.

At this the merchant's bird also folded its wings, shut its eyes, and fell to the floor of the cage. It did not stir even after being prodded repeatedly. Taking it out of the cage and running his hands over it tenderly, the merchant mused, if only I hadn't given him this news, my bird wouldn't have died on being informed of his friend's death. He placed the bird on the windowsill.

At once the bird flew off to the tree outside the window. Astonished, the merchant ran out to stand beneath the tree and call out to his bird. The bird said, as it flew away, 'My friend didn't die, mian. He showed me how I could start flying again. You're the one who brought me the information. Salaam.'

The bird disappeared.

— Do you know what Asad mian told the dervish after listening to this story, mian? Mirza Ghalib asked.

— No, huzoor.

— I still haven't understood what life really is, Abid mian. Not even stories can touch it. Only fog—there's nothing else. Listen, then, I shall tell you the next story.

— What story, huzoor?

— Asad told the dervish, take me with you, Khidr.

— Where?

— Wherever you're going.

Putting his hand on Asad's head, he muttered a long incantation. Asad didn't know what he said. Sitting on the riverbank, he was cold despite the sunshine. Eventually the dervish said, 'Don't go away, Asad. Your father did not pass on his sword to you. You will never be able to use a sword, Asad. It's very difficult, with each stroke you too will die, Asad.'

— Then take me with you, said Asad.

— Where?

— Wherever you're going. I'll become a dervish like you.

— This is not your path, Asad. As he spoke, he pulled a mirror out of his bag and handed it to Asad, whose face became dimly visible in it. —Wipe it, polish the mirror properly.

Asad started wiping the mirror. Swaying from side to side, the dervish immersed himself in song.

— And then?

— Asad kept polishing the mirror; the more he did, the more the mirror sparkled. Finally the dervish's song ended. He said, 'Look into the mirror now.'

Asad was amazed when he looked into the mirror. He should have seen himself in it, but he wasn't in the mirror. Instead, it reflected a sky as blue as his mother's pashmina. Just like the myriad patterns on the shawl, birds were making patterns in this sky. One large bird was followed by numerous smaller ones, their multiple colours and motion forming the design. Asad raised his eyes towards the dervish.

The dervish said, 'Do you recognize this bird?'

— No.

— That's the hoopoe. And all those other birds you can see are flying with the hoopoe in search of their king.

— Who is their king?

— Simurg.

— Where does he live?

— On Mount Qaf.

— What will they do when they find Simurg?

— You'll understand later. The more you polish the mirror, the more clearly will you see the birds flying over one valley after another. They have to cross seven valleys. Eventually, you'll see Simurg. You will have to keep writing until then.

— What shall I write?

— You shall write of love. You will never find love, Asad, but it is the same love that you'll have to write about.

— And then? Mirza Ghalib's eyes seemed to be drifting around an empty expanse. An expanse where the only things alive were bushes of thorns and thistles.

5

گل و آئینہ کیا خورشید وہ مہ کیا ہے
جدھر دیکھا اُدھر تیرا ہی رو تھا

I gaze at the flowers, the mirror, the sun and the moon
Wherever I look, your face is all I see

My boat sailed on an infinite sea, Manto bhai. The beginning of my lifelong pursuit of what cannot be seen. It was then that the pen became my pennant. Do you know what my quills were made of? They were made of the broken arrows of my warrior ancestors. The first day that I wrote a sher, I felt as though I had been carrying the seeds of poetry within me since the beginning of time. Don't you agree that you cannot try to write poetry? Poetry must come to you on its own. But we don't know why it comes, or how. Do you know what I think? I think you cannot call someone a poet even if he has written a thousand ghazals, but if he can write even a single sher like a howl of pain, smeared with all the blood in his heart, then and only then can we call him a poet. Poetry isn't a sermon delivered from a mosque, after all; it is one's final words from the edge of the ravine, face to face with death. I wrote about my love, my ishq, on bloodstained paper day after day, Manto bhai, my hand became numb, but still I wrote. I knew that my ghazals would provide comfort to many people one day. It wasn't pride, Manto bhai, but wounds—I wrote about each of my wounds—how could it not touch people?

For days on end I've seen how blood oozes out of the heart. Let me tell you about my childhood, then. My blood has been seeping out ever since those days, and now it has clotted into a rock that weighs me down. You know what Mir sahib said in his sher, don't you?

ہوں شمع آخر شب ،سن سر گزشت میری
پھر صبح ہونے اک تو قصہ ہی مختصر ہے

Yes, I am the flame of twilight
My story is indeed short

Consider, when I was born, an empire was ending. So many times I have dreamt of having been born in the time of Jahanpanah Akbar; if I had even been born in the eras of Jahanpanah Jahangir or Shahjahan, I would not have had to spend my entire life like a stray dog on the streets. Khuda sentenced me for my sins to a hell where the royal court had been reduced to a leftover. And I had to wait hand and foot on that Bahadur Shah, who couldn't write a line of a ghazal to save his life! But

then, Allah is merciful, perhaps this was his plan for me.

I never saw my father. Many people used to say I resembled him. When I was a little grown up, I used to stand before the mirror, looking for Abdullah Beg Khan in the reflection of my face. He died on a battlefield somewhere, my mother didn't even get a chance to see his corpse. A man disappeared suddenly, without leaving a trace behind, no one had even drawn a portrait of him to remember him by. In Jahanpanah Aurangzeb's time, painting was considered immoral. Otherwise, just consider, has anyone ever seen an art gallery of the likes of the Mughal court's? Are there better artists in the world than the musavvirs from Persia? Have you heard of Bihzad? It's doubtful whether a painter of such calibre is born even once in a thousand years.

Alas for my mother. Not a single picture remained for her. If I don't tell you about her you will not understand my childhood and my adolescence, Manto bhai. Much later, when I was nearly an old man, thinking of my mother made me realize that her entire life was actually a single word: waiting. You know that the colour of waiting is blue, don't you? The blue that drips from depression. She had no family of her own, no home of her own. All she could do was wait for my father to come home. He would come for a few days at best, spending those few nights with her. That was how Yusuf, Chhoti Khanum and I were born. I don't know whether there were other births between ours. Sometimes I even wondered whether Abdullah Beg Khan really was our father. Apparently the walls of Kale Mahal held many secrets. But never mind all that. Dilli and Agra were full of secret stories anyway.

I had wanted to write a dastan about ammijaan, Manto bhai. But writing stories isn't easy. You have to keep writing the way daily labourers do. I didn't have such stamina. Since I've written the history of the Mutiny, the *Dastambu*, since I've written reams of letters, you might ask why I couldn't have written the dastan about my mother. Maybe I could have. I would even sit down with my quill from time to time, but I would find myself shrouded in the darkness of fatigue. I couldn't write a single word—my eyes would brim with tears. It felt as though we had never had a home in this world—as though my mother never had a home of her own.

Let me tell you what happened one day. I had woken up suddenly in the middle of the night. I saw my walid and my ammijaan sitting quietly on the bed in one corner of the room. My mother's hands were in his; a bloodstained sword lay at his feet. The sound of horses neighing could be heard, like a continuous storm. My mother's head was laid on Abdullah Beg Khan Bahadur's chest.

— What are you so afraid of? Abbajaan was asking her.

— I never get to know where you are, janab. So …

— I live far away bibijaan.

— Where?

— Where nothing but blood flows. Abbajaan's voice was fogged with exhaustion.

— When will you come again janab?

— I don't know. If I ever die, don't look for my grave on earth, bibijaan. I shall be buried in your heart.

— Janab …

— Bibijaan.

— Will we never have a house of our own?

— If I can come back for the last time, never to go away again, we will.

— I don't like living in Kale Mahal, janab. This isn't my home, after all. Won't you build your own mahal?

Bursting into laughter, abbajaan said, 'The battlefield is my mahal. You can't ever go there.'

— I shall go.

— Where?

— With you, janab. My mahal is wherever you are.

I saw Abdullah Beg Khan Bahadur pull my mother even closer. He was looking at her as though clouds were gathering in the desert sky. Have you ever seen the baramasa pictures, Manto bhai, which depict the twelve months of the year? Oh, these pictures I have seen once, the books too, each of them a picture. It started with the book of Amir Hamza's dastan—in Jahanpanah Akbar's era—whose pictures were drawn by Mir Syed Ali. Jahanpanah Humayun had brought him over from Persia. There were many illustrators in the workshop at the emperor's palace, all from Persia. Khwaja Abdus Samad was known as the Sweet Pen, Shireen Qalam. So many illustrated manuscripts were created—the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, there was even a book about Nala and Damayanti; and yes, Keshav Das's *Rasikapriya*. That was such a wonderful book, Manto bhai. Keshav Das wrote of many different women in *Rasikapriya*, and the painters created pictures of each of them. They were so beautiful, all of them, radiant like the full moon. You know of the chakor bird, don't you, which survives by eating moonlight? When it saw one of these ladies on a full moon night, the bird lost its bearings completely, unable to decide which moon to gaze at. Jahanpanah Aurangzeb put an end to all this. Paintings were immoral for him, haraam. The Mughal workshop was closed down. The painters abandoned Shahjahanabad, taking up assignments in the royal courts of the Pahadi kingdoms in the mountains. Dilli's art workshop, the tasveerkhana, was emptied out; the scraps left behind were wiped out by Nadir Shah and the Marathas, followed by the Englishmen. Do you know what Mir sahib wrote after Nadir Shah looted Dilli?

دلی جو ایک شہر تھا،عالم میں انتخاب
رہتے تھے منتخب ہی جہاں روزگار کے
اس کو فلک نے لوٹ کے ویراں کردیا
ہم رہنے والے ہیں اسی اُجڑے دیار کے

Dilli, which was the chosen city of this world,
Which the finest people on earth made their home,
Has now been ravaged by time and left in ruins
This devastated city is where I come from

You're laughing, Manto bhai? You're right, I'm just as bad as you are, once I start talking there's no knowing where I'll meander—I lose my bearings. You know what, once the words begin to flow, I wonder where they came from. I wasn't even born when they were created. Who is actually talking within me? I am astounded Manto bhai, really astounded—how many different people do you suppose are hidden inside each of us? Do people who lived even before you were born still live inside you? Do you know how it feels? As though a distant mist is rolling over my mind.

I was telling you about the baramasa pictures, wasn't I? These pictures originated in the Pahadi kingdoms. I was reminded of them from the way my father was looking at my mother. The painters would sometimes come down from the hills to Shahjahanabad to sell their works. I had seen a painting of the month of Bhadon from one of them. First I must tell you the mystery of Bhadon, Manto bhai. No one can stay away from their beloved in this month of love. Even those who travelled abroad on business returned to their wives in Bhadon. Overcast skies, water dripping from leaves all night, the

vines trembling in the breeze, can you possibly bear to be separated from your lover at this time? The fragrance of the magnolia and the frangipani carried on the moist wind is bound to make bodies long for one another. In that picture I saw a golden streak of lightning caressing the thick dark clouds, a flock of cranes flying like parched creatures into the depths of those clouds, the breeze flirting with the trees, lovers sitting in the balcony upstairs. If you had seen them, Manto bhai, you'd have known at once that they were Radha and Krishna. A peacock on the parapet beneath the balcony gazed at the dark grey sky, and in the uncovered balcony downstairs sat a woman, passionate, waiting for someone. Perhaps it was my mother. Ammijaan was like the dark clouds spread across the sky, like the golden lightning, Abdullah Beg Khan had come to her unexpectedly. It takes such a long wait for two people to want each other so, Manto bhai, the way the azan longs to meet Allah. Abdullah Beg Khan kissed his wife so tenderly that night, Manto bhai, and made love to her. The dream unfolded before my eyes; I feel no guilt about it, Manto bhai, can there be any guilt in watching Krishna make love to Radha? That was the only time I saw my father—in my dream.

I never got the chance to catch my mother's eye. She had a lot of responsibilities in the ladies' chambers; my brother, sister and I used to hover about nearby, but she didn't have the time to spare even a glance at us. Chhoti Khanum was allowed to be with her at night, of course. Yusuf and I occupied the diwankhana. I had realized as a very small child, Manto bhai, that Kale Mahal was not my home. We lived there, true, but the three of us were different from everyone else. That was probably why Yusuf went mad. Chhoti Khanum didn't live long, either. Only I was chosen by Allah to be punished, to be charred black in the flames of dozakh, of hell. Humans cannot go against Rahman's wishes, after all. Perhaps it was for Asad in Kale Mahal that Mir sahib had written:

کیا میر ہے یہی جو تیرے در پہ تھا کھڑا
نمناک چشم وخشک لب وزرد تھا

Is this the Mir who stood at your door
With moist eyes, dry lips, and ashen face?

It was sport that saved Asad eventually, Manto bhai. Kite-flying and chess: patangbazi and shatranj. In both, you have to fight all by yourself, without anyone by your side. In both, your eyes must be rooted to one specific spot—the sky in one case and the black-and-white squares in the other. You're sure to lose if they're not. Sport brought me victory, Manto bhai, and life, one defeat after another.

I still remember those days of flying kites and racing pigeons. A tempest would rage in my Turkish blood, Manto bhai. I hated being cooped up in Kale Mahal. I would either wander around Agra's streets, or go up to people's roofs to fly kites. Sometimes I would play chess late into the night at Bansidhar's house. We used to fly our kites from the roof of a large haveli next to Kale Mahal. Yusuf and Kanhaiyalal used to be there, many others too, I no longer remember everyone's name. I often competed against Raja Balban Singh's kites. When I lost, I used to think, tomorrow will soon be here, I'll definitely beat him tomorrow. Turkish blood flowed in my veins, Manto bhai, could I possibly lose every single day? Many years later, Kanhaiyalal came to Dilli and showed me a masnavi. I had written it when I was eight or nine. It was about the mysteries of patangbazi. *Ek din masl-e-patang-e-kaghzi, leke dil sar rishta-e-azadgi.* Like a kite, my heart had once yearned to fly to freedom.

I was drawn even more strongly to chess. Do you know why? Shatranj is a battlefield. Every time I captured one of Bansidhar's pieces, I scented blood. This was how my days went by. Then I took up chausar as well. Gambling with dice. Maikhana, mehfil, sharaab. Taverns, poetry sessions, wine. I used

to visit tawaifs too. Courtesans. What could I have done? I didn't enjoy spending my time in Kale Mahal—I saw so little of my mother there. Her place was in the ladies' chambers. I had no one else to call my own. I used to study at Mir Azam Ali's madrassa; Shaikh Muazzam taught me, but I didn't enjoy learning all this, Manto bhai. Such wonderful words used to knock at the doors of my heart; as I wandered about the streets I used to lay those words out, someone used to speak inside me. I would start in surprise—arre wah, how wonderful, this was a sher. Yes, Manto bhai, I, Mirza Ghalib, can say with pride that I wrote ghazals from the age of nine. Then janab Abdul Samad came; he spent two years at Kale Mahal. It was from him that I learnt the beauty and the mysteries of Farsi. I wrote my ghazals in Urdu, it is true, but I believe that the only real language for the ghazal is Farsi, Manto bhai. And that a real tasveer can only be painted by a musavvir from Persia.

'Do you go to the madrasa every day?' my mother asked me.

— I do.

— Study hard, Asad. You cannot stay here in this house forever.

— Yes.

— You will build your own house. Yusuf, Chhoti Khanum and I will go and live with you.

As you know, Manto bhai, I never had a mahal of my own. Eventually I abandoned ammijaan in Agra and went away to Shahjahanabad. Before that my wedding with Umrao Begum took place. I was imprisoned again, Manto bhai. You will have to listen to many tales of my incarceration from your grave.

6

چاہتے ہیں خوب روؤں کو اسد
آپ کی صورت تو دیکھا چاہیے

You love beautiful faces, Asad
You should see yourself once

Let's change the direction of this story a bit, my friends. Listening to the two of us chattering away from our graves is bound to be tiresome. Why should you even bother to pay attention? Your lives are no less full of stories than ours, if you'd like to tell them, by God, both of us will listen closely. But for now, let me tell you a qissa that isn't about either Mirza sahib or me. You'll enjoy this fluffy little tale—it isn't part of Mirza sahib's existence, which was perpetually weighed down by a rock. You have to let fresh air into your stories now and then; I shall never consider anyone a real storyteller unless he can do this. These people's stories make you choke, as though they have thrust you into a prison where you must follow their diktat. For heaven's sake, words are flowers, if you can't see their colours or smell them, they're nothing but dead letters. Didn't Hafiz sahib say:

رونق عہد شبا بست
دگر بوستاں را
می رسد مزدۂ گل
بلبل خوش الحاں را

If the nightingale's song doesn't reach the rose, then why fill page after page with words? A hurt pride lurks within language, my brothers.

You remember the dervish, don't you? The one who surfaced from the Yamuna to appear before Asad. Just as Shamsuddin Tabrizi had come into Jalaluddin Rumi's life once, after which, of course, Rumi entered a different kind of existence altogether. This Shams was an extraordinary character, my brothers. He was possessed with divine madness. A story about him is on the tip of my tongue now, I might as well tell all of you. Don't imagine it has nothing to do with Mirza sahib's life. I cannot even begin to count the number of stories that Mirza sahib's life is entwined with. When you hear the story about Shams, you'll know just where Mirza sahib is concealed in it.

Awad al-Din Kirmani was a Sufi shaikh. He believed that Allah was to be found in this very world—within all the beauties of creation. He was sitting by a lake one night, gazing at the reflection of the moon. Chancing to meet him, Shams asked, 'Why do you gaze upon the water, shaikh?'

— I am looking at the reflection of the moon.

— But why, does your neck ache?

— No.

— Then all you have to do is look up at the sky to see the moon. Or have you gone blind? Simple things should be looked at in simple ways.

The shaikh realized his mistake.

— You are my pir, huzoor, my master. Allow me to serve you.

'You are not strong enough to meet my requirements,' responded Shams.

— I am, huzoor. Take me with you.

Shams burst out in laughter. Then he said, 'Then get some wine. We will drink together in the bazaars of Baghdad.'

But alcohol is sacrilege in Islam. What would people say if the shaikh were to drink in the bazaar? His honour would be tarnished. 'How can I do that, pirzada?' he mumbled.

'You will never prove adequate,' Shams roared. 'You do not have the power to reach the court of Allah. I am looking for the man who can reach the vicinity of the all-knowing one.'

It was in Jalaluddin Rumi that Shams had found such a man. Sometimes I can see Mirza sahib drinking with Shams in front of the Jama Masjid. Maula Rumi is sitting opposite them. He has written a new masnavi, about his lovers Shams and Mirza sahib. If only all this had been true, just imagine, the world would have become as beautiful as the design on a jamevar shawl.

Oh no, don't look at me so disbelievingly, my brothers. I haven't forgotten anything. My memory is sharp. Look, when you consider the world I grew up in, when you consider the flowing currents of refugees, mohajirs, that I was witness to, you will know that I would not have survived had it not been for the glow of memories. So many mohajirs—do you know what I think, I think the twentieth century should have been named the century of the refugee. The century of forgetting your name, the century of changing your name. Have any of you read my story 'Thanda Gosht'? I was hauled to court in Lahore on grounds of obscenity for writing this story titled 'Cold Meat'. Oh no, you may want to hear the story of 'Thanda Gosht' now, but we have started a different story today, my brothers. Let's keep 'Thanda Gosht' for another day. Don't forget, we have to spend many more centuries in these graves of ours before the universe comes to an end, there will always be time for 'Cold Meat' later.

Right. I hope you remember that the dervish gave Asad a mirror. In the mirror Asad has seen a pattern of birds flying against a sky as blue as his ammijaan's pashmina shawl. The birds were on their way to their king Simurg. This is a profound tale, my brothers. The lord alone knows why the reflection of this story appeared in the mirror that the dervish gave Asad. But then, how can we hope to know of the Creator's intentions anyway? Do you know what I think, it is because we cannot hope to know that we can write all these words that we do. That's the best thing about a story, you can write, keep writing, what does it matter to you what some chutiya, some fucker of a critic says? A story is nothing but a story—it lives alone, it dies alone.

Pardon me, my brothers, I inevitably stray into a maze when I talk. I have spoken to thousands of people in my life—living people and dead people. When I couldn't talk, I felt as though I was buried under a rock. Ismat used to laugh at me. You know Ismat, don't you, Ismat Chughtai—in her presence I used to be intoxicated by the need to talk. Ismat could speak beautifully too, behind those glasses her eyes were like the deepest pools. I would simply submerge myself in those pools and keep talking, while Ismat would stare at me with her large eyes. I wanted to swallow those eyes of hers some day. I never got round to telling Ismat this, however. She would have pulled my hair out at the roots.

You do remember the sight of flying birds in the mirror that the dervish gave Asad? A story written by Fariduddin Ittar appeared in the mirror. Just imagine the wonder of it all! A story in a mirror! And every story is itself a mirror, isn't it? I for one have never been able to tell when the story and the mirror become one. Never mind! But before I recount the story, I simply have to tell you a little about Ittar sahib. He was a messenger of God, a Sufi saint, but you couldn't find a match for him when it came to telling stories. The only person he could perhaps be compared to was Abdul Rahman Jami. Ittar sahib was born in Nishapur in Persia, almost eight hundred years ago. He owned a pharmacy where he made both medicines and ittar. He ran a thriving business. One day, a dervish appeared in his pharmacy. It was a very large shop—he gaped at the things on display and then stared at Ittar sahib. Naturally, being stared at this way made Ittar sahib uncomfortable. 'Why do you look at me like that, huzoor?' he asked.

The dervish smiled—I was wondering how you'll ever give up all these riches to go to your grave.

Enraged, Ittar sahib said, 'I will die one day, just like you. How can it be any different?'

— But I have nothing but this tattered robe and this begging bowl, bhaijaan. You have so many riches. How will you die just like me?

— I will die exactly like you.

Do you know what happened then, my brothers? The dervish lay down, using his begging bowl as his pillow. Closing his eyes, he said, 'Bismillah ur-Rahman ur-Rahim.' Gibrail appeared, ready to take him away as soon as his life ebbed out. Ittar sahib stood like a stone, watching this miraculous death unfold. Then he shut down his pharmacy forever and set off on the road to his Din, the true way to the Lord.

The birds that Asad saw in the dervish's mirror were born in Ittar sahib's story. You've had to put up with a lot of bakwas, a whole heap of nonsense, all this time, so let us have the story now. But you know what, I love switching from one story to another, in these stories I am sometimes the dervish, sometimes Ittar sahib, sometimes Kallu. And as for Mirza sahib, he is deep inside me. You must have heard that sher of his:

ہوئی مدت کہ غالب مر گیا، پر یاد آتا ہے
وہ ہر ایک بات پہ کہنا کے،یوں ہوتا تو کیا ہوتا

Ghalib has long been dead, but we remember him
Wondering, what if this had happened, or that?

What would have happened if Saadat Hasan Manto had become Asadullah Khan Ghalib? I said this once to Shafia Begum; do you know what she said, my brothers? You've lived all your life as one character or another, Manto sahib, when will you reveal yourself? Shafia Begum didn't understand that Manto lives in different characters. Without those characters, there can be no Manto. Shafia Begum asked me once, 'What have you achieved with all these stories, Manto sahib? No one will give you anything for them. Set up a shop instead.'

— And what shall I do with the shop inside my head, Begum?

— The shop inside your head?

— This shop with hundreds of stories. Manto will die if the shop closes down, Begum.

Gustakhi maaf, my brothers, pardon me. I've drifted a long way. Your eyes are shining with anticipation; I know you're waiting to hear the story. But you must indulge your Manto bhai. Memories, my brothers, so many memories, they just drag me back to the past as I talk. I cannot resist them. If I

could have, I wouldn't have had to die like a stray dog in Pakistan.

But let's talk of birds now. Let's talk of the most tender of souls in the universe. You know what, each of our hearts is a bird, sometimes imprisoned, sometimes flying freely in the sky. I really wanted to spend a night holding a sparrow to my breast, but they can't be caught, they're so restless. On a perch one moment, they'll fly off the next. If they were chirping a minute ago, they're staring wistfully into the distance now. Birds are like that, all they know is that the world is actually a place to wander about, go here and there, fly about, and then die one day without even being aware of it.

One day all the birds gathered together in a conference. Why? They had no emperor, they would have to search for one. All searches need a murshid, a guide—who would be their teacher? The collective decision was that only the hoopoe could be their guide. The hoopoe was Sulaiman's favourite bird. He used to bring news of Queen Bilqis from the town of Sheba. So only the hoopoe could be their teacher; he was the only one who could take them to their king. The hoopoe had a clump of feathers on his head and Bismillah's name on his lips. 'Look, you can certainly try to seek Jahanpanah,' the hoopoe told the birds, 'but it is a long and difficult route. To undertake this journey, you have to shake off the life you have led up to this moment; if you can do that, if you can leave everyone you love, only then can I show you the way.'

The birds were shattered; each of them came up with a different excuse. Oh no, they couldn't go on such a long journey. The nightingale was the first to speak. 'I cannot go anywhere. Only the rose understands my secret love. How can I go away from her? My love for the rose will last all my life.' The hoopoe told the nightingale, 'You are just looking at external beauty. The rose may smile, but the smile is not for you. She appears to look at you and smile, but then she wilts and dies. Do you know why she smiles at you? Because you do not realize that she will soon wilt and die.'

— But I will not leave the gulbahar and go anywhere, murshid.

— Then let me tell you a story. Fluttering his wings a few times, the hoopoe settled down. 'Bismillah ur-Rahman ur-Rahim,' he muttered. 'Give me language, O Lord, so that I can tell the nightingale this story properly.' After a few minutes' silence, he shouted, 'Listen, nightingale, and remember this story. After that, you can do as you please.'

— No story can match up to the rose when she blooms, pir sahib.

— Of course. But listen anyway. A story won't give you an upset stomach, will it?

— Very well, tell me. The nightingale squeaked.

— There was a nawab who had a daughter. It cannot be explained just how beautiful she was. Her hair was as black as a sky in which no stars twinkle, her body gave off the fragrance of musk deer, and as for her glance when she spoke, it was sweeter than honey. And her complexion? It beat the ruby hands down. To tell the truth, anyone who saw the maiden fell in love with her. But it is impossible to read the mind of the Lord. One day a dervish saw the girl and was smitten. The dervish was eating when he saw her, and his food slipped from his hand when he set eyes on her. The maiden smiled at this. The smile was what did him in, the dervish lost his heart totally.

— And then?

— He planted himself in front of the nawab's haveli for seven years, spending his days with the cats and dogs on the road. For seven years the dervish kept weeping for the woman he had fallen in love with. Then the maiden's guards decided to murder him.

— Did they?

— Coming to know of the plan to murder the dervish, the girl felt pity for him. Stealing outside the palace one day, she told the dervish, 'You're so strange! I'm the daughter of a nawab, how did you even

think of marrying me? Look, just go away and don't ever come back. You'll be killed if you're still here tomorrow.'

— What did the dervish say? The nightingale fluttered his wings impatiently.

— The dervish said, 'Ever since I saw you, life and death have become one and the same to me. I am not afraid of being killed. No power on earth can dislodge me from the door of your palace. Your guards want to kill me, don't they? So be it. But will you answer the riddle first?'

— What riddle?

— Why did you smile at me?

— You really are an idiot. I felt pity when I saw you, even your food had slipped from your hand. What do you expect me to do but smile?

— And then? The nightingale's eyes brimmed with tears.

— The hoopoe said, 'Your rose is like that maiden. Beautiful only in appearance.'

With different stories like this one, the hoopoe dismissed all the excuses offered by the birds. Then the birds said, 'We should take a tohfa, a gift, for the emperor. You tell us, o guide, what we should take for Emperor Simurg.'

— Zikr. The chanting soul. The emperor's court has everything. But he wants souls that have been purified by fire and by suffering.

For years on end the birds flew on behind the hoopoe. They had to cross not one, not two, but seven valleys. Many birds died on the way, many more no longer had the strength to fly. Only thirty birds arrived eventually at Emperor Simurg's palace on Mount Qaf. The sentries simply wouldn't let them in. But they had been so becalmed by their long journey that not even the sentries' invectives could upset them. They merely waited. Finally, the emperor's personal attendant appeared to escort them to the court. It was a wondrous affair. Wherever they looked, they could only see themselves. The thirty birds were flabbergasted as they looked at one another. Where was Emperor Simurg, then? Friends, the word Simurg means 'thirty birds' in Farsi. They were now face to face with their souls. Their emperor was Simurg. The birds sang, '*Tere naam se jee loon, tere naam se mar jaaoon* … We live by your name and we die by it …'

7

کہتے ہیں آگے تھا بتوں میں رحم
ہے خدا جانے یہ کبھی بات

People say Goddesses were merciful once
The Lord knows which era they're referring to

Although life in Kale Mahal was lonely, Manto bhai, I never forgot all that Agra gave me till the age of thirteen. The air and water of Agra were part of my soul. The jewels of my memory are still to be found scattered on every one of Agra's streets. The ishq that tore my heart apart had Agra as its playground. Untasted love dripped from every flower in the gardens, the leaves of every tree seemed to have a caress for me. To tell the truth, Manto bhai, Agra put the bright blue sky inside me. Every now and then, a Falak Ara would rise in this sky as its adornment. She was a perennial fountain of laughter. I would gaze at her in wonder, and, returning my glance, the necklace of stars would change its colour every moment. What an exhibition of hues it was. Only in the paintings made in Jahanpanah Akbar's art gallery were such colours to be seen. Who was she? Poori zindagi guzar gayi Manto bhai, my entire life passed but I could not identify her, could not reach out and touch her. Something unusual happened one day. I was walking by myself along the road in front of Chaharbagh. Suddenly I spotted a begum sahiba sitting in the garden, considerably older than me. Perhaps it was for her that Hafiz sahib had written:

اگر آن تُرکِ شیرازی
بدست آرد دلِ مارا
بخالِ ہند وش بخشم
سمر قند و بخارا

This beauty with the black mole on her cheek
Touched my heart with her hands
Bukhara is nothing, I could even
Gift her Samarkand in sheer joy

The sight of her put me in a trance. Entering the garden, I called out from a distance, 'Falak Ara.'

Begum sahiba didn't even bother to turn. She only shook off the scarf covering her head and tossed her coiled hair loose. It was like a goblet being shattered and a spray of wine bursting forth, Manto bhai. Ah, I was reminded of Mir sahib's sher at the vision of those tresses …

اُس کے کاکُل کی پہیلی کہو تم مجھ سے میر
کیا ہے زنجیر نہیں، دام نہیں، مار نہیں

Can you unravel the mystery of her coiled hair, Mir?
It's neither a chain, nor a snake or trap. What is it?

'Falak Ara,' I called again.

This time Begum sahiba turned towards me. Describing her smile is beyond me. It reminded me once again of Hafiz sahib's sher …

وعدۂ گل رنگ وتلخ وعذب خشک وارۂ سبک
نقل از ان لالہ نگرونقل از یاقوت جام

Fill my cup with the light, sweet,
Madly intoxicating, taste
Of the sharp-edged wine
Whose colour is just like a flower's

— Tum kaun ho? Who are you? She waved me over to herself.

I went forward hesitantly. She approached me as well. Grasping my hand, she whispered, 'Who's Falak Ara?'

Face to face with her loveliness, how could I speak? I could not summon up a single word. 'Who's Falak Ara?' she asked again.

This time I took courage in my hands, saying, 'I don't know.'

— Where did you come across this name?

— In the skies of Agra.

Begum sahiba laughed.

— So this name is written in Agra's skies?

— Yes it is.

— Have you seen it?

— Yes I have.

— When? Kab dekha?

— Har roz. Every single day.

— Do you know this sher of Mir sahib's?

— Tell me.

— *Phir kuchh ek dil ko beqarari hai, sinh jua-e-zakhmkaari hai.* My heart in turmoil again is looking for an assassin.

Truly, Manto bhai, my heart had turned restless by then. I had set out in search of the very person who would break my heart once again. What option did I have but to seek her out? I had no house of my own, I simply had to look for a home, but in the process I crossed one dozakh after another, one hell after another, the road was a long winter night, ur-Rahman ur-Rahim, I screamed silently, save me, Al-Bashir, grant me good fortune but once.

Do you know what happened then, Manto bhai? Strolling about Chaharbagh, holding my hand, she stopped before a cage. A flock of mynahs was flying about inside. Begum sahiba glanced at me. Do you

know what kind of look it was? It seemed to hold Hafiz sahib's sher:

ال اے آہِ بہشی کذائی
مار ا با ئست بسوار اشنائی

Which forest are you in, bewildered deer?
Our love is ancient, don't you remember?

If a man can raise his eyes to a beautiful woman after hearing this sher, Manto bhai, I will say he has no idea what ishq is. All you can do after this is bow before such a woman's feet and say:

ہزاروں خواہشیں ایسی کہ ہر خواہش پہ دم نکلے
بہت نکلے مرے ارماں لیکن پھر بھی کم نکلے

Yes, Manto bhai, each one of my thousands of desires puts me on the verge of death. How many have been fulfilled? Many—and yet, too few. And that is why we keep living, isn't that so? We wait, but still the glass isn't filled. Looking at her feet, I sang to myself:

ভরা থাক, ভরা থাক, স্মৃতিসুধায়
বিদায়ের পাত্রখানি...

May this farewell glass always brim with sweet memories …

I don't know where this song came to me from, Manto bhai. I had never heard it before. Who knows where things come from? From some remote past, or even from the distant future. Is it because the past holds the future that the sky glows so brightly? But our lives, they just flicker like burnt embers. Does it not hurt to flicker like this, Manto bhai?

The mynahs in the cage chirped as they flew about. Begum sahiba said, 'There's a Falak Ara in there too, let me see if you can spot her.'

I looked at the bird. Suddenly, I don't know what came over me, I pointed to one particular bird and said, 'That's Falak Ara.'

The mynah was perched on a rod.

Looking at me in astonishment, Begum sahiba said, 'How did you know? Have you seen her before?'

— No.

— Then how?

— She's trembling so much.

— Who?

— Falak Ara.

— Why? I could discern a blue tinge on Begum sahiba's throat.

— She wants to talk to someone.

— To whom?

To whom, indeed? Do you suppose I knew, Manto bhai? Begum sahiba cupped my face in her hands as though it were a goblet. 'Who are you?' she whispered.

I couldn't tell her, Manto bhai, I just stood there in silence, but in my head I said:

حافظِ حال عذاب
با کہ کئے گفت کہ ما
بلبلا نیم کہ در
موسم گل خاموشیم

Hafiz sahib really seemed to have written about me. Whom can I tell all this, I'm in a wretched state, it's the month when flowers bud, and yet the nightingale won't sing.

— How did you know that my name is Falak Ara too? Begum sahiba's voice wafted out like a subtle perfume from a vial.

— I don't know.

— Tell me how you knew.

— You're Falak Ara—you—you alone are Falak Ara. There's no one else.

My dream was shattered, Manto bhai. None of this is the entire truth. Just a khwab, a dream that I had one day. If you want to know about my life, you have to hear about my dreams too. Like a dream I had one night in which Ustad Tansen walked past the houses of Fatehpur Sikri, holding my hand, before leading me into one of them. The rains came to the house that day, and I woke up drenched in sweat, shouting, 'Kallu—where are you—Kallu beta …'

Kallu arrived at once. —Yes huzoor.

— Tarjuman-ul-ashq, I muttered.

— Huzoor?

— I am tarjuman-ul-ashq, I am the meaning of perfection.

— Yes, huzoor.

— Why do you keep addressing me as huzoor?

— What do you want, sir?

— Can you get me some this morning, Kallu?

— Some wine?

— Yes, huzoor. I smiled.

Kallu clutched my feet. —Forgive me, huzoor, but … in the morning …

— Just a little, Kallu.

— Why?

— I want to dream.

— What dream, huzoor?

— Falak Ara.

— You want to see a mynah, huzoor? Come with me, I'll show you as many as you want.

— I want to see my Falak Ara, Kallu, you won't understand.

Who was Falak Ara, Manto bhai? A dream. She was visible in the sky over Agra, but I knew I could never get her, my Falak mynah. She would remain imprisoned in a cage somewhere. Mir sahib once wrote, I asked how long will this rose be in bloom; the rosebud only chuckled at my question, without answering. So how could I not recognize the mynah on the rod, my Falak Ara? When I saw her smile in Agra's sky, I felt I had known her over many earlier births. And now Kallu wanted to show me a mynah? Tchah! Tell me, Manto bhai, can every mynah possibly become a Falak Ara?

Even today I wonder where Begum Falak Ara came into my dreams from. I had never seen a woman such as her before. I hardly had to be reminded that the ladies always remained behind the purdah. Then who was this Begum sahiba?

I saw her one evening at Moti Mahal. I didn't call out to her, I only watched her from a distance. She kept taking her earring off and putting it back on. Unscrewing her nose stud, she examined its silvery lustre before putting it on again, took it off once more, re-examined it, and put it back on; could someone have been hiding in the nose stud, Manto bhai? Why would she keep taking it off otherwise? I was very curious to know what the nose stud contained. I went up to her.

'You again?' She was startled.

— Begum sahiba …

— Why do you chase me?

— Your nose stud …

— What's in there?

— Why do you keep examining it then?

Begum sahiba burst into laughter. —Do you know how long one wants to go on dreaming?

— How long?

— All the way from jannat to jahannum, from heaven to hell.

— They're one and the same, Begum sahiba.

— Call me Falak Ara.

Her voice shrouded me in a mist, Manto bhai.

— What?

— My name is Falak Ara. Don't you know?

Taking my hand, Begum sahiba made me sit down by her side. She explored my fingers with hers. Then she asked, 'What do you do?'

— Nothing.

— Meaning?

— I wander about in Kale Mahal. I roam the streets of Agra.

— What else do you do?

— I fly kites, I play chess, I drink …

— And women?

I laughed. I had tasted a woman's body by then, Manto bhai, I knew what it was like. Each of their bodies was like a pashmina with a unique pattern. I had even had a romance with one of the courtesans of Agra. She was like husn-e-lav bam—as fresh as dawn. Have you ever seen a ripe castor apple? That's what I was like. I had ripened just like a fruit ripens on its own. I could hear the buzzing of bees all over my body.

— Yes, I said, my head bowed.

— What about them?

— I have known them.

This is a rose-hued story, Manto bhai. She drew me to her breasts, showing me a pair of pigeons even more wonderful than the birds I had seen on the roofs of the houses. I rubbed my face against the beaks of those pigeons, what a pleasure it was to run my hands over their feathers, what joy. Do you know what I thought then, Manto bhai? That this world gets her but once, never again …

— Say it again, she had said, flicking my ear with her tongue, say it once more, mian …

She had a mole on her shoulder, Manto bhai, hidden in the depths of her coils. As you know, a mole is but a drop. A dot is what Creation began with. I lapped up that drop that day, it whetted a thirst within me that has not been quenched all my life. Sometimes it feels as though she was only a marvellous picture that I had walked into.

Don't imagine for a moment that all this is true, Manto bhai. Lord be merciful—I confess that there are no truths in my life, everything is a story, a dream, a novel. I was very young then. Burying my face in Begum sahiba's breasts, I said, 'Don't leave me.'

— Why not?

— Aap meri jaan hain, you are my heart, my life.

— Mujhe jaan na kaho, meri jaan. My heart, do not call me your heart.

— What should I call you?

— Falak Ara.

When I left Agra, Manto bhai, this necklace of stars slipped out of my life. Falak Ara lived on only as a name. A drop, a dot, the beginning. A beginning which also held the end, Manto bhai.

8

I hadn't been to Tabassum's house for a fortnight. This happens with me all the time. I start something and then lose interest abruptly. My wife Atasi says I lack the willpower to stick to a task. Perhaps. But what is willpower? Is it the determination necessary to complete a task? But does this determination come to any use eventually? When I think of it, I am only reminded of the crematorium after the war in the *Mahabharata*, strewn with corpses and pyres and vultures. A tale from the *Anushasana Parva* keeps coming back to me. It's a circular orbit. Opening Rajshekhar Basu's *Mahabharata*, I read the story again.

Yudhishthira said, Pitamaha, you have given us much counsel about peace, but my heart will not be calmed after committing the sin of shedding my brothers' blood. I am dispirited at observing you impaled and bloodied by arrows. What shall be the outcome of the heinous acts that we have committed? I consider Duryodhan fortunate for not having to be witness to this plight of ours. The Almighty must have created us so for the express purpose of perpetrating transgressions. If you desire our well-being, advise us on how we may be freed of sin in the afterlife. Bhishma replied: the human soul is under the jurisdiction of God, why do you consider it responsible for your acts, be they good or bad? The acts we perform have causes too subtle for our senses to capture. Let me tell you a story from ancient history.

There was an old Brahmin woman named Gautami whose son was slain by a snakebite. An enraged hunter named Arjunak trapped the snake and brought him to Gautami, saying, this, the basest among serpents, is the slayer of your son, tell me how I should kill him; should I cast him into flames, or slice him into pieces? Gautami replied, you are foolish, Arjunak, do not kill this snake, release him. His death will not resurrect my son, nor will releasing him do you harm. Why should anyone risk eternal damnation in hell by killing this living creature?

The hunter retorted, your advice is appropriate for one in his senses, but the grief stricken will not be consoled. Proponents of peace suppress their anguish by attributing such acts to the will of Time, but those who favour vengeance are relieved of their grief only by annihilating the enemy, while the rest merely continue with lamentations resulting from their attachment to the departed. Therefore, you can free yourself of grief, too, by slaying this serpent. Gautami answered, those who adhere to their dharma like me do not experience grief; this boy has died because such was his destiny, I cannot slay the snake because of this. Fury does not become the Brahmin, it only causes agony. Forgive this serpent and release him. The hunter averred, slaying it will save many lives, wrongdoers should be exterminated.

Despite the hunter's repeated requests, Gautami did not acquiesce to slaying the serpent. Then the snake said softly to the hunter, using the human tongue, how is it my fault, foolish Arjunak? I am not independent. I did not bite this boy of my own free will, I did it at the bidding of Death. If anyone has sinned, it is Death himself. The hunter replied, even if you are subservient to another, you are

responsible for this transgression, and hence fit for slaying. The snake responded, I alone am not responsible, several reasons have converged to cause this. The hunter avowed, yours is the primary responsibility for this boy's death, and hence you are fit for slaying.

While the snake and the hunter were engaged in argument, Death himself appeared, saying, I despatched you at the bidding of Time, snake; therefore neither of us is responsible for this boy's demise. Everything in this universe, movable and immovable, the sun and the moon and the Gods and the water and the air, are under the jurisdiction of Time. Therefore you cannot blame me. The snake replied, I have neither blamed nor exonerated you, all I have stated is that I sank my fangs into the boy under your orders; it is not my task to assign blame. You have heard what Death said, now release me, hunter. The hunter responded, it has not been proved that you are innocent; both you and Death are responsible for this boy's demise, shame on both of you.

Now Time himself appeared and told the hunter, neither I nor Death nor the snake is to blame, this child's own karma is responsible for his mortality. Just as the potter fashions objects from clay according to his own desires, so too is man subject to the outcome of his own acts. This child is himself responsible for his demise.

Gautami said, neither Time nor the serpent nor Death is responsible for the boy's death. He has died because of his own karma. I too have lost my son because of my own karma. Therefore, Time and Death may leave now, while you release the snake. Time and Death left upon hearing this, and the hunter released the snake. Gautami was drained of grief.

Finishing his story, Bhishma said, those who were slain in war all faced the consequences of their karma under the influence of Time. They did not have to die because of your act or Duryodhana's. Therefore you may forsake your grief.

I know today that all our acts flow in ways dictated by destiny—a snake that keeps eating its own tail. There's no end to its self-consumption, to its attempt to neutralize itself. I am only following the orders of an unseen entity. Even if there is something that can be termed willpower, what use does it come to? We simply drift from one story to another like a fallen leaf.

Meanwhile, Tabassum telephoned. —What's the matter, janab? Even your fragrance is missing.

— Er … Unable to respond, I smiled.

— Is Manto's novel simply going to languish?

— Why?

— You don't seem remotely inclined to continue with the translation.

— Oh no … we have to resume it.

— What's wrong with you?

— Nothing.

Tabassum's laughter cascaded down on me.

— You and your 'nothing'. What is this 'nothing' that takes hold of you? Tell me what this 'nothing' is.

— Sitting with a blank page.

— Meaning? I could see Tabassum's eyes dancing. The lavish lines of kohl beneath her eyes were dancing too.

— You sit with a blank page, endlessly. And then at some point words and images appear on it.

— When will these words appear?

— Have you read Basho's poetry?

— Who's Basho?

— A Japanese writer of haikus from the seventeenth century. Basho wrote, like wild geese we will disappear amidst the clouds.

— I cannot keep pace with you, janab. I can see this translation will not be completed.

— Why?

— You're sitting with a blank sheet of paper now. Who can tell when the words will appear, when the images will become visible?

— Will you recite that ghazal of Ghalib's for me?

— Which one?

— You know the one: *hoon garmi-e-nishat-e …*

— *Hoon garmi-e-nishat-e-tasavvur se naghma sanj, main andallab-e-gulshan-e-na-afrid hoon*. So when will the nightingale drunk on music create its garden?

— Whenever she summons him.

— Who will summon him?

— The spring breeze has arrived in winter this year.

Tabassum laughed. —What is it janab? Are you in love?

— *Aa nikalta hai kabhi hansta, to hai bagh-e-bahar, uski aamad mein hai saare faslein aane ki tarah*.

— Oh my God! So you're deep into Mir?

— When it comes to Urdu ghazals, don't you think Mir is the most sensual? Ghalib glows with brilliance, while a bleeding Mir hands you his heart. Ghalib conceals himself somewhere, he is drawn more by the beauty behind the veil.

— You're right. But you can learn the art of concealment only from Ghalib. You can place your hand on Mir's breast, you can plunge a knife in too. Ghalib is a mirror in the distance. It only accepts your reflection and remains aloof, alone. How strange this mirror is. Man can leave his mark on anything, but when it comes to a mirror, your reflection exists only as long as you do. After that, you're gone. Ghalib is a mirror. The moment you go away, you're nowhere in it.

— I didn't think of this, Tabassum.

— Didn't think of what? A bird flew away in her voice.

— I never thought of Ghalib the way you do.

— Naturally. You have your own way of thinking.

— No, Tabassum. I do not believe in this sort of individuality anymore. Why will we not think along the lines of the ideas in Sufi tales or Zen koans or Eskimo legends? Why will we not think like Vyasa? Why will we not think like Mirabai? Yajnabalka said, 'There is no individual consciousness when you have transcended everything.'

— What's the matter with you? Tabassum's question glided over my head like a calm breeze. Breezes like these blew over the heads of cypress trees in miniature paintings once upon a time.

— Why do you ask?

— Are you disturbed about something?

— No. Many persons old and new are surrounding me every day, Tabassum. I want to listen to what they have to say, but I have far too little time.

— Meaning?

— Never mind. We'll resume our work tomorrow.

— Don't evade the issue, please. You have far too little time—what does this mean?

— Then let me read you a poem.

— Whose poem?

— That same ancient sailor's. Listen …

I saw—in the twilight of my benumbed senses
My body drifting along the currents of the black river,
Bearing its swarm of sensations, its eccentric agonies,
The memories gathered from birth in its patterned shroud,
Carrying its flute. As it floated further and further still
Its form turned indistinct, everywhere on the familiar shores
Amidst the houses held in the embrace of shade-giving trees,
The evening prayers grew fainter, doors were barred for
the night
Lamps were put out, the ferry-boats moored to the banks.
The river crossings finally came to an end, night gathered,
Muted birdsong on the forest branches lay down its offering,
Its self-sacrifice, at the feet of the great silence.
A dark exquisite beauty descended over the diverse world
In water, on land. The body became a shadow, a drop, vanished
In the infinite black. I visited the foot of the altar of stars,
Stood by myself, looked upwards, joined my palms,
and spoke—
You have retracted your web of light, o sun,
Reveal now your most benevolent form,
Show me the man who is common to both of us.

— Are you exhausted?

— No, I am very happy, Tabassum. This is the joy of losing myself. I am losing myself in the ruins of buildings as I translate this novel. I am becoming one with shards from broken bangles, tattered scraps of muslin, pages torn out of notebooks, vials of dried perfume. It is to lose oneself this way that we write.

In that mirror we sat—Tabassum and I—with Manto's manuscript before us. This manuscript had put us in deep difficulties. In it, Ghalib's and Falak Ara's story was in the sixth chapter. Manto had not written the seventh chapter. He had only jotted down a few points, adding, 'This can be written later. I feel no interest in writing this chapter now.' It really was hard to understand Manto. He seemed to be writing not for the reader but for himself. After this he had jumped directly to the eighth chapter, where Mirza Ghalib arrives in Delhi. But he never did get around to writing the seventh. What were we to do?

— Why do you think he didn't write the seventh chapter? asked Tabassum, hunched over the manuscript.

— Maybe he was in no condition to write. He may have had too much whisky. But what were the points about?

— About Mirza's marriage.

— Will you read them, please?

— He wrote: Mirza was married to Nawab Illahi Buksh Khan's daughter Umrao Begum in 1810. Ghalib was thirteen, and Umrao, eleven. Illahi Buksh was the brother of Ahmed Buksh Khan, the nawab of Jhirka and Loharu.

— After that?

— Illahi Buksh wrote ghazals too. His pseudonym, takhallus, was Mahroof. He was one of the aristocrats of Delhi.

— And then?

— Mirza could not bring himself to accept this marriage. It meant being imprisoned once again in a rich man's house. Manacles were put around my legs again, he wrote himself. Balls and chains. Manto sahib wrote, it makes no sense to write an entire chapter about this wedding business. But he could actually have done a wonderful chapter on it. An aristocratic Muslim wedding. Elephants, horses, palanquins, illuminated squares, singing and dancing, food and drinks. Why didn't Manto sahib write anything about all this?

— Did he write anything else?

— No … wait a minute, he did write a story.

— A story?

— About his father-in-law Mahroof.

— Let's hear it.

— It's an interesting story. One day, Mahroof sahib asked Mirza to make a copy of his family tree. Mirza made a copy all right, but he put the third generation after the first, and then the fifth—and so on. He skipped the second, fourth, sixth, etc. generations completely. Mahroof sahib was livid when he saw this. What have you done Mirza? Mirza answered calmly, 'A family tree is nothing but a ladder. A ladder you have to climb to reach Allah. Where's the harm in skipping a rung or two? Climbing will be a little harder, that's all.'

— And then?

— An enraged Mahroof sahib tore up the copy of the family tree. Mirza was still chuckling.

— Didn't Manto sahib write anything else?

— No.

— Madness. He could easily have written this chapter.

— Why?

— A wedding with the nawab's daughter. Just think of the scope. Bengali novelists would have swooped down on the opportunity. A description of Umrao Begum's beauty over four pages. Ten pages about the wedding. True-to-life descriptions with details culled from history. Can you imagine? Perfect fast-food for readers. And this is what Manto sahib chose to skip. He could have included love at first sight—long lines of dialogue with which to …

— You really believe all this?

— Believe what?

— Such descriptions.

— Tabassum …

She looked at me. In her glance I saw the image of a thousand cranes in flight. Turning away from her, I looked at her reflection in the mirror.

— Why are novels written, Tabassum?

— Why?

— To listen to voices in the darkness. Many voices.

— Whose voices?

— People we don't know.

— Which means the novelist does not know his characters?

— No.

— Why did Manto sahib write about Mirza, then?

— Because he didn't know Mirza.

— Will he know him when the novel is completed?

— No.

— Where will Manto sahib's novel end up, then?

— Nowhere.

— And what about Mirza?

— He won't be there either. Only a shadow will.

— Whose?

— Many people's. Those who no longer exist. This is why I cannot write novels anymore, Tabassum. I can bear many burdens, but I cannot carry a shadow that stays behind. Let's start from the next chapter.

— Not today. Let's go out for some coffee.

I observe Tabassum in the mirror. She rises to her feet with the rhythm of a dancer, her arms outspread like wings. —You do like coffee, don't you?

— Mmm …

— I'm going to buy you a special coffee today.

— Is it right to abandon Mirza for coffee? Wouldn't a drink be a better way to show respect for him? I smiled.

— That's not going to happen in my company, janab.

I had never been to such a coffee shop. It was like a mushaira newly sprung up in the city. But here Hafiz sahib would not have been able to say,

صبح ہست ساقیا قدح
پر شراب کن
دور فلک دریغ
ندا باد شتاب گن

Look, Saki, the night is ending
Fill my cup with wine
They're racing upwards there
Be quick, time is flying

Here you could sit, or lie back against cushions. The strains of Joan Baez or Kailash Kher wafted gently over the coffee shop; at intervals the Bengali song *Ferari Mon—The Escaped Heart*—was played. The coffee that Tabassum ordered was named Black Coffee with honey. A brown liquid was served in a tall glass. The first small sip seemed to set free a young bird inside my mouth, with the fragrance of caramel in its wings.

— Like it? Tabassum asked with a movement of her eyes.

— *Yeh na thi hamari kismat ke wisal-e-yaar hota, agar aur jeete rahte yehi intezaar hota.* It was not in my destiny to meet you. Had I lived longer, I would have waited longer.

— Wow! Is that what it tastes like?

— Have you noticed, Tabassum …

— What?

— The more the coffee dwindles, the more the ocean of nectar swells.

— Really?

— Hmm.

— Would Mirza have liked this coffee?

— Perhaps Ghalib mian would have written … *Ghalib chhuti sharaab par ab bhi kabhi kabhi peeta hoon roz-e-abr-o-shab-e-mehtaab mein.* Ghalib still drinks as an exception, on cloudy days and moonlit nights. But why did you bring this taste of nectar to me today Tabassum?

Tabassum was silent for a long time. Then she said, 'We really shall enter dozakh tomorrow, janab.'

— Is that so?

— Ghalib is coming to Dilli in the next chapter. It is a macabre episode. How did Manto sahib even write it? In Dilli, Mirza spoke to the dead for the first time. The dead showed him the way. I wept as I read. Manto sahib is so cruel.

I toyed with the taste of caramel in my mouth.

9

شکوۂ آبلہ ابھی سے میر
ہے پیارے ہنوز دلی دور

Already weeping over your scar, Mir?
It's still a long way to Dilli, friend

I entered Shahjahanabad with the voices of ill-fated spirits ringing in my ears, Manto bhai. Everyone referred to it as Dilli, but I liked using the name Shahjahanabad; some names have a certain fragrance attached to them, don't they? A fragrance like Jahangiri Ittar. Haven't you heard of it? But then, how many people know all this? Jahanpanah Jahangir used to claim that ittar was invented during his reign. All these are the whims of kings and queens. But do you know who distilled this ittar? It was Begum Noorjehan's mother Asmat Begum. Jahangir was filled with regret at the fact that his father, Jahanpanah Akbar, had had to go to his grave without experiencing the fragrance of this ittar. Emperor Akbar! He was like the front door to heaven, Manto bhai. I don't know how much of this is true—I got it from highly-placed people in Dilli—the foam that would gather on the surface of the water when Asmat Begum made rosewater would be collected, a little bit at a time, in an ittar vial. This was how Jahangiri Ittar was born. It was said that a drop of this ittar could make a garden bloom with a gathering of thousands. Such was its fragrance that even lost souls came back, attracted by its scent.

I came to Dilli like a lost soul too. Or was it like a dream— what do you say? What was my life, after all? Nothing but a dream, although I was at least a flesh and blood human being. Wasn't I? I was Allah's dream—no, not a dream but a nightmare. Do you know why he had this nightmare? He knew that I would bring poetry to this world, and through this poetry each of you would walk across halls of mirrors. And you would see how your reality was changing. My existence would be scattered like dust on the floors of the halls of mirrors. The dust from which Allah made man.

How we drift from one subject to another! I was telling all of you about my arrival in Shahjahanabad, wasn't I? Yes, that's what I was saying, for how else would we have been talking of fragrances? The universe of words is remarkable, you know. I was talking of the voice of ill-fated spirits ringing in my ears during my journey to Shahjahanabad, and that's what brought me to the subject of perfume. Souls are fragrances, each of them. But you will not find any of these fragrances in the perfumeries of Mughal emperors. These fragrances are made by Allah. The Creator gives each soul a different fragrance. Some of them match the perfumes made in this world. That is why these fragrances are to be found in heaven as well as on earth. Something is wrong, Manto bhai. When I'm trying to tell you about my arrival in Shahjahanabad, why am I reminded repeatedly of my days in Agra? Mir sahib

said long ago:

نصیحت میر نے مجھ کو یہی کی
کہ سب کچھ ہوتاٹو، عاشق نہ ہونا

Since the subject of love *has* come up, and since Mir sahib himself has said, be whatever you want to be, but never a lover, I might as well tell you the story of how he lost his heart. I might forget, and never get a chance to tell this story, so gustakhi maaf, I want to use this opportunity to recount Mir sahib's agony. Why not let our conversation continue this way, my very own brothers in hell, forward and backward and losing our way, like a succession of waves that cannot be told apart? What is it, why are all of you sitting up? Why is there a dark shadow on your faces? What is it, Manto bhai? Did I say something wrong? I have measured out my entire life in mistakes. Umrao Begum had asked me once, 'Aap kaun hain, Mirza sahib, who are you?'

— Meaning?

— Who are you?

I had burst out laughing. —A dot, Begum, I am but a dot.

— A dot?

A dot—a drop—no one can tell, Manto bhai, when or where it will appear, or when and in which direction it will be stretched into a line. But why do all of you stare at me like this? All right, give me a moment to reflect, let me think it over, I'm sure I will find out where I went wrong, what my mistake was, just give me a little time …

Yes, I must talk about my arrival in Shahjahanabad first. They spoke to me a minute ago, those same spirits whose voices I had heard on my way to Dilli. If you don't talk about us first, no one will listen to you, you idiot, they told me.

— Why not?

— Because the first thing that people want to hear about is what lies deep in the earth. And it's we who are resting in those depths …

— Where do you rest?

— Under Dilli. Talk about us first. This city stands on the foundation of our flesh and blood. Everyone knows of Mir sahib. But we are unknown, if you do not talk about us, who will? Who were the ones to talk to you when you came to Shahjahanabad? Who knew you then, Asad? It was we who spoke to you.

I will talk about them now, stay alert and listen closely. This is a city whose story is told in regret—it was born of sorrow, it died of sorrow. I have seen this death, Manto bhai, I will recount every bit of what I saw. I must. For this city is my flesh and my bones. I'm not exaggerating, Chandni Chowk was my backbone, the Qila-e-Mualla, the Red Fort, was my misshapen skull. And my heart? That was Jama Masjid, you understand that, don't you? The Qila-e-Mualla faced west, towards Mecca. Chandni Chowk was to the west, and Jama Masjid faced west too. The doors to the city were like the world itself. The gateways were actually the four entrances to heaven. It was in the courtyard of the Jama Masjid that I first heard Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti tell stories. Do you know what the Khwaja said? 'Whose face is that in the mirror? What beauty is this that has let itself be captured in the frame of my soul? Who has adorned the universe? Who is reflected in each and every atom? Who fills all the grains of sand with light? I can see the flesh, but who is concealed in the marrow? Who sings for the peace of the

spirit? He sees himself, loves himself. Who is he? Who is he?' He is Garib Nawaz. The friend of the hungry people.'

The day I arrived in Shahjahanabad, those who came up to me were the ones whom history doesn't write about, Manto bhai. They had been buried alive in order to build Shahjahanabad. Let me tell you this story from the beginning, then. Although I cannot tell even now where it begins and where it ends. I am that ancient tree, you know, which has survived for thousands of years, which no one ever tries to hack with an axe because it is of no use to anyone. I just keep standing, forever. It seems to me that my head is actually where the roots are, shooting upwards through the sky towards an unknown place, no, certainly not towards heaven, and my feet are sunk in the flames of hell. Still I had told Allah:

اب جفا سے بھی ہے محروم اللہ اللہ
اس قدر دشمن اربابِ وفا ہو جانا

I am now deprived even of cruelty, oh God
Such enmity towards your devoted lover!

As I was saying, as you know, before Shahjahanabad, the Mughals had their capital in Akbarabad, or Agra. Jahanpanah Akbar went to Agra in 1558. Are you really going to enjoy history lessons now? There are plenty of history books for that purpose. King Bahadur Shah had assigned me the task of writing a history of the Mughals; I couldn't progress beyond the first volume. I grew up listening to stories, Manto bhai, could history possibly show me the way to heaven? On the contrary, we have been burnt to cinders in the hell of history ever since 1857.

Still, I must tell you a thing or two about Agra. The first love of my life is mingled in its dust. The current of the Yamuna used to talk to me. I used to roam about in Chaharbagh and in Moti Mahal. The Bulandbagh was situated right next to Zafar Khan's memorial; it was an extraordinary garden. To tell the truth, Manto bhai, Agra was a city of gardens. And it had innumerable taverns, sarais. The one next to the Taj Mahal, named the Taj-e-Mukaam, was where we would gather every day. You could say the Taj-e-Mukaam was our garden of stories. Every story was succeeded by another; gusts of laughter rose skywards like a swarm of kites. It was there that I heard the story of Mir Sauda. I had never considered Sauda much of a poet, but one had to admit his skills when it came to writing qaseedas. There was something rather amusing that Sauda used to say, though all this was hearsay, for I had never seen him. Apparently he used to say, 'It's true I'm no flower in the garden, but then nor am I a thorn in anyone's flesh.' I might as well tell the story. Sauda wrote this amusing tale about Mir Hasan's father Mir Zahid. Food made Mir Zahid forget everything else in the world. There wasn't anything in the universe that couldn't yield something for him to eat. You'll roll with laughter when you hear the story, Manto bhai. One day, Mir Zahid was staring open-mouthed at his Begum's angia. You know what an angia is, don't you—underclothes to cover the breasts. The Begum was astonished; how brazen he was, why was a man gaping at her angia this way?

Embarrassed, she asked, 'Anything wrong, janab?'

— No.

— Then why are you …

— I'm looking, Begum.

— At what?

— What's inside the angia, Begum?

— What can there possibly be, janab?

Pouncing on her and cupping her breasts, Mir Zahid shouted, 'Roti hai, Begum, we have rotis here, as soft as velvet.'

— Ya Allah, ejaculated the Begum, about to faint. On other days, he would insert his hand into her petticoat and ask, 'What's in here, Begum? So soft, and yet so warm. This is a freshly baked roti, Begum. Why are you hiding it from me? Give it to me Begum—this roti has a special taste.' Ha ha ha, Manto bhai, just imagine the conversation at the inn. So many people passed through the city every day—familiar faces and strangers—there were more people in Akbarabad than in London at the time. This was Akbarabad, a tapestry woven with coloured threads—no, why call it that, it was more like a portrait gallery, where we had been painted with God's own brush. I am reminded of Hafiz sahib's sher, Manto bhai:

روزوصل دوست داراں یاد باد
یاد باد آن روئے گراں‌یاد باد

I still remember those days, when our friendship
Brought us together, do you still remember those days?

In 1637 Emperor Shahjahan went away to Dilli. Agra's portrait gallery collapsed. As Mir sahib had written:

بوئے گل جا نا بہ بلبل کی
عمر ، افسوں کیا شتاب گیا

The fragrance of the rose, the song of the nightingale,
And my life—how quickly all of them ended

Then began the work of building Shahjahanabad. Emperor Shahjahan had asked for a site to be identified somewhere between Agra and Lahore. This spot by the Yamuna was finalized for the purpose. You do know that a horoscope was drawn up for the city? Astrologers had determined the correct moment to begin. Construction was started on May 12, 1639. The story I'm about to tell you, Manto bhai, is the story of the beginning before this beginning. How a city gradually grows on a foundation of the dead, the same dead people whose spirits had surrounded me that night.

I was standing before the Qila-e-Mualla after my arrival in Dilli. There was no moon in the sky; the fortress appeared to be a gigantic ghost. And I felt people gathering around me, their breaths rank with the stench of rotting flesh.

— Asad. Someone called out to me.

I looked around but couldn't see anyone. I had arrived in Dilli very recently, who could possibly know me hereabouts?

— Who are you, I asked apprehensively.

— Qutub.

— But I don't know you. Where are you? Why can't I see you?

— We cannot be seen, Asad.

— Why?

— They have wiped us out.

— Who?

— Those who are building Shahjahanabad. They had handpicked us.

— And then?

— They killed and buried the whole lot of us. It's on that ground that Shahjahanabad stands today.

— Why were all of you killed?

— I didn't want to give them an inch of my land. So they got rid of me. There can be no greater crime against the emperor, they said. They branded me a vile criminal, keeping me imprisoned in an airless gaol for days on end.

— Asad bhai …

— Who are you?

— I am Yusuf.

— What did you do?

— I merely set eyes on her.

— On whom?

— I don't even know her name. She was standing in the balcony of the haveli. I only saw her eyes above her veil. Do you know what those eyes were like, Asad bhai? Like a pair of nightingales. I used to visit the haveli every day to see those nightingales. But I never saw them again. Still they took me away in chains and forced me inside a dark pit. And then one day …

— You went to your grave too, Yusuf?

— Yes.

— Didn't anyone protest?

— Who would raise his voice? Love is profane, love is hell. Who would say a word, Asad bhai? We don't have love in our lives, do we?

— And I just used to wander around the streets.

— Who are you?

— Hasan. Why did I wander around, Asad?

— Why?

— In search of dust.

— Dust? Why? What dust?

— The dust with which Allah had made Adam. Someone or the other must search for it, mustn't he?

— And so they took you away?

— They said, you're looking for dust? You want to create Adam from dust? You want to be Allah? The maulvis tore my clothes off. They stoned me to death. I didn't say anything to them, Asad bhai. I stood up to them fearlessly. Beat me as much as you can, pluck my eyes out, cleave my flesh from my body. Even in heaven I will search for dust. What will you do to me then? I shouted, beat me as much as you can, stone me as much as you can, I am Al-Hallaj. They had stoned Al-Hallaj too, hadn't they? Al-Hallaj had said, I am Allah, it's no one else but me. I had only wanted to create Adam from dust, Asad bhai. Does this make me a hypocrite, a munafiq?

All night I listened to these spirits, Manto bhai, who had been proven guilty on one pretext or another, and then killed and buried. The foundations of Shahjahanabad were built on the earth covering their graves. I had gone to Dilli with the dream of being a famous shair. On hearing my ghazals

at mushairas, wealthy people would exclaim, 'kyabaat, kyabaat, marhaba, marhaba!' But what city of wandering spirits had I arrived at instead? All night long I listened to the stories of their lives. None of them was a criminal, but they were branded that way. Because, to build a city, it was necessary to find criminals to kill and bury without reason. Sadiq mian's spirit had once asked me, 'You plan to write ghazals, Asad sahib?'

— I'm not good for anything else, mian.

— Aren't you going to write about spirits like us?

— I will.

— No one will understand your ghazals in that case Asad sahib. Sadiq had laughed.

— Why?

— They will only get the stench of death.

— Do you know what will happen after that? Sadiq mian asked, laughing.

— What?

— You will die like a street dog.

The spirits were absolutely right, Manto bhai. But even if I was a street dog, I was handsome once. Some people even used to want me. Mughaljaan, Munirabai and the other girls used to love me. Then, one day, I saw that I was turning mangy, I had become infested with worms. All my fur fell off eventually, leaving only a few bones beneath the roasted skin. Sprawled in the diwankhana, I would stare at this bundle of bones endlessly before the sheer fatigue of the activity made me drop off. And I would dream that Dilli was disintegrating, turning into crumbling sand, just sand; I was sinking beneath the dunes in the desert. Just think of the number of ancient spirits whose hands I took to arrive in Dilli, Manto bhai.

10

خرابی د ل کی اس حد ہے کہ یہ سمجھانہیں جاتا
کہ آبادی بھی یہاں تھی یا کہ ویرانہ مدت کا

My heart is so bereft that I cannot tell whether
Anyone ever lived here, or whether it has long been empty

Gustakhi maaf, Mirza sahib and my friends, it's time to hear about the ill-fated Manto. Words are bubbling up within me, they will not be held back. Whenever I spoke, Ismat would only laugh and suck on an ice cube—how she loved eating ice—and I would just keep talking, talking like a mad man. Shafia Begum would show up from time to time to cover my mouth with her hand and giggle. I know they couldn't tolerate me speaking for any length of time, I swore all the time, I couldn't talk without adding a 'bastard' before and after every sentence; what could I do, just like Mirza sahib, my life too had passed on the streets, in tea shops and coffee houses; I had had no one besides my mother to look after me.

There's nothing much to say about my father, Mirza sahib. He was an important person, a government official in Samrala in Ludhiana. He had married not once but twice. I was his second wife's son. He never even spared me a glance. All my games and mischief were with my mother, whom I used to address as 'bibijaan'. And there was my blood sister Iqbal. My father was like a shadow of a djinn, Mirza sahib, a shadow that I could not escape all my life. Much later, I was startled when I read Kafka's short story 'Judgement'. In this story too there was a father, a father like a demon, who caused his own son to jump into a river and commit suicide. In all my stories one character or another appeared like a demonic father, Mirza sahib, and I wanted to kill him off.

My father Maulvi Ghulam Hasan had his three sons by his first wife educated properly. He sent them abroad and made sure that they were well settled. But as for this Manto, he was turned loose on the streets—get out, you swine, wander around like a stray dog, eat the scraps and bones left behind by people. Muhammad Hasan, Sayeed Hasan, Saleem Hasan—his three sons by his first wife—were in England, Mirza sahib. And I was on Samrala's roads, doing what? Watching performing monkeys and people walking through flames. I gave up studies after my matriculation—who was going to pay for higher studies? After all, Maulvi Ghulam Hasan had to ensure that his three sons in England became important people. What else was there for me to do, Mirza sahib? So one day I entered a drinking dive. The police beat me all the way into jail. I was even released a few days later, I have no idea how. I began to drink regularly after this. That was how I started stealing money from Bibijaan's box. I would sleep after drinking, and dream in my sleep; do you know who appeared in my dreams? Maulvi Ghulam Hasan, the son of a bitch. I would throw rocks at him, fling shit and mud, and still the man would laugh at the top of his voice, besharam aadmi, that was how shameless he was. He was Khabish, Mirza sahib,

nothing but the evil spirit of my life. Do you know how he'd look at me? As though I was a cockroach which had just scurried out of a drain and into the room. Do you know what he'd say to my mother? 'Why do you love this loafer so much, bibi, he should actually be tried in court.'

Trials, yes, my entire life passed in trials, Mirza sahib. I had to stand on trial over and over again simply for the stories I wrote. From childhood, a coil of fire closed in on me. Do you remember Mir sahib's sher, Mirza sahib?

دل کے تئیں آتش ہجراں سے بچھایا نہ گیا
گھر جلا سامنے پہ ہم سے بجھایا نہ گیا

I couldn't save my heart from the heat of separation
I saw my home burn but I couldn't put out the fire

I had passed through just such a blaze in my childhood. Ever since then, Mirza sahib, I became a resident of fire. Or would you rather call it an aag ka darya, a river of flames? Whatever you'd like to call it, I spent forty-three years roasting in this blaze. Shafia Begum would say, 'What have you got by burning away this way, Manto sahib?

— Qisse, Begum. Stories.

— Stories about whom?

— About them, there they are, standing across the road, can't you see them? They're hidden in the spirals of smoke.

— Who?

— Manto's spirits.

Let me tell the story of the fire first, Mirza sahib. Let me tell you, my brothers, it was Manto—Saadat Hasan had died long ago—who walked through fire. That's the truth, without a speck of falsehood in it. Manto doesn't know falsehoods, never knew them; that was why they dragged him to court again and again. When did Manto ever learn to write, questioned the big shots of literature. The communists didn't spare him either. That bloody Manto, that son of a bitch, spreading garbage masquerading as art. The very people who claimed to be my friends were the ones who laughed at me, saying I was a cynic, a reactionary. Apparently I even stole cigarettes from the pockets of dead people. I had nowhere to go, Mirza sahib, except the fire through which I walked as a child. You wrote such a long time ago:

غمِ ہستی کا ،اسد،کس سے ہوجز مرگِ علاج
شمع ہر رنگ میں جلتی ہے سحر ہونے تک

What medicine besides death for the agony of living, Asad?
The lamp must burn in different hues till dawn

Let's say, if I was born in 1918—provided of course Maulvi Ghulam Hasan acknowledges this—then I was a cur of ten or twelve at the time. None of you knows this, but that year Master Khuda Buksh had created a sensation in London's Piccadilly Circus, driving a car blindfolded. What acclaim he received! As though we had become the goddamned masters of the world. Then, you know what, something happened. It was like a message from God. You know, Mirza sahib, a single incident can change life like

the ocean on a full moon night. Like Begum Falak Ara in your case. I know you will never talk about her again; it was you who taught me what ishq is. It was you for whom Hafiz sahib had written:

چاکو ہالے بسنسے مہ خاکی استانے شُشست
کوزا رب میں با فرما اجی جناب کجا

We came together once, the heady memories
have vanished now
The enchantment and desire have dwindled on their own

Yes, some of these things have to be buried in the deepest shrine within the heart, which is like a place of pilgrimage, a heaven inside one's own body. That's where I buried Ismat—how she loved sucking ice. There was no Shafia Begum in this dargah of desire. What if there wasn't? What could I do about it, Mirza sahib? We cannot decide who will be admitted and who will be turned away from our own jannat and jahannum, can we? Al-Fatah decides for us. You accept that, don't you?

Pardon this impoverished man, my brothers. Manto keeps disappearing from his own stories. This was my nature. If you had read my stories, you'd have realized that Manto kept giving everyone the slip; he was perpetually on the run, like the soul of an infidel. There was no option. Saadat Hasan could never confront Manto. Saadat Hasan was full of affectations—such elegance, the clothes must be just so, anything but Lahori shoes was out of the question, he had to possess at least a dozen pairs of sandals from the Karnal Boot Shop in Anarkali bazaar; there was no end to his fancies and demands. And Manto would grab him by his ear, shake him, and say, you fucking son of a bitch, you think you're a fucking aristocrat, do you even know the fate of what you're writing? They will blindfold you and gag you and throw you into a pit. All of Hindustan will reek with the stench of your stories. You bastard, you swine, you dare write *Thanda Gosht*? Is there no limit to your defiance of our religion? Have you heard what they say? All you write about are relationships of the flesh between men and women, is there anything besides red light areas in your stories? I accept it, Mirza sahib, there really wasn't anything else; there was murder, there was rape, there was necrophilia, there were strings of profanities—and behind all these images were a few specific years in time—-years swept away by blood—1946, 1947, 1948—there was No Man's Land, the area between the two countries where Toba Tek Singh died. None of you has heard of Toba Tek Singh. How could you have heard of him? He was nothing but a lunatic.

No, don't panic, my brothers, the story of the fire will begin now. I'm not going to spin a yarn about Toba Tek Singh. But you know what, people have tried to understand Manto in different ways—who was this son of a bitch, really?—was he a lunatic, or a maniac, or a mental patient, or an angel? I wanted to piss on this attempt to understand everything. How would you understand, you bloody fools, did you ever see the sunset the way I did? How would you understand, then, why the first thing I would look for in a woman was her feet? So give up your attempts; if you must discover Manto, read his stories—all those men and women you see, on the streets, in the slums, at the whorehouses, in the movie studios of Bombay—you might just find Manto among them. Are these stories or shit, they would ask. For heaven's sake, if you can't understand the times we live in, read my stories, and if you cannot bear to read them you'll know that you cannot bear to live in these times. But what's the use of saying all this? They singed Manto with flaming rods; what kind of a writer is he anyway, he's just a pornographer, he deals only with the seamy side of life. Yet, whenever I started a new story, I never forgot to write the number 786 and Bismillah's name before beginning. All this was my reward for walking on burning coal,

my brothers.

You remember the exploits of Master Khuda Buksh, don't you? The one who had demonstrated the art of driving blindfolded in London's Trafalgar Square. After him, a performer named Allarakha appeared in Amritsar, claiming to be Khuda Buksh's teacher. Digging a hole in the road, he lit some coal in the pit he had made, and then proceeded to walk on the fiery lumps. The crowds swelled every day to watch Allarakha sahib's magic. Many stories, many legends, began to spread about him. I used to sit there quietly, watching him. How does a man walk on burning coal? After he had walked on them, he would show us the soles of his feet to prove there were no blisters. I had heard the story of Al-Hallaj from Bibijaan. Once he took a lot of people across the desert to Mecca. The travellers were weary with hunger. Can we not get some dates to eat, pir sahib, they asked Hallaj.

Smiling, Hallaj said, 'You want to eat dates?'

— Yes, we're starving. We cannot walk any more.

— Wait. Hallaj made a gesture in the air with his arm, whereupon a bowl of dates appeared in his hand.

The journey was resumed, and once again they collapsed in the desert with hunger. That was another era, my brothers. Wasn't it, Mirza sahib? Life meant nothing but crossing one desert after another. And the nights would pass in the company of the stars in the desert sky. It was the road of the pir, of the devout, of the Hazrat. We moved away from that road towards this hell of ours such a long time ago, to this cacophony, this torment, this stench of rotting flesh.

This time they wanted halwa to assuage their hunger.

Smiling, Hallaj asked, is that all you need, or do you want something else too?

— No, huzoor, that's all we need to continue on our journey.

— That's true. How will you get closer to the true path, the Din, unless you survive physically? Saying this, he gestured with his arm in the air once again, making the halwa appear. The desert was suffused with its aroma. After everyone had eaten, one of them said, 'But halwa of this quality isn't available anywhere except Baghdad, pir sahib.'

Smiling, Hallaj said, 'To the Lord, the desert and Baghdad are one and the same.'

— And where did you get the dates?

After a few moments of silence, Hallaj stood upright, like a tree. 'Shake me,' he said.

— Why, pir sahib?

— Try it. Hallaj smiled.

All of them began to shake Hallaj, and he turned into a tree, ripe dates falling to earth from his body. The dark brown dates glittered like jewels in the sunlight.

I was thinking of this story about Mansur Hallaj while watching Allarakha sahib's magic. This was pure magic then, Mirza sahib, not sleight of hand. If one man can become a palm tree, why can't another walk on burning coal? How many skills does a man come to earth with? But how little of these powers is actually used? How much of them do we get to see? Why don't we see them, Mirza sahib? Do you remember Mir sahib's sher:

وارے دنیا میں رہو غم زدہ یا شاد رہو
ایسا کچھ کر کے چلو یاں کہ یاد رہو

Live amongst people. You will find joy, sorrows too

Live in this world. Don't try to understand it, my brothers. Live in this world as though it is a book. Just write down everything that happens.

Let me tell you what happened after this, for I can tell your faces are turning gloomy.

One day, Allarakha sahib suddenly said, 'Do all of you believe in God?'

— Yes, janab, came the crowd's reply in a chorus.

— And in me?

— Huzoor is a prophet, everyone responded.

Allarakha sahib burst into laughter. —A prophet? Have you seen a prophet? Do you know who a real prophet is?

— Tell us, huzoor.

— Then let me tell you a story. Have you ever heard of Abu Sayeed Abul-Khayeer? A Sufi saint from Khorasan. All this happened twelve or thirteen hundred years ago. Do you know what the world was like back then?

— What was it like, huzoor?

— A hundred different winds would blow. And each of them would turn people mad in different ways. Allarakha sahib laughed. —So Pir Abu Sayeed was on his way through the forest one day with a disciple of his. The forest was infested with poisonous snakes. Suddenly one such snake wound itself around Abu Sayeed's leg. The disciple froze with fear. 'Don't be afraid,' Abu Sayeed told him. 'The snake is here to offer me its sajda, to worship me. Would you like it to worship you too?'

— Certainly. The disciple brightened.

— It will not worship you till you cannot forget yourself.

Now this was a true prophet, friends. He had no possessions of his own. He was sent to this world only to spread the word of God. Now, it's time for each of you to be tested.

Tested for what? What did Allarakha sahib want to test? The crowd exchanged glances.

— You say you believe in God. In me too. Those who have faith, come forward and walk through the fire with me.

At this the crowds began to thin. Some crept away surreptitiously, others ran away after one look at the flames. And then, I couldn't stay still anymore Mirza sahib, I went forward towards Allarakha sahib. Taking my shoes and socks off, I hitched my kurta up.

Looking at me in surprise, Allarakha sahib asked, 'Do you want to walk with me, son?'

— Yes.

— Then come along. He tugged at my hand. —Recite the Kalma. La illaha illallaho Muhammadur rasullullah.

— La illaha illallaho Muhammadur rasullullah.

As I recited the Kalma, my body began to feel as light as the air. Holding Allarakha sahib's hand, I entered the circle of fire, Mirza sahib. I walked behind him on the burning lumps of coal. Yes, Mirza sahib, I had found myself for the first time. On my own path, beyond my father's threats, beyond my highly educated stepbrothers' disdain, as I walked behind Allarakha sahib across the circle of fire. No, I didn't get blisters on my feet, Mirza sahib.

To tell the truth, I drifted through the days like a vagrant. I hated studying in school. But it was in school that books entered my blood. Some of us formed a troupe to stage a play by Agha Zafar

Kashmiri. One day my father broke the harmonium, the tablas—everything. No more of this, he decreed. And the more stubbornly determined I grew. Abandoning my textbooks, I would read romances; they were written for adults, no one of my age read them. My wild ways earned me the nickname of Tommy in school. I passed the matriculation examination in the third division on my third attempt, and you know the funniest thing—I failed in Urdu. Ha ha ha, just imagine, Mirza sahib, I failed in Urdu.

Those were the days, my brothers. Studies were abandoned once and for all, and I began to frequent the gambling dens. Denu and Fazlu ran their den in Karta Jamal Singh. I used to play flush. Though an apprentice initially, I learnt the intricacies quickly enough. All my time was spent gambling. I didn't keep count of how long things went on this way. But one day, you know, I felt immensely bored of it all. It was tedious to keep betting on oneself all the time. Was I no one, then? Was I just an object that could be betted on? Very well then, Manto, I decided, let's walk a different road now. Life doesn't offer just the one road. Why not try a different one now? But what would I do instead? If I gave up the gambling den, where could I go? The streets took me in, I wandered from one road to another, from one lane to another, in a daze of dreams I walked, I became friendly with the dogs, I used to sit with them and pet them, they would lick me back. I wandered around the cemeteries, I heard hundreds of stories from fakirs, Mirza sahib; those stories are lost forever, for I couldn't write them down.

The Jallianwalla Bagh massacre of 1919 had taken place already. I was only seven at the time. But I saw Punjab rising in revolt, there were parades and slogans on the streets of Amritsar. Bhagat Singh was my ideal then. I had a photograph of him on my desk. During my days of wandering around the streets, I wondered as I sat beneath a tree in Jallianwallah Bagh whether the world as we knew it could be destroyed in a way that would prevent the Tommies from firing indiscriminately at us ever again. Several times I even thought of making bombs, you know, Mirza sahib. I would fucking blow Amritsar apart, force the white swine to leave the country. I would say all this to Bala, to Ashiq, to Fakir Husain and Captain Wahid and Gyani Arur Singh. They would laugh their guts out. All friends of mine. Their advice was … relax, enjoy yourself, to hell with Amritsar. We would smoke hashish in Aziz's restaurant. The hashish fumes were the perfect accompaniment to Aziz's kebabs. Ashiq was a photograper, Fakir wrote poetry and Gyani Arur Singh was a dentist. I no longer remember what the Captain did. When he was stoned on hashish Ashiq would sing like Rafiq Ghaznavi. And Anwar, who was an artist, would just go 'Wah! Wah!' at the music. In Aziz's darkened restaurant Anwar himself would sing sometimes, 'E ishq kahin le chal. Take me away somewhere, o love.' He had turned Akhtar Sherani's poetry into songs. I wonder which grave Aziz's restaurant lies in now.

11

محبت سے ہے انتظام جہاں
محبت سے گردش میں ہے آسماں

All the arrangements on earth are for love
Love makes the sky go round

Ya Allah, what a life you had begun to live, Manto bhai. The lord had made every necessary arrangement for you to have dozakh written into your destiny. Just like he had taken care in my case too. What will this fellow do in jannat? Indeed, what *would* I have done? Maybe a houri or nymph would have been assigned to me, but how long could I have stared at the same face? Even dead, I wouldn't have been able to bear the punishment of heaven. It's all written by the lord's quill. All my life, I couldn't find the language to talk of my failure. Even after all the Urdu and Farsi ghazals I wrote, Manto bhai, I don't think I succeeded in touching these wounds; their agonies did not surface in my ghazals. But I often wondered whether anything beautiful has ever been crafted except through pain. Take the cypress tree, for instance. Its branches and leaves are pruned continuously to make it beautiful—the cypress has to withstand so much pain for the sake of this beauty. Then take wine. You cannot make it without hurting the grapes. You have to cut and slice the reed properly to make a quill. Then let's say you have to write a letter. You have to cut the paper to the appropriate size, then draw strokes on its breast with ink. Each stroke is nothing but a wound, after all, and what's the outcome? The mysteries of your heart revealed to your beloved. We cannot give birth to anything beautiful without causing pain. Then how can God? All the games of creation and destruction in his world are played to give birth to new kinds of beauty. Take me. He made me with a fistful of dust; then he flung me up in the sky, where I stayed for some time; but then one day he suddenly tossed me to the bosom of the earth, I fell here at this spot, and the impact of that fall remained as a scar on this planet. The world acquired this gash whose name is Mirza Ghalib. But who can deny the beauty of this wound, Manto bhai? This is how the world goes round, doesn't it?

Look, our friends are going back to sleep again. What is it— what's the matter? This exchange between a couple of idiots seems rather cruel, doesn't it? Theek hai, very well, let's change the subject, shall we Manto bhai? Life—mine or the Hazrat's or prince Salim's—is usually quite dreary. You have to turn into the washerman's ass to bear this burden; I plod on, plodding along. To tolerate this existence we have to resort to the hikayat sometimes; not stories, but narrative poems. Stories are about our lives, but these long tales in verse are like a reflection of another world in the mirror. I have plenty of time to tell my stories, none of us is running away from our graves. But since the subject of the hikayat came up, let's hear one. Tales like these surface only for a brief while before being lost again.

This one is titled *Sihr-ul-Bayan*. It's not about the head, the sar, but it can certainly make your head spin with its magic. Look, Manto bhai, they're all sitting up again. This masnavi was written by Mir Hasan, the son of Mir Zahid, whom Sauda used to make fun of. He was born seventy years before me. But he left Dilli for Faizabad; not that he had been keen on moving, for his lover used to live in Dilli. But what could he do—making love and making a living don't go hand in hand. However, I'm told Hasan sahib did not have a particularly comfortable life in Faizabad either. He barely managed to make ends meet. When it came to writing, though, he was a champion. *Sihr-ul-Bayan* became so famous that it was known as Mir Hasan's masnavi. This masnavi was actually a hikayat. I've heard that it used to float in the sky, on the wind, even on people's lips. Just imagine, this hikayat became Mir Hasan's masnavi.

There was a nawab named Malik Shah. Where? I cannot tell. Why not assume that his gorgeous city existed in a mirror. What did this city look like? Words, it seems, cannot describe it. It was as exquisite as the azan at dawn. Sparkling roads, with houses as white as snow, interspersed with flower-gardens. And where there were gardens there were bound to be a variety of birds and songs. This city was supposed to have had markets you wouldn't want to leave. It wasn't so much a case of walking around a market as it was of exploring a crystal palace. You can imagine what the nawab's fort in such a city would be like. Yes, my brothers, you do have to use your imagination, for that is the way of the hikayat.

The nawab was very sad, however, because he had no son. When it was time for him to die, whom would he anoint as king? One day, he summoned all his ministers and told them, 'It is time for me to leave this world now.'

— Why, Jahanpanah? There was a clamour of protests.

— What am I going to do with all these riches? Whom shall I bequeath them to? I ruled my kingdom with unwavering attention all these years. I had no respite to consider the path of God. Enough. I want to abdicate now and follow his path.

'You're mistaken, Jahanpanah,' said the prime minister. 'The lord gave you the responsibility of running your kingdom. This is his chosen path for you. If you do not fulfil this responsibility, how will you answer him on the Day of Judgement, huzoor?'

— But who will rule when I am gone?

— Who says you will not have a son? I am sending for Brahmins and astrologers. Let them make their predictions. We will consider the future thereafter.

The nawab accepted the prime minister's suggestion. Brahmins and astrologers arrived and began to chart the nawab's future. Eventually they declared unanimously that the nawab's Begum was definitely going to give birth to a son. Nobody could alter the course of destiny. If Sauda had been present, he might have joked, where is the course of destiny hidden, can you give me a glimpse? Under the pyjamas, perhaps? The Brahmins announced that the Begum would have a son as beautiful as the moon. But yes, there was a problem. What problem? Just that the boy would have to be protected zealously till the age of twelve. For there was a risk of losing him before he turned twelve.

— What are you saying? The nawab's face fell.

— Oh no, we aren't predicting the death of the prince. But he might be lost. So you must keep watch on him continuously, huzoor.

— Arrangements shall be made as you recommend. But what steps do we have to take?

— He must not be allowed out of the fort for twelve years, huzoor. Not even to the terrace.

— Why?

— It appears that a fairy will fall in love with the prince.

— And then?

— The prince will fall in love with someone else.

Just imagine, Manto bhai, the son hasn't even been born, and already they're discussing his love life. Enjoying yourselves, my brothers? Keep listening, there will be many more twists and turns to make your senses reel. Do you suppose a game that began with talk of romance is going to end easily? So, before a year had passed, one of the nawab's wives gave birth to a son. The city erupted in joy. Listen to this sher of Hafiz sahib's:

شگفتہ شد گل ہمراہ
و گشت بلبل مست
سدائے سر خوشی اے
عاشقانے وعدہ پرست

The red rose has bloomed
The nightingales swoon
Where are you, wine-lovers?
It's time for loud celebrations

And do you know what the son was named? Benazir. The nawab distributed riches amongst his subjects unstintingly. For six days the entire city celebrated with singing and dancing and feasting and carousing. The nawab was so happy that he even freed many of his slaves. That's royal largesse for you. There was no such largesse in Jahanpanah Zafar's time. It was limited to feeding the poor one good meal.

A new palace was constructed for the prince, with a garden all around it. The palace was beyond compare. The garden was full of cypress and other trees, birdsong rang out everywhere. Hundreds of servants and maids surrounded Benazir all the time. Because the prince must not be let out of sight. Within a few years, Benazir had mastered reading and writing, horsemanship, archery, painting and shooting. But, most important, he had a wonderful heart; the servants and maids were like his brothers and sisters, his family. Had he not been aptly named, my brothers? He really seemed to be the red rose that Hafiz sahib described, born in this world only to spread its fragrance.

On the prince's twelfth birthday, the Nawab Malik Shah announced that the prince would tour the city that day. Pretty maids bathed Benazir with fragrant oils, and dressed him so beautifully that he looked like a painting by the master artist Bihzad. Pearls were rained on Benazir as soon as he emerged from the palace, while his retinue immediately began to argue and fight over their share. Every home and every shop in the city was decorated with finely embroidered cotton. Large mirrors were set up to reflect the sunlight in its seven constituent colours. Images of the parade would appear in the mirrors too. Indeed, the prince's first tour of the city remained imprinted in everyone's memory in veritable letters of gold.

But they had made a miscalculation, which neither the nawab nor anyone else had realized. There was still a night to go for the dangerous period of twelve years to end. It was a full moon night, the moonbeams were flooding the palace, and Benazir was sleepy after the excitement of the day. He felt a desire to sleep on the terrace in the light of the full moon. This is the course of destiny, Manto bhai. You never know when an urge will strike without warning, nor what kind of hangover it will lead you into. So a bed was prepared for the prince on the terrace, Benazir even fell asleep in the soft moonlight,

under the caressing fragrance of the flowers. Several servants and maids surrounded him to keep watch. But suddenly a sweet perfume wafted in on the cooling breeze, putting all of them to sleep. Only the moon observed from the sky the events that were about to unfold in Benazir's life.

Do you know the source of the cooling breeze, my brothers? It was a fairy. She was out in the night sky for a ride on her flying throne. Allow me to tell you something about this fairy, Manto bhai. There are many here who came to their graves well after me, to them a fairy is a pretty woman with gossamer wings. All this is the white man's imagination. Do you know whom we call a fairy in Farsi? A disembodied spirit who appears in man's life disguised as a beautiful woman. Do you know why? The fairy actually wants to imprison the man by deceiving him with the pretence of love. She controls him according to her wishes; disobeying her leads to death. Sometimes it seems to me that this is how love comes into our lives, every love affair is death; doesn't it seem as though each one of us has been imprisoned by a different fairy till eternity, Manto bhai?

The fairy was named Mahrukh. The sight of the handsome Benazir made her gasp. Could such a beautiful man possibly exist in this universe? But clearly he could, as she could see. Oh, I must have him, what sort of fairy am I if I cannot snare him? Mahrukh descended on the terrace, she felt that the night was magical not because of the moonlight but because of the lustre of Benazir's beauty. She pressed her lips against the sleeping Benazir's. And then? Then she took him away to her fairyland.

When the servants and maids awoke, they found the prince gone. Where was he? Even after combing the entire palace and the garden, he was nowhere to be found. The nawab and his wives broke down in tears. And not just them. The flowers and trees and birds and fountains all began to cry too. Where had their favourite prince disappeared? Who had taken him away? Obviously, they couldn't find him anywhere in the kingdom.

Benazir remained imprisoned in Mahrukh's fairyland. Years passed, but he couldn't forget his home. Mahrukh's attempts to win him over with all kinds of temptations did not succeed. Then she told Benazir one day, 'You know you're my prisoner, don't you?'

— I do.

— Then you must obey me.

— Take me home.

— I can't do that. But I can't bear to see you so unhappy, Benazir. I love you.

— Then take me home. Benazir grasped Mahrukh's hand.

Mahrukh laughed. —Prisoners cannot return home, Benazir. But there's something I can do for you. When I visit my father every evening, you can take a ride too. I can give you a magic horse. You could take a ride on it for a couple of hours; it'll make you feel better. The magic horse will take you wherever you want to go. But wherever you go, you must promise not to give your heart to anyone else. If you do, you will be punished suitably. Don't forget, ours may be a romantic relationship, but you're still my prisoner.

Benazir accepted Mahrukh's proposal. What choice did he have? You have no idea of the punishment meted out by fairies, my brothers, it's even worse than hell. One night, as he was flying about on his magic horse, Benazir spotted a lovely garden beneath him. And glittering in the moonlight in the middle of that garden was an exquisite palace. Descending to the garden, Benazir hid behind a tree to check whether anyone else was present. A little later he spotted a few young women beside a fountain. And do you know what he saw among them? A vision like the full moon amidst the stars. It was princess Badr-e-Munir, daughter of another nawab named Masood Shahr. Her beauty glowed through her cotton dress like a candle on its stand. Benazir could not tear his eyes away from her. Then

he remembered the fairy Mahrukh. You mustn't give your heart to anyone else, Benazir. But what was Benazir to do now? He had already given his heart away at first sight. This was how it used to be in our lives, my brothers. The instant two pairs of eyes met, sparks flew. Do you know why? Because our lives were actually spent like prisoners. There was no relationship between love and marriage in our lives. Love was a sin. The woman's place was in the ladies' chambers; she wasn't allowed to set eyes on anyone except her brothers. And men couldn't set eyes on any women at all. So all it took was for two sets of eyes to meet. Love, and sin. All this must not be allowed. Get them married as quickly as possible. But what did this lead to? Men were forced to visit brothels, and women had secret affairs. It's human nature, Manto bhai, human nature—who can stop it? Could anyone stop Mir sahib? It was because they couldn't that they branded him a lunatic. This is what society is good at, Manto bhai. When it cannot accept you, it can stamp you with the label of a mad man. You're outside civilized society then, outside the tamaddun. Deaf, mute, speechless.

Yes, let me tell you what happened after this. That was the first time that Benazir set eyes on Badr-e-Munir. I'm reminded of Mir sahib's sher:

گر میاں متصل رہیں باہم
نے تساہل ہو، نے تغافل ہو

Let us be addicted to each other always
Never less eager, never indifferent

Badr-e-Munir fainted when she saw how handsome Benazir was. Her friend Nazm-un-Nissa, the prime minister's daughter and extraordinarily beautiful herself, sprinkled rosewater on her to revive her. When she recovered, the princess pretended to be angry, saying, 'Who has dared to intrude in my garden?' Actually, of course, an entirely different sort of fire was raging within this statement. This is what first love is like, isn't it? The game of mock quarrels and making up continued. They made silent glances at each other. Then Benazir told the princess everything—even the details of how he was being held prisoner by the fairy Mahrukh. Do you know what Badr-e-Munir said? 'I cannot share you with anyone. You can live with your fairy then, don't come back here.' Grasping the princess's feet, Benazir said, 'I don't even want to know whether Mahrukh loves me or not. I cannot live without you. But I have to go back this one time. If I get my freedom I'll be back at the same time tomorrow. I am leaving my heart with you, it's only my body that will return to Mahrukh's prison.'

Everything was prepared for Benazir's return the next day. Badr-e-Munir dressed as though it was her wedding night. The room grew redolent with flowers and the fragrance of ittar. The food, the wine, the wine glasses were all readied. Books of poetry by the Farsi poets Juhuri and Naziri were placed by the pillows on the bed. Benazir arrived as scheduled. After some conversation they went to bed, embracing each other with their glasses of wine. No description can do justice to all this. When they emerged from the room, Benazir was glowing even more, and Badr-e-Munir was full of blushes. But the hours marched forward, and Benazir had to go back. So it went on, day after day.

But human beings are never granted unadulterated happiness. Mahrukh the fairy came to know of everything; she even witnessed it all with her own eyes. Mahrukh was furious when Benazir returned that day. She began to spit fire. 'Prepare to be punished, traitor.' Summoning a djinn, Mahrukh directed, 'Take him to the desert and cast him into a dry pit, and cover its mouth with a rock.' The djinn took him some food once a day. Benazir began to live again as a prisoner in the dark, dry pit. Meanwhile, Badr-e-Munir wilted like a flower as she waited day after day for Benazir. You couldn't bear

to glance at such a flower. She passed days on end without sleeping. Then one night, she slept eventually, and in her dream she saw the pit in the desert, Benazir's voice emerging from it. She woke up. Hearing of her dream, her friend Nazm-un-Nissa said, 'Don't weep anymore. I will go into the desert and rescue Benazir. If I live, you will have him back.' Disguising herself as a monk, Nazm-un-Nissa left, carrying a veena.

One full moon night she was playing the veena in the desert. The birds and beasts forgot to sleep when they heard her playing; a breeze sprang up above the heads of the trees, and the moon looked at her in astonishment. Feroze Shah, the prince of djinns, was passing by at that moment on his flying throne. Descending to earth and realizing that this was a beautiful woman disguised as a monk, he was captivated by the sight of Nazm. Noticing his enchantment, Nazm said, 'Either turn your mind to Allah, or go back.' Feroze answered, 'Yes, I will go back, but first I want to hear you play.' The sun rose as Nazm played and even Feroze Shah, even a man like him, wept piteously. Is there anything women cannot do, Manto bhai? Do you know what happened after that? Feroze Shah took Nazm to his father's court on his flying throne. She even had to play the veena at the request of the king of djinns. No one could hold back their tears when they heard her playing. And Feroze Shah? My life will be meaningless without this woman, he concluded. Nazm stayed on at the palace of the king of djinns and began to toy with Feroze, playing hot and cold with him. One day Feroze flung himself at her feet, asking, 'Why do you make me suffer so? I cannot live without you.' Sensing her opportunity, Nazm said with a smile, 'Listen closely to what I tell you. If you can do as I say, you might benefit too.'

— Tell me what I have to do.

— You're a djinn. If you want to, you can easily find out where Mahrukh has imprisoned Benazir. If you help, Benazir will be saved, and you will get what you want.

On Feroze Shah's instructions, the djinns fanned out in different directions in search of Benazir. A few days later, one of them returned with information. Feroze Shah wrote a stern letter to Mahrukh, threatening dire consequences if she did not free Benazir. She would also have to swear not to have relationships with humans ever again. Pleading guilty, Mahrukh requested that her father not be informed of any of this. This was how Benazir was finally freed.

After this, Feroze Shah, Benazir and Nazm-un-Nissa went off to Badr-e-Munir on the flying throne. The princess fainted on hearing that Benazir was back. When she had recovered, Nazm-un-Nissa told her, 'I have had to imprison someone else in order to bring Benazir back to you. Now I have to send him back.' And then? The lovers billed and cooed all night. They simply couldn't stop talking. Words are such a trap, Manto bhai, if only people understood this.

Benazir wrote a letter to Badr-e-Munir's father Masood Shah, revealing his identity and proposing marriage. The nawab accepted with pleasure. Masood Shah's city erupted in joy. Then Benazir and Badr-e-Munir were married with great pomp and ceremony. What was the wedding like? I have lain in my grave for so long that I have forgotten the language to describe it. Then, at Benazir's request, Nazm-un-Nissa's father also agreed to her marriage to Feroze Shah, who returned with his bride to his kingdom on his flying throne. Benazir, too, prepared to return home with his bride.

Did you enjoy this sweet tale of happy endings amidst the stories of ill-luck that the two of us have been telling you, my brothers? But what did Mir Hasan get for writing this masnavi? Nothing at all. It's just that, after all these years, here in this darkness of the grave, I was able to recount this hikayat to all of you. What more can a poet expect from his fate anyway?

12

ہر قدم دوری منزل ہے نمایاں مجھ سے
میری رفتار سے بھاگے ہے بیاباں مجھ سے

Every step makes the distance to the destination palpable
The desolate forest walks even faster, leaving me behind

Kyabaat Mirza sahib, well done, you have brought pleasures to hell. But where do you suppose the stories of the Benazirs and the Badr-e-Munirs have been lost? Have you noticed how animated our friends have become? As though plates of shahi kebab have just been served at our table at Aziz's restaurant, and it will get even more exciting with the meat and the hashish and the ribaldry. Our Captain Wahid was chasing some woman or the other at the time. Which is all very well, but is there any sense in being besotted with a woman all the time, Mirza sahib? The Captain was perpetually terrified that she would run off with another man. Let her if she wants to, for heaven's sake, is the world running short of whores? Pardon me, Mirza sahib, I can never mind my tongue. If I let slip something like this in Ismat's presence, she would look at me wide-eyed; she was the one woman who could shake me and say, 'Who're you calling a whore, you bastard? Which whore gave birth to you?' Not that Ismat ever said any such thing. Her sense of propriety was unmatched. She would only look at me with widened eyes; you had to decipher her meaning from those eyes. Never mind Ismat, can't you see all these people are dying to hear the story of Aziz in hell?

So, one day our Captain was drooping over the table like a vine uprooted by a storm. Apparently he hadn't met the woman in several days. The more we tried to cheer him up, the more the bastard curled up like an earthworm, unmoved by our laughter and jokes and profanities. Who was this Majnu in our midst, for heaven's sake? And yet, think of his name. Captain, Captain Wahid. After much effort on our part he finally asked tearfully, 'What are women really like, Saadat bhai?'

— What?

— Do they know how to love?

— How should I know? I lost my temper.

— Tell us, yaar … Ashiq clapped me on my back. 'Tell Captain that story of yours about the cat. He won't go sniffing after just one woman all his life when he hears it.'

The table erupted in laughter. Looking at us with tears in his eyes, Captain said, 'But I was asking about women. Where do cats come into it?'

— Let Manto tell you. Ashiq winked at me. In other words, out with it, quick. Let this damned Captain's romance be buggered. Ashiq was an expert at teasing people.

Comforting Captain, I said, 'See, Captain, I swear by the lord, I can never understand cats and

women.'

— Why? Cats are cats and women are women. What's so difficult about understanding them?

— We had a cat at home, you know. Once a year that damned cat would start wailing so loudly, it defies description. You must have heard a cat wail. It makes the entire world sound like it's in mourning. And its wails would bring forth a tomcat from somewhere. Then they would screech and fight and draw blood.

— And then?

— What do you suppose? The cat would become the mother of four kittens. The net result of all that fighting was those four kittens.

— You're a fucking bastard, a harami ka bachha, said the Captain, slumping on the table again. Meanwhile, Aziz's restaurant resounded with laughter and catcalls.

But Mirza sahib, in spite of all this tomfoolery, I wasn't enjoying myself anymore. The gambling was becoming tiresome, and the mornings and evenings at Aziz's restaurant had nothing more to offer me. Do you know the thought that crossed my mind? That I was actually meant to do something else. But what? I had no idea, Mirza sahib. Then suddenly, the hands of the clock changed direction one day. This is probably how life gives us things even without asking. Provided, of course, we have the capacity to accept them.

It was in the same Aziz's restaurant that my fortune took a turn, my brothers. I met Bari Alig and Ata Muhammad Chihati. They were older than I was. They would visit Aziz's restaurant from time to time for a cup of tea. Abdul Rahman sahib had started a newspaper named *Masawat—Equality*—where Bari sahib used to work. One day in Aziz's restaurant, I was sitting at the same table as Bari Alig sahib. There were several others too. Suddenly the subject of the death sentence came up. Was the death sentence right or wrong? Did anyone have the right to sentence a criminal to death? Explain this to us, sir, I requested Bari sahib. If I murder you, why cannot I be killed? He presented a strong argument, explaining why retaliating for murder with murder cannot be the option. There is no moral principle that justifies the death sentence. This led someone to mention Victor Hugo's book *The Last Days of the Condemned*. You can't have heard of Victor Hugo, Mirza sahib. He was one of the finest French poets and novelists. I was startled, because I had the book at home. 'I have this book,' I told Bari sahib at once. 'Would you like to read it again?'

Bari sahib looked at me for a long time. Who knew what he saw? Then he said, 'Bring the book to my office tomorrow.'

I couldn't sleep all night, Mirza sahib. I was proud of myself. The book of Hugo's that Bari sahib had mentioned was actually in my possession, and I would take it to him the next day. But what would I talk to a man like him about? Would he even talk to me? As I pondered over all this, I imagined a complete dialogue between us. This was also how stories were born within me, Mirza sahib. A face would float up in my mind, and I'd knit a tale. The characters would come alive.

Bari sahib took me under his wing. I began to frequent his newspaper office every day. I was bowled over by his arguments, his erudition, his appreciation of things. I wrote about him later in my book *Ganjay Farishtey—Bald Angels*. You cannot forget such a person all your life. At the same time, he was something of a coward as well. But once you got talking to him, once you heard him laugh, you were hooked. Bari sahib had sensed my restlessness. He told me to read Urdu literature. It was at his behest that I began to read Gorky and Gogol and Pushkin and Chekov and Oscar Wilde. The great writers of the world. As I read them, Mirza sahib, I seemed to see the road before me clearly—I would be a writer too, writing was the only mission I could pursue. Do you know what Bari sahib did then? He made me

translate Hugo's *The Last Days of the Condemned* into Urdu. I stuck to my task for two weeks straight, not touching a drop of alcohol. Then my Urdu translation was actually published by Lahore's Urdu Bookstall—*Aasir Ki Ye Sarguzasht*. I was finally someone. So you think I'm useless, you bastards? Here, you swine, look at this. This book has Saadat Hasan Manto's name on it.

I began to write film reviews regularly for *Masawat*. Bari sahib believed that the short story writer in Manto was born in those reviews. I wanted to do several things at once, Mirza sahib. I translated Oscar Wilde's play *Vera* together with Hasan Abbas. I took a bottle of rum to Akhtar Sherani. He drank all night long and corrected my manuscript. I translated several Russian stories too at the time for *Humayun* and *Alamgir* magazines.

Then *Masawat* closed down suddenly. Bari sahib went off to Lahore with a job in a newspaper. I used to wander about in Amritsar's bylanes, along with Abu Sayeed Quraishi, Abbas, and Ashiq Bari. We called ourselves The Free Thinkers' Group. We could do as we liked, think as we liked. We considered starting a revolution. Abbas and I had even mapped an overland route to Russia. But after Bari sahib's departure for Lahore, I was out of a job once again. I couldn't concentrate on writing either. Once in a while I had the urge to just go back to gambling; damn it all, at least the hours would pass lightly. But gambling no longer excited me, Mirza sahib.

We heard that Bari sahib had started a new weekly magazine named *Khulq*. Hasan Abbas and I joined him. The very first issue of the magazine carried Bari sahib's essay, *From Hegel to Marx* … What is it? Why are all of you staring at me this way? Your eyes look as though you're sleepy. You too, Mirza sahib? Pardon me, my brothers, I was supposed to tell you stories, but here I am in the clutches of history without even knowing it. I feel like laughing at myself now. Damn it, this is like an autobiography. This is why I have to tell myself sometimes—you son of a bitch, are you in your grave to peddle your autobiography? But let me tell you something before I stop. It was in that first issue of *Khulq* that my first story, 'Tamasha', came out. I thought the story was rather juvenile, which is why I didn't publish it under my own name. It was about the period under Martial Law in 1919, seen through the eyes of a seven-year-old. I'm sure you remember I was seven too in 1919. I was always part of my stories.

All right, let me tell you some stories about our drinking. There, Mirza sahib, see how everyone's eyes are shining now? But what's the use? How will we get alcohol in our graves? Just like a cow chewing cud, try chewing the cud of your drinking days, you might get a little high. Bari sahib used to say no one could be bigger drunkards than Abbas and I. To tell you the truth, pardon my profanity, Abbas and I used to drink till we were full all the way down to our arse. Abu Sayeed Quraishi was always the one to unscrew the cap. There was no holding back after that. And as for Bari sahib, he was a garrulous sort anyway; with a drink under his belt, he was like a talking fountain. Abbas and I were such bastards; we would say in our heads, talk as much as you want to, huzoor, while we take care of the bottle. Bari sahib used to get drunk on giving speeches. But he didn't dare address meetings or anything like that. All of it was reserved for us, while we quaffed our drinks.

But he was such an entertaining drinking companion that it was no fun hitting the bottle without him. One evening he turned up at home. I was sitting by the window. 'How are you, mian?' he asked with a smile.

— Left high and dry.

With a mischievous smile in his eyes, he said, 'Just a minute, I'll bring some.' He was back soon with a bottle of alcohol wrapped in a piece of cloth. It was uncorked before I could say a word. By then Abbas had arrived too. We shut all the doors and windows. Abbas brought some water in a tumbler from the draw-well outside. And the party began. Some time later, to provoke Bari sahib, Abbas said,

'Everyone in this family respects you. Even bibijaan, since you read the namaz regularly. What will happen if she turns up?'

Jumping up from his chair, Bari sahib said, 'I'll escape through the window, and I'll never appear in her presence again.'

This was the kind of cowardice on Bari sahib's part that I was talking about. And it was because he lacked spine that he accomplished none of the things someone of his calibre should have. After he got a job at the British High Commission, he drifted away from us. We would run into him on the road sometimes. He pretended not to recognize us. I met him at Zohra Chowk a couple of days before he died. He made me realize how a man could be destroyed in the process of making compromises. I was genuinely upset. Was this the same Bari sahib whose support had led to Manto being reborn?

Have patience, my brothers. I had written explicitly in *Ganjay Farishtay* about Bari sahib's ardent desire to be a social reformer. He wanted to be well known across the entire country. He would be the venerated pioneer who had shown the nation the way. He used to dream constantly of doing something that the next generation would remember him for. But Bari sahib lacked resolve. All he could do was discuss the condition of the country with the women at Hira Mandi after a couple of drinks. When he returned, he would sit on his heels and read the namaz. I really did feel sorry for him Mirza sahib; could a man stoop so low just to save his skin? Bari sahib must be in one of these graves somewhere, perhaps he can hear me too, but there's no window here he can escape through. There's always a window one can use to escape, isn't there, Mirza sahib? This is where we have to pay the price of life, with interest added to the principal. Pardon me, my brothers, for spouting philosophy again. But you know what, I couldn't even bring myself to hate Bari sahib. I felt nothing but pity for him. Do you know what I think —the person who offers pity is a worse person than the object of it.

No, no more of this melodrama, let's talk about Hira Mandi instead. Do you know what Lahore used to be called before the Partition? The Paris of the East. And Hira Mandi was its heart. Many people used to call it Tibbi.

گلزار ہست و بود نہ بیگانہ واردیکہ
ہے دیکھنے کی چیز اسے بار بار دیکہ

Come to Tibbi to see God's charisma
You have to see it over and over again

Hira Mandi was another name for the light of the walled city of old Lahore. This was where I had discovered Sultana and Saugandhi and Kanta, my brothers. If you thought Hira Mandi was nothing but mounds of flesh, you'd be wrong. Once upon a time the scions of nawabs and badshahs and kings and emperors used to visit the courtesans of Hira Mandi to learn etiquette and culture—the adab and the tahzeeb. It was the courtesans who were the best teachers of behaviour. Their tools were the song and the dance, the lingering glances and conversation. Those of you who have read Mirza Ruswa's *Umrao Jaan Ada* will know exactly what I'm talking about. And our Mirza sahib knows everything too. He met so many famous courtesans in his lifetime. The kotha of the courtesan was not just a place you visited for pleasure. To be part of the gatherings you had to master the necessary social graces. It's not as though you could pounce on anyone you liked. Wooing was necessary. Only if you managed to set a woman's heart on fire did the question of going to bed with her arise. Else, listen to all the thumris and dadras and ghazals you want, watch the kathak, and then make your payment and go home.

Yes, now you're standing at the bottom of the stairs of a kotha in Hira Mandi. There are pimps, there are flower sellers. Only after negotiating with the pimp will you be able to enter the kotha. But before that, you must buy a garland from the flower seller and wrap it around your wrist. Then you climb the stairs to the rangmahal, the hall of entertainment. The light from the chandelier, the mirrors on the walls, the classical paintings, and the fragrance of the flowers and the perfume converts your heart into a garden in an instant; the nightingales begin singing from the trees. A fine white sheet is spread over the carpet on the floor. Bolsters await you, lean back on them. The baiji appears and takes her position in the middle. Behind her are the musicians playing the sarangi and the veena and the tabla. You see that old woman sitting a little apart from everyone else, she's the owner of the kotha. Once she was a courtesan herself, now she supervises everything. She puts the apprentices through their paces, turning them into alluring tawaifs too. Next to the owner is the silver salver, adorned with golden and silver foil, piled high with paan. On a marble stool is a golden filigree jug of rosewater. Sliced betelnuts dusted with saffron, masala and zarda lie in a small bowl. The owner will first exchange a word or two with each of the guests, sizing them up. Then a young woman will circle around the room, handing paan to everyone. What must you do? You must give her at least one silver coin. Then the baiji will come up to you in her silk shalwaar and kurta, its front embellished with an intricate pattern in golden or silver zari. Her face will be hidden behind a translucent veil, as though she's put on a cloud of fog. Her ornaments will glitter under the lights.

Now the baiji will begin singing. A different song for each of the guests, as she sings she will give you lingering looks and gentle smiles. When the song ends, beckon her to come closer and put a bundle of currency notes in her hand. Then she will turn her attention to the other guests. You may be keen on watching her dance too. The anklets will start their patter. Cries of 'wah wah' and 'bahaut khoob' and 'marhabba, marhabba' will mingle with the song and the music and the rhythms of the dance. Although the glory of Hira Mandi had faded after the advent of the British, the glow of the sunset had not disappeared. But from the Second World War onwards, Hira Mandi turned into a prison of flesh. Who were the clients then? Freshly sprouted businessmen, contractors, scum who had cashed in on the war to make quick money. They didn't even know the meaning of the word decorum. I have seen both the Hira Mandis, my brothers. I have seen the baijis of the kothas turn into call girls, ready to get into a hotel bed with you as soon as you paid them. But to me Hira Mandi was a gold-enamelled picture.

I have seen a man become a pauper here, not for flesh but for love. I will not tell you his name, he was a landowner from Punjab. He fell in love with Zohra Jaan from Hira Mandi. He used to visit her frequently and stay with her. People used to say it was he who made her a woman. You understand what that means, don't you, my brothers? Suddenly the landowner had a fancy for buying a car so that he could take Zohra around Lahore's streets in it. He might have been a landowner, but he hadn't been able to save much money; and he had spent extravagant amounts on Zohra's family. But he had to buy a car. Eventually he bought one on loan. He had promised to return the money in two instalments a year, from the proceeds of selling the crops on his land. The loan should have been paid back in three years. The car company got its money on time only twice. After that the landowner disappeared. No one knew where he had vanished. All that could be discovered was that he had sold all his land and gone off to Calcutta with Zohra Jaan. The car was parked next to his country home, which was why the company at least got its vehicle back.

About ten years passed. The manager of the car company was at Hira Mandi with his friends for a colourful evening. Standing before a kotha, he discovered the absconding landowner looking sickly with his eyes glazed over.

— Would you like to hear Zohra Jaan sing, huzoor? The landowner approached the manager.

— What's happened to you? Where were you all this time?

— It's all fate, huzoor. I took Zohra to Calcutta. I tried very hard to get her into films.

— And then?

— Didn't work. We ran out of whatever little money I had. They simply wouldn't let Zohra work in films.

— So you came back?

— What else could I do? Zohra had to survive. How could I abandon her? So I have to get clients for her now.

Just like all the light in Hira Mandi, darkness fell on some people's lives too. But even in this darkness I have seen a glowworm, my brothers. The glow-worm of love. Even though he was a pauper, he had not abandoned Zohra Jaan. From her lover he had become her pimp. But his love hadn't died.

People like Bari sahib didn't see any of this in Hira Mandi. And I used to go to Hira Mandi in search of jewels within flesh, in search of glow-worms. I swear by Allah, Manto never considered sleeping with them. Is that the truth? Or is this another of my lies?

13

دل کی ویرانی کا کیا مذکور ہے
یہ نگر سو مرتبہ لوٹا گیا

What do I say of my plundered heart
This city has been looted again and again

Just like me, Dilli has also been destroyed repeatedly, only to be back on its feet each time. Sometimes I feel that the lord wrote our destinies—Dilli's and mine—with the same quill. Although a degree of peace had returned to Dilli when I came to the city, it was the peace of death, for Dilli had long lost its lustre. You've read it in the history books—how waves of Farsi and Afghan and Maratha invasions, along with the infighting in the court, left the city in ruins. Everyone knows that poets like Mir and Sauda were forced to leave Dilli for Lucknow. Why did they have to go? Let me tell you a sher of Mir sahib's, then:

اب خرابہ ہوا جہان آباد
ورنہ ہر اک قدم پہ یہاں گھر تھا

Once a bustling city, it's emptied out now
Once there was a house here at every step

Dilli was emptied out this way before my own eyes too. It felt like being in Karbala, but still I could not abandon this city. Often I wondered whether I was needed here. It had come into my life in the form of a prison, but still I had not been able to bid farewell to it. Do you know why? As I said, because the lord wrote our destinies with the same quill, Dilli's and mine. How could I run away? Whatever life gave me, and whatever it held back, were all carved on the soul of the city. People might call it madness, but how was I to live without this junoon, this obsession? I had my back to the wall, but so what? Fire away, keep firing, I would say to myself. Let me find out how much more blood you want to see flowing, how much more of my brain you want to spill; humiliate me as much as you like, but you will still not be able to touch the fragrance deep inside, you will still not be able to damage the words that I put together for my ghazals. My sins will not survive, people will forget your attacks too. Only the words and rhythms will still be alive, and their name will still be Mirza Ghalib. But never mind all this, people will laugh; they'll say no one can beat poets at blowing their own trumpet. When I was in Calcutta, I heard someone say, 'You cannot live with Lakshmi and Saraswati at the same time.' I couldn't share a house with Lakshmi. I had fallen in love with Saraswati, after all. Ya Allah! The things I say! Gustakhi maaf, but I haven't seen any other Hindu goddess with a veena, you see. I fell in love with Munirabai for

her music. Umrao Begum would only whisper the Quran and the Hadith into my ears. Just imagine sacred flowers, Manto bhai, which no bee has ever alighted on. If the bee doesn't drink the nectar that the flower is shoring up, where is the fulfilment? My father-in-law, Nawab Illahi Buksh Khan, would also get enraged when he heard me say all this. He wrote shers too, his pseudonym was Mahroof, as you well know. Do you know what makes me laugh? Can you locate even a single sher of Mahroof's today? But history says he was a devoted Muslim. I bow to such devotion. Allah didn't write about the poet Mahroof in any of his books. Do you know why not? Allah understands poetry, you see. How many wives did Hazrat, his messenger, have? And the Quran? The Hazrat had received it from Allah in the form of the rhythms of poetry. The Quran is an extraordinary work of poetry for me, Manto bhai. Birth and death, love and destiny, the entire universe, are engaged in sport in it. Just like the Vedas and the Upanishads or the Bhagvat Gita or the Zend-a-vesta; I was exhausted trying to enter this sport through my ghazals. Couldn't I have written like Zauq sahib or Momin sahib? But I staked my life; I even told my shagird, my pupil Hargopal Tafta, look, a ghazal isn't pretty words or rhythm, you cannot write a ghazal unless your heart has bled. In my solitude I have known how blood soaked each of my words is, Manto sahib.

But I drift. Pardon me, my entombed brothers who are listening. You know what, the failures of my life are all connected with these meandering thoughts of mine. I couldn't even answer my accusers properly; I used to have memory lapses, you see. Every day was a new one for me—my life lasted one single day only—I have no idea what happened the next day. I admit without reservations to all of you that I have sinned many times—since the Shariyat calls such acts sins. But then judgement is not for this world, it will be delivered when the qayamat comes, in the court of the lord. But I had no desire to avenge myself on anyone. Do you know why? You'll laugh, but I'll say it anyway. Thank goodness I went to bed with poetry. Thank goodness I never thought of building my own haveli in Dilli. Thank goodness I was belittled at one mushaira after another. Thank goodness I did not get my pension despite my best efforts to chase it. Thank goodness I had to rely on the charity of nawabs and maharajas. Thank goodness I was reminded over and over again that your father did not possess a house, Ghalib, and you don't possess one either. Thank goodness I was born like an orphan and lived like an orphan. Thank goodness I did time in jail for gambling—for this was how I got to know human beings. In fact, they are all shadow puppets—they have no idea where life is taking them. I didn't, either. But they blindly believed that they were on their way to Mecca. I had never wanted to tread that path, Manto bhai. Do you remember this sher?

ہوں میں بھی تماشائی نیرنگِ تمنا
مطلب نہیں کچھ اس سے کہ مطلب ہی بار آئے

I am witness to the ever-changing colours of desire
Whether my desire will ever be fulfilled is irrelevant

Gustakhi maaf, all I've been talking about is the darkness inside. No, let's turn to something a little more colourful. No one likes hearing about the desolate road. I don't, either; can anyone possibly endure the incredible lightness of being without laughter and jokes? Life is so fragile—we will soon be separated from one another—that we cannot bear living. Would anyone believe, Manto bhai, that I could not bear the paltry weight of a single petal from a dead rose? What will people say when they hear all this? That the scoundrel knew how to charm people with his words, but what did he give his wife? Why didn't any of their children survive beyond fifteen months even though they had so many of them?

What did that idiot ever do for his sons and daughters? There's a story that I tell these people. Have you heard of Rabeya? I'm talking of the famous Sufi devotee Rabeya of Basra, who was born to a family of beggars and was forced to survive much of her life after her parents' death as a slave. Ittar sahib had written a story about her in his *Tazkirat al-Awliya–Memoirs of the Saints*. It was an amusing tale.

Someone had asked Rabeya, 'Where are you from?'

— Another world, smiled Rabeya.

— And where are you going?

— To yet another world.

— Then what were you doing in this one?

— I dropped in to play, bhaijaan.

Don't mistake me for a Sufi devotee because I told this story. I never had the capability of being one. I am only a man who sat before the mirror all his life, staring at his own reflection. How could I walk the path of devotion? I never made any such claim. But when those who had led their entire lives correctly, without leaving a single stain anywhere, told me that they were following the road to the Din, I had no option but to chuckle. Why had the Lord made Adam with dust, then? Why did he push him towards sin? If Allah had confined himself within his shell, how would he have known himself? Through Adam he saw himself. In the process of sinning he saw where salvation lay. Oh no, I'm not making excuses. I have heard many stories from the *Mahabharata*. Who has the right to be considered the most virtuous? Only Yudhishthira, whose entire life is a saga of sin. None of the other Pandavas sinned as much as he. But still the God Dharma chose to accompany him in the guise of a dog. Why? Even I don't have the answer, Manto bhai. Let me tell you about another person. Have you heard of Pingala the prostitute? She's been written about in the *Uddhava Gita*. I heard the story from a dastango at the Jama Masjid. Dattatreya Avadhoot Rajarshi was telling Yadu about his twenty-four gurus, one of whom was Pingala. Avadhoot had seen her one evening, standing in front of her house in search of a client. Evening deepened into night, but no one passed by. No client tonight, Pingala mused. It has come to this because I do not pray to God. Her mounting disappointment changing finally to serenity, she fell asleep at dawn. What did Pingala teach Avadhoot? Peace comes from abandoning hope. Just imagine, even a prostitute can be a guru.

But my father-in-law Mahroof sahib had the answer to every question in the world. When we came to Dilli, Umrao Begum and I put up at his house to begin with, we even stayed there for some time. But the man was intolerable. He would count everything in pennies. How can a human being be sized up this way? So I used to mock him. What else can you do with people who tell you at every step what your choice should be? The more you mock them, the more you will see their mirrors shatter. All these pious people, I've noticed, have mastered only one art. How—and in how many ways—to humiliate others. My father may not have had a house of his own, but Turkish blood flows in my veins; how could I stomach such humiliation? So the ace up my sleeve was my mockery. Mock that swine Mahroof sahib so ruthlessly that the idol would be smashed.

I used to love street dogs since childhood, Manto bhai. The dogs of Akbarabad would follow me about everywhere. I used to cuddle them, talk to them. I believe with all my heart that no one can be your friend the way a street dog can. They used to snuggle up to me too, sniff at me, and look at me as though they really did have a lot to tell me. But I didn't know the language of dogs; if the Lord had been kind enough to grant me this gift, my life would not have turned more and more arid by the day. And Mahroof sahib couldn't stand dogs at all. One day he said, 'You live in a haveli, mian, why so thick with street dogs?'

You damned dog, I had wanted to retort. But I couldn't. I couldn't possibly say this to the person I lived off. But I wasn't his slave just because I enjoyed his hospitality. So I began to play the fool with him.

— They haven't done you any harm, have they?

— Could any animal be dirtier? You should bathe if their shadow falls on you. Do you?

— No.

— Tauba, tauba, don't you follow any of the precepts of the Quran?

— Of course I do.

— Then why so thick with dogs?

I laughed. —I'm a dog too, Mahroof sahib.

— Meaning?

— My father didn't have a house. I grew up in my grandfather's house. Now I live in yours after marrying your daughter. Why shouldn't you call me a dog, then? By rights I should have remained on the street.

— You talk too much, mian. You want to shit on the hand that feeds you. Mahroof sahib growled in rage.

— Just like a dog does.

— Mind your tongue, mian.

— Have you seen a dog on heat, Mahroof sahib? Have you seen how it behaves on the roads? There's a dog on heat hidden inside some human beings. Such human beings cannot cleanse themselves even if they bathe a thousand times.

— What are you trying to say?

— Cleanse yourself first.

Why does someone who spouts the Quran and the Hadith at the drop of a hat visit the kothas even when he has a wife at home, Manto bhai? Does such a person have the right to comment on others' purity?

I never claimed to be pure. To tell the truth, it was greed that brought me to Dilli. Mahroof sahib's was an aristocratic family with connections to the royal court, I had expected to find a place in court as a shair and lead a life of my choice; I was hopelessly addicted to wine and women at the time. I had no relationship with the Begum. She was involved with her prayers and the Quran and the Hadith; her obsession only kept growing. Eventually she even began to use her own set of plates and dishes. Why? Because I drank, I wrote ghazals, both of which were haraam according to her Quran. She was extremely conscientious, ensuring that all my needs were looked after, but this couldn't be termed love. Or, I don't know, maybe this was the form of Umrao Begum's love. But you know what, the older I got, the more I lost faith in the word called love. Did I really lose faith? I do know that my life grew more and more bereft by the day. Why? Maybe I lacked love within me, I couldn't love anyone. Today in my grave I feel I was a beggar for love, but I didn't love anyone myself. I am not Mir sahib—think of how much he had endured just for the sake of love. All of us know the story of Laila and Majnu, but how many of us know about those days in Mir sahib's life? He demonstrated with his own life what it was like to lose yourself over love, to be diwana for ishq.

Yes, I'm talking of Mir sahib now, I know you cannot take too much whining about one person's life. I know I'm telling the story of my life in great detail, but if I had to tell it in just one word, I would only have to draw a question mark on a piece of paper. Let's go back to those days in Mir sahib's life instead.

His heart was a pockmarked city, Mir sahib's. He wrote about this city in his masnavi *Muamlat-e-Ishq –Stages of Love*. In my opinion, of all the masnavis about love that Mir sahib wrote, *Muamlat* was the best. It was like a lamentation echoing in the sheesh mahal. Do you know what the lament was for? It was for the moon. Ever since his grandmother used to tell him when washing his face as a child, 'Look at the sky my child, there's the moon,' it had become part of his life. And then he was stricken by the same moon. He used to see his lover in the moon, which was how he went insane one day. Who was his lover?

I don't know her name, Manto bhai. In the society in which we lived, a woman's name was only available in stories. Who needed her name? The mullahs had shrouded her in a burqa, obliterating her very identity as an independent person. But we can easily give her a name today, can't we? What name shall we choose? How about Mehr Nigar? Isn't it a beautiful name? So Mir sahib fell in love with this Mehr Nigar when he was about eighteen. Mehr Nigar, who was married, was somewhat older—rather than younger—than Mir sahib, but because they belonged to the same family, there was no purdah between them; she could be in Mir sahib's company without restrictions. Everyone in the family was full of praise for the way the Begum conducted herself. With those praises ringing in his ears, Mir sahib fell in love with her one day. He would spy on her secretly, but didn't dare tell her what he felt. What could he say? When the things you want to say have accumulated inside you, how can you possibly speak, Manto bhai? Gradually the secrecy was lifted, Mir sahib even touched her physically. In *Muamlat* he wrote, I cannot describe her beauty—she seemed to have been born in the mould of my own desire. Mir sahib used to discover the cadence of ghazals in her walk, in the way she raised her eyes for a glance, in the tilt of her neck. Do you know what happened one day? Mehr Begum was having a paan, her lips were as crimson as the sky at sunset. When he saw those lips Mir sahib could not restrain himself anymore, he asked for their nectar. Although Mehr Begum declined smilingly at first, eventually she did sip the nectar of Mir sahib's lips. You can imagine what was likely to ensue. He wanted to meet her in private, and so did she. When things continued this way for some time, Mehr Begum said, 'This love can have no fulfilment, Mir. We cannot go on this way.'

Mehr Begum withdrew. And Mir sahib seemed to slip into a dreamy trance. In his imagination, he spent every night with Mehr Begum, but the days grew unbearable. Neither of them saw each other for years after that. What happens to a man in this situation? The entire world becomes a lie, ceasing to exist. Meanwhile, people had come to know. Friends and family had turned away from Mir sahib, branding him mad. As you know, Manto bhai, when the elephant trips, even an ant can kick it. Mir sahib was in a similar situation. Then Mehr Begum herself came to him in secret. 'We have to be apart, Mir,' she said. 'All lovers like us have to be parted one day. You will remain in my heart as long as I live.' Now the separation was complete. Only memories, the weight of memories, remained. Mir sahib went mad. In *Khwab-o-Khayal-e-Mir–Mir's Dreams and Fancies*—he wrote about his days spent in the grips of this insanity. He would be afraid to look at the moon, but still his eyes would be drawn to it; it was Mehr Begum whom he'd see in the moon. He couldn't sleep anymore, believe me. He forgot about food and drink. Wherever he looked, he could only see Mehr Nigar. He was lost in a spiral of images.

Many hakims tried to cure him, many spells were cast and witch doctors brought in, but none of them could understand that just when his desire for his lover had swollen like the moon, the moon was lost from Mir sahib's life. Do you know what they did when their best efforts could not cure him? Mir sahib was locked up in a tiny chamber, yes, let me tell you, it was even smaller than a grave. How do people define a normal life? Eat, shit, eat, shit, and say the things you don't believe in. Do you know what followed? They decided that the poisoned blood would have to be drained out of this body. Mir

sahib fell unconscious bleeding, but so what? The poisoned blood had to be removed, after all. Later Mir sahib wrote a sher, be a slave, rot in a jail, but don't let love get you in its clutches. Once upon a time his love had burst into flames, all that remained afterwards were the ashes.

Mir sahib had felt the heat from this fire, but I had only managed to roll in its ashes. I couldn't love anyone the way Mir sahib did. Do you know why? Either Khuda did not give me the capacity for love, or spending my life as an orphan robbed me of the power; I learnt to love words, but I did not learn how words could touch people.

When we were starting our life together, Umrao Begum had asked me one day, 'Why don't you talk, Mirza sahib?'

— Talk about what?

— Don't you want to talk to me?

— Of course I do. But …

— But what?

— You are so far away from me Begum.

— How far?

I had pointed to a star in the sky.

14

نغمہ ہے،محو ساز رہ ،نشہ ہے،بے نیاز رہ
رندِتمام ناز رہ،خلق کو پارسا سمجھ

There's music, float away on its currents
There's wine, forget everything
There's a beautiful girl, fall in love hopelessly
Piety is for others

Mirza sahib, hey there Mirza sahib! Look, the old man is fast asleep. All these years in the grave haven't taken away his ability to sleep. Or do you suppose he pretends to be asleep? It's hard to read this old man, my brothers. Just like his ghazals—if you're taken in by the appearance, you'll never know what lies within. When the Momins and Zauqs were either repeating themselves ad nauseam about the moon and flowers and birds and ladies, or composing encomiums to the emperor, Mirza sahib arrived on the scene to breathe new life into the dead ghazal. How can an artist create such magnificent works? Such heights can be reached only when a person sets his own life on fire to keep the flames of his art alive. People like these are most unpredictable, you know, beyond comprehension; trying to gauge Mirza sahib with the measuring stick of our routine lives would be a grave error. At times the man will appear to be nothing but the devil. Maybe that *is* what he was, the devil, someone who can toy with his own life. I'm reminded of a funny story about Mirza sahib. None of his contemporaries could match him when it came to humour, but he would often turn his satire on himself. No, my brothers, don't be annoyed, here's the story. Please don't imagine I'm making excuses for Mirza sahib. Who am I to make excuses for him? And besides, Mirza sahib's life is nothing but a story now. Only his ghazals live; we're wrong, my brothers, it's very easy to defeat an artist in his lifetime, but the artist's real life begins after his death, a life which not even the best efforts of people like Ibrahim Zauq can tarnish.

Now for the story. The room that Mirza sahib spent his entire day in was on the roof over the main entrance. On one side was a small, dark chamber. The door was very low, forcing people to stoop before entering. Mirza sahib used to sit on a sheet in this room from about ten in the morning till three or four in the afternoon. Sometimes he'd be alone, at other times he'd pass the afternoon with chausar—a game of dice—if he found someone to play against. It was the month of Ramzan. Maulana Arzuda arrived one afternoon. He was a great favourite of Mirza sahib's. That particular afternoon Mirza sahib was playing chausar with a friend. Chausar in the month of Ramzan? This was a sin for the Maulana. He said, 'I have read in the Hadith that the devil remains imprisoned in the month of Ramzan. I can no longer believe the Hadith.'

— Why not?

— Since you're playing chausar, how do I believe the Hadith?

— Can't you see the unshakeable truth of what the Hadith says? Mirza sahib smiled.

— What do you mean?

— The Hadith is absolutely right. The devil is indeed imprisoned in this chamber here, don't you see? What do you think, mian? Directing the last question at his opponent, Mirza sahib burst out laughing.

— You're calling yourself the devil?

— But of course. Without a devil like me how could you have been a priest?

— What do you mean?

— Is it so difficult to understand? It's only because the devil exists that the Shariyat needs so many rules. I have told you so many times, Arzuda sahib, that I'm only half a Muslim. I drink, though I don't touch pork.

I could have said something similar. A friend had once asked just how much of a Muslim I was. I'd answered, 'I'll cheer if Islamia College scores a goal against DAV College. That's as far as my being a Muslim goes. No further.'

Let me tell you another story, my brothers. This is from the later years of Mirza sahib's life. Dilli was in the grips of an epidemic of cholera. Mir Mehdi Husain Mazrooh wrote in a letter, 'Has the epidemic fled from the city, Hazrat, or is it still raging?' Mirza sahib answered, 'I cannot understand what kind of epidemic this is. An epidemic that cannot kill an old man and an old woman of seventy needn't have bothered.'

You or I will never be able to fathom this Mirza sahib. But a man does want to understand another. That's where they go wrong. When a man cannot even understand himself—when all he can see is only the tip of the iceberg—isn't the attempt to understand someone else laughable? Leave alone us, even a Sufi saint like Fariduddin Ittar could not fathom Omar Khayyam. Do you know why?

Khayyam sahib used to believe that there was no resurrection after death. Like the philosopher Ibn Sina, Khayyam sahib was convinced that the lord might understand the concept of fragrance, but the individual fragrances of each flower did not reach him. Ibn Sina used to say, there is no creator of the universe, such as Allah—it has always been and always will be. And Khayyam sahib wrote in one of his rubaiyats, since there is no place for me in the world, it would be a mistake to live without my lover and my wine. But how long can there be doubt over whether the universe was created or whether it has always existed? Questions like these will have no meaning after I die. So, the way Ittar sahib had pictured Khayyam sahib on Judgement Day had left no room for a devil like him at the court of the Lord. Why not? One of Khayyam sahib's whores had asked as much to a shaikh. Imagine the temerity. The shaikh had told the whore, 'You're a drunkard, always busy deceiving people.' The whore had answered, 'I am indeed what you say I am, but are you what you think you are?'

Khayyam sahib had himself predicted what would happen after his death. Nizami sahib had become a disciple of his. The last time he saw Khayyam sahib was at a friend's house in a lane of the slave market at Balkh. Many people were present to listen to Khayyam sahib talk. Apparently he had said, 'I shall be buried where the trees shed their flowers twice a year.' Nizami sahib hadn't believed him. Four years after Khayyam sahib's death, Nizami sahib visited his guru's grave at Nishapur. When he saw the grave buried under flowers, he couldn't keep himself from crying.

Pardon me for digressing, my brothers. The thing is, the story about Mirza sahib that I'm telling you is not his story alone. The lord made all of us from dust, after all. Consider, then, what ancient dust from distant lands and its memories we hold. I'm perpetually amused by the fact that we exist

somewhere or the other eternally, concealed in the dust.

[Translator's interpolation: Manto stops suddenly at this point. I am reproducing what he wrote on a page before resuming the story. I could easily have omitted it. But we would like to remain as faithful to the original as possible. Therefore I see no reason not to consider this statement of Manto's part of the novel. I am putting down exactly what Manto wrote both within and without this story.]

Sometimes I wonder whether this really is turning out to be a novel about Ghalib's life. I wasn't in as much doubt before as I am now. But ever since I moved to Lahore I have been drinking so much more, and playing so many dirty tricks to keep body and soul together—not that I paid much attention to the household; you could say the dirty tricks are for self-preservation—that I have long since lost track of things. The film script I wrote about Mirza Ghalib was nothing but fraud, the whole world of films is fraud. They had wanted a story about Mirza Ghalib's illicit relationship. So I wrote one for them. I used to write treatments and film scripts strictly for the money. But the Ghalib of my novel is like that man in Gogol's 'Overcoat', whom I cannot quite pin down. So I read out what I had written to my wife. Ever since I moved to Lahore, I have had no one to read my stories to. Shafia Begum had to bear the brunt of it all.

— What do you think, Shafia? I asked.

— What do I know of literature? Shafia smiled. 'Ismat would have understood.'

— But Ismat isn't here. You have to tell me.

— Pardon my insolence, Manto sahib.

— Tell me.

— You're imposing yourself on Mirza sahib.

— You think so?

— I do.

I had asked Begum a few more questions. She only kept repeating, 'What do I know of literature? If Ismat were here …' Ismat, Ismat, Ismat. The same name over and over. My greatest friend, my biggest enemy. She knew I was dying but she wouldn't reply to my letters. I knew she had begun to loathe me for coming away to Pakistan. But Ismat was Ismat. Who else but she could write a story like 'Lihaaf'–'The Quilt'? What a lot of trouble it had led to! From the mullahs to the progressive, everyone had pounced on her. A story about homosexuality? And that too, between women? Ismat really had stirred up a hornet's nest.

Eventually I summoned Mirza sahib and made him sit down with me.

— Kya mian? What do you want? Mirza sahib began to laugh.

— I'm writing a novel about you. May I read some of it to you? If you say it isn't working at all, I'll give up.

— Read it then. Is there anyone who doesn't want to hear his own story?

When I finished, Mirza sahib began to pace up and down in the room. 'What do you think?' I asked him.

Still pacing up and down, Mirza sahib recited a sher:

گردش سغبِ جلو ۂ رنگین تجه سے
عینداری اک دیدِ ۂ حیران مجه سے

You turn the goblet round and round to show me the
coloured patterns
I capture them in the mirror of my astonished,
bewildered eyes

Then he said, 'Keep writing, Manto bhai. People cannot touch one another even in real life; it is futile to expect you to touch me through your story. Still, keep writing. Writing is the road to the Din.'

So there was a path to the Din even for me? Even after all my sins?

I was quite amused by this section of Manto's novel. I told Tabassum that while I wasn't going to be able to write a novel about Mirza Ghalib, I did want to write one about Manto.

— Why, janab? Tabassum asked with a smile

— I haven't come across a bigger devil. Exploring a devil is a special joy.

— What do you consider yourself to be?

— What do you think?

— You tell me.

— It would have been easy if I knew. Just like Manto referred to everyone and everything as a fraud, I'm a fraud too. You could say writing is my business of fraud.

Back to Mirza sahib. He did not stay very long in his father-in-law Mahroof sahib's house. For one thing he couldn't stand his father-in-law; for another, he had begun to think of himself as a big shot after his arrival in Dilli. Yes, there was this streak in his character; as I said, he could never forget that he was descended from Turkish soldiers. The lofty disposition was in his blood. So he couldn't bear to live in his father-in-law's house. He rented Sabban Khan's house next to Habash Khan ka Phatak at Chandni Chowk to live life the way he wanted to. Umrao Begum languished in the ladies' chambers with her Quran and Hadith and Tasbi.

It must be admitted, friends, that Mirza sahib never really spared a glance for his wife. He was perpetually occupied with his ghazals and drinking and mushairas and courtesans and the good life. Do you suppose Umrao Begum never wanted to talk to her husband or be close to him? Certainly she did. But Mirza sahib's neglect and cruelty were boundless. He slept with his wife—who gave birth to not one or two but seven children, none of whom lived beyond a year and a half—but he remained besotted with his lifestyle. I can understand why Umrao Begum gradually locked her life into the Quran, why she even segregated the utensils she ate out of. The birth and subsequent death of each successive child had pushed her ever deeper into the darkness within herself. Mirza sahib was not interested in paying attention to her. He made fun of her instead. On one occasion, he was determined to move to a different haveli, even inspecting it himself. Umrao Begum asked, 'Did you like the house, Mirza sahib?'

— The diwankhana is fine. But I didn't take a look at the zenana mahal.

— Why not?

— What use is it for me? It's your mosque, you'd better take a look. Mirza sahib laughed.

— Mosque?

— Of course. You've turned the ladies' chamber into a mosque. Don't argue anymore, go and take a look for yourself.

Accepting her husband's suggestion, Umrao Begum went to inspect the house. On her return Mirza sahib asked, 'Well? Did you like it?'

— Yes. But …

— But what?

— Everyone's saying there are spirits in that house.

— Who's saying there are spirits?

— The neighbours.

— Have they seen you?

— Yes.

Mirza sahib burst into laughter. —Oh Begum, is there a more powerful spirit than you in the world?

What can a woman say when her husband speaks this way? Suppressing her tears, Umrao Begum returned to the ladies' chamber. I cannot forgive this Mirza sahib, my brothers. Not that I could give Shafia Begum all that I should have as a husband, for I did as I pleased. But at least I never insulted her this way. Mirza sahib could humiliate people effortlessly, at least in his youth. Of course, if you hand out insults you must be prepared to face them too. However, he could not swallow humiliation. But don't start judging Mirza sahib because of all this. Photographs are black-and-white, but life isn't like that—there are shades of grey everywhere. And Mirza sahib's life was much bigger than our daily grind; as they say, it was larger than life. You can criticize his life, you can raise questions about it, but you cannot but acknowledge his existence as he rolled and tumbled in a shark-infested ocean.

Mirza sahib had to swallow no small amount of humiliation in order to establish himself as a shair in Dilli. His ghazals and he himself were insulted at one mushaira after another. Why? Because connoisseurs of his writing had not yet been born; what could the dwarfed poets do to retaliate? They cast aspersions on the poetry, they stuck the label of incomprehensibility on it, they mocked it. Let me tell you what happened at one particular mushaira. The famous poets and the crème de la crème of Dilli were present. A succession of poets read out their ghazals. Cries of 'kyabaat' resounded, waves of applause rose in the air, but Mirza sahib could make out that the poetry was hollow, stuffed only with ornamentation, like women whose beauty was lost beneath an overdose of jewellery. When it was Mirza sahib's turn to read, Agha Jan Aish, a doctor, stood up, saying, 'I would like to say something before such a great shair reads his ghazals. I seek your permission.'

'Please go ahead,' a chorus rose in the air.

— Arz kiya hai?

— Ershad, ershad.

Agha Jan began to read,

Meaningless is the poetry that only the poet understands
You can enjoy it only when everyone gets it
I understand Mir, Mirza too, but whatever Ghalib writes,
God save him, only he knows whether anyone understands

There was a wave of laughter. Can a poet possibly read after this, my brothers?

Let me tell you what happened another time. Abdul Qadir, the maulvi of Rampur, arrived and said, 'Mirza sahib, I simply cannot understand one of your Urdu shers. If you could explain.'

— Which sher, janab?

— The one where you wrote:

Take the fragrance of the rose
From the egg of the bull
There's some more fragrance in there
Take it from the egg of the bull

— This isn't my sher, Qadir sahib.

— But this is what I read in your diwan. Would you like to check?

Mirza sahib realized that this was a ploy to laugh about his poetry. But he did accept his friend Fazl-e-Haq's criticism. You can hardly change an artist by attacking him. If you can tell him as a friend, if you're equipped to speak on the subject, an artist will accept what you have to say. Mirza sahib changed the idiom of his poetry as a result of Fazl-e-Haq's criticism. For, a friend's criticism is not a joke, it is a hand of support. And Fazl-e-Haq understood the intricacies of the language of poetry. But did someone who wasn't familiar with it have the right to criticize Mirza sahib's ghazals? You have to be an expert to talk about physics or chemistry, but when it comes to poetry, how can you get by spouting any nonsense you want to? You cannot be entitled to pass judgement until you have studied how the language of poetry was created and how it evolved in history. Just because the poet has only a pen, while scientists are surrounded by an array of instruments, are you entitled to talk about poets carelessly? That was why Mirza sahib wrote in a sher after swallowing so much humiliation:

تھی خبر گرم کہ غالب کے اڑیں گے پرزے
دیکھنے ہم بھی گئے پہ تماشا نہ ہوا

There were strong rumours that Ghalib would be massacred
I went to see too, but the show was called off

Mirza sahib had gone to Dilli full of hope. Soon he realized that his optimism would not bear fruit. There was no room for him at the royal court in Dilli. Alone in his diwankhana, he muttered, drunk:

نہیں گر سر و برگِ ادراکِ معنی
تماشا ئے نیر نگِ صورت سلامت

Even if I never become worthy of understanding the meaning
May my eye for beauty in different forms never weaken

15

محبت نے ظلمت سے کاڑھا ہے نور
نہ محبت ہوتی نہ ہوتا ظہور

Love has snatched light out of the darkness
Without love there would have been no flowers

You were right, Manto bhai, I wasn't asleep, I had merely shut my eyes. I didn't feel up to talking. After 1857 I didn't feel the urge to stay awake, in fact my only prayer to the lord was, Al-Rashid, lead me to my grave now. But even after losing my friends and family, I had to stay alive for twelve years more. Naturally. Did anything in my life ever go right? That was why I learnt to observe myself in the third person, even deriving joy from my own misery. Laugh if you like, but I began to see myself through my enemies' eyes. With each whiplash of fate, I shouted to myself, 'There, see, that dog Ghalib has been beaten up again. How vain you were, Ghalib. There isn't another shair like you; who can match up to you in Farsi? And now see what's been written next to your name. That you're an inhabitant of dozakh, you swine.' I'd burst into tears as I abused myself. Then even the tears dried up eventually; my eyes turned as arid as a desert. I used to pray to Him, no more tears, Allah, may blood flow from my eyes now, I want to die like an orphan with blood smeared on my face and my hands. But God was determined to show me hell on earth before sending me to my grave. Do you know why? I had committed only one sin—while the lord wanted to completely erase this mortal life, I had wanted to give a few moments from this life the taste of eternity—through my ghazals. How could the lord not punish me for it? Of course he had to. Who do you think you are, Mirza Ghalib, trying to create another universe next to the lord's with your words? You're an imbecile, a bewakoof. You write poetry, make up stories, paint pictures, compose melodies—what else are you but an imbecile? But what can one do, Manto bhai? I adore words, you see, I sieve out colours from words, I can hear melodies by entering deep within them, I can see the darkness too—that I can do all this is Allah's gift. Must he punish me still? I understood the significance of this punishment much later. You have seen what cannot be seen; you have heard what cannot be heard; you have sensed what cannot be sensed; for this you must be punished. Because you tasted eternity, you must live through life in hell. Just as Al-Hallaj had to be punished. You want to build a new universe, but you will not bear its burden—how can that be possible?

But none of this occurred to me during the first eleven or twelve years after coming to Dilli. When you said a little earlier that I used to weep in the diwankhana, you were exaggerating. No, Manto bhai, I hadn't learnt to shed tears as yet. I was disappointed and annoyed, I even felt very lonely at times, but clouds had not yet gathered in my eyes. First the earth has to be soaked, the vapour has to be created and made to rise to the sky, and only then will the clouds appear; all this takes time. And those were my

salad days. Everyone used to look at me with wide eyes. Do you know why? My complexion was like a jasmine's. When you see this Ghalib, stooped and wrinkled, you'll never guess what that Ghalib looked like. Tall and slim, a head of curly hair, I could feel the touch of velvet when I ran my fingers through it. I knew that many of the ladies would be staring at me behind their curtain, Manto bhai. And why shouldn't they? How many men could Dilli boast of, who were capable of competing with me? All of them dressed the same way, with their long hair and dense beards. All sheep, you see. So how was it possible that people would not stare at Mirza Ghalib when he went down the road in a palanquin? A thin kurta and pyjamas, with a jaamdaani design on the kurta, replete with floral and other patterns, and an Astrakhan hat. I tried to bring out my uniqueness in everything I did. I learnt all this from the *Mirzanama*. It was quite a book, my brothers, it had all the rules that told you how to be a proper prince, a proper Mirza. Do you suppose anyone can be a Mirza? It has its own methods. Your very dress will reveal whether you're a Mirza or not. A Mirza will not converse with anyone except his peers. And in order to convey the fact that he's different from the common man, the Mirza will never travel anywhere on foot, but always use a palanquin. If there's something he likes at the market, the Mirza will buy it no matter how much it costs; he will not haggle over the price like others. What else must he do? He must invite rich people home for mehfils. Get this straight: the tobacco that is served must be fragrant and mixed with hashish. Ground pearls must be stirred into the wine. To be a Mirza you must be able to recite passages from Saadi's *Gulistan* and *Bustan* from memory. Even more important, when you speak, your grammar must be flawless. You will have to quote stanzas from ghazals from time to time. Your favourite among flowers must be the narcissus. And your favourite among fruits, the orange. To him the fort at Agra is the greatest in the world, and the finest city of Persia is Isfahan. The Mirza will always loathe those who put gigantic turbans on their heads.

When I grew old, I wanted to laugh when I set eyes on this Mirza Ghalib. You know what, when a man is immersed in a dream, this is how he thinks of himself as unique. And then, when the dream is shattered, he slowly learns to put his feet back on the ground, realizes that the desire to be different from everyone else is nothing but the arrogance of youth. The truth is that every person is unique; no two persons are alike. Everyone is different in their own way. You have to pass through many Karbalas on the journey of life to learn this truth, Manto bhai.

No, please don't be upset, my brothers, I will tell you the story you want to hear—of the Mirza Ghalib whose skin was the colour of jasmine. But remember, when you stand outside your own life and observe it, the story can never progress along a straight line—it is led by words branching off in different directions. I am looking back on a life that has ended. Since no new road will appear in this life anymore, many alternatives will present themselves to me; what if it had happened this way and not that, what would the outcome have been? I cannot reject any of these thoughts now.

You were right, Manto bhai, after leaving Mahroof sahib's house I finally got the chance to spread my wings. I was choking to death over there. A man who wants to compose ghazals as well as lecture you cannot be tolerated very long. Their lives are like measuring tapes, and they want to trim the lives of other people to the same measurements. But I was an orphan, I had never seen my father; to me life was not something to be measured out. When I rented Sabban Khan's house, I tasted independent life. Who could stop me now from drinking and gambling and visiting brothels? Some nights I went to bed with my wife, performing mechanically; she didn't even want anything more. To her, two bodies came together only for the purpose of giving birth to children. They were born accordingly, and even died within a year and a half. How could they have survived, after all? They were not born in love. But it was also true that I paid no attention to their survival. If some of them had been alive, maybe my

relationship with Begum would not have turned so cold. But I was drunk on the desire to be different. It's the kind of drunkenness in which you will not consider a man a human being, you will try to dismiss everything you see and hear with laughter and ridicule. I was fully capable of this. Let me tell you a story, then. One evening a priest gave me a terrible lecture about drinking. Since alcohol is haraam, you will have to go to hell. When he had ranted for a long time, I couldn't be quiet anymore. 'What's so bad about drinking, mian?' I asked.

— The drunkard doesn't understand that.

— Who does?

— The lord keeps an account of all this.

— What accounts does he keep?

— Accounts that render a drunkard's prayers futile.

My pent up laughter burst out now. I said, 'I have wine, mian, it can make me forget everything; why do I need to pray?'

Now I do realize that a drunkard's prayers are indeed never met. The drunkard's consciousness is stuck in a place from which he cannot perceive anything else. But still I couldn't give up drinking. Alcohol creates a cloistered environment that you can never escape—you can only whirl about inside it. Caught in this tornado, you become even lonelier with every passing day.

To tell you the truth, I had arrived in Shahjahanabad with a great deal of hope. My reputation as a poet was growing, but there was no dearth of people to insult me at every mushaira. I did not want to write ghazals full of clichés as Zauq and Momin did. To me each word was like a crystal; when the light of the heart fell on a word, it gave birth to a rainbow. When I wandered about in Kale Mahal or on Akbarabad's roads, I could hear the sounds of cascading tears concealed within words, Manto bhai. Do you know who wept inside those words? Souls that had been lost in the sky and the air and space. I could hear their sighs as I wrote my ghazals. Why would the people who sent mushairas into raptures every single day ever want to understand me? They had only one task—throw that bastard Ghalib out, humiliate him, he must never be allowed a place in the king's court. The swine doesn't care for anyone, doesn't consider anyone his master. Indeed I don't, I know that I'm the best after Amir Khusrau, I and I alone can hold aloft the banner of the Farsi ghazal. I don't consider anyone without the guts to write ghazals in Farsi a poet, Manto bhai. There was no one in my life I could say these things to. I would say them to myself, alone, for my own benefit.

It was at such a time that she came into my life, my brothers. I only saw her eyes at first. And the moment I did, Mir sahib's ghazal began humming in my head:

جی میں کیا کیا ہے اپنے اے ہمدم
ہر سکون کا تا بہ لب نہیں آتا

There's so much in my heart, my soulmate
But not a single word reaches my lips

I had drunk a great deal that evening. I couldn't go back home after leaving the kotha and fell asleep on its veranda. Someone awoke me from the depths of sleep. I saw only her eyes, the line of her kohl, and silken tears.

— Mirza sahib.

A voice engulfed me like a wind on a wintry night. I gazed only into her eyes and hundreds of birds

were flying in them, as though it were dawn, the first dawn of my life, in her eyes. As though the painter Bihzad's brush had painted a pair of eyes on a body made of air.

— Mirza sahib …

— Who are you? Kaun ho tum?

— Why didn't you go back home?

— Home? I chuckled. —Where is it?

— Next to Habas Khan's gate.

— But my home isn't there.

She was quiet for the longest time. Then she said, 'Come, let me take you home.'

— Why?

— You mustn't languish here on the streets, Mirza sahib.

— Why not?

— Because you're a poet without peer.

— Without peer?

— Truly, yes.

— Say it again.

— You're a poet without peer. You're benazir.

I grasped her hand. How warm it was, how hot. I held it against my mouth, I sucked on its flesh. She was dark as the night. And because of this, she dazzled in the darkness.

— Let me go, janab.

But I was entering her darkness. I wouldn't be satisfied till I had clasped her to my breast. She allowed herself to be taken, without resisting. For the first time I got the scent of moist earth in a woman's body, Manto bhai. The scent that the base of the tree gives out after it has rained. This was not the fragrance of ittar on the bodies of the courtesans in the kothas, this was the dark smell of a moist, ancient earth.

I was entranced by this smell, Manto bhai. She was no famous courtesan from a brothel. She was an ordinary domni. You do know what domnis did for a living, don't you? They sang and danced at weddings to earn money, and they slept with men as well; but no refined Mirza would ever touch a domni. Their behaviour and speech belonged to the gutter. But Munira— Munirabai was different from the rest of them.

Munirabai gave me shelter in her room from that day on. She sang nobody's ghazals but mine. When Munirabai sang, the glow of vermilion clouds would spread on her darkling face.

— Munira …

— Yes?

— Where did you hear my ghazals?

Munirabai would smile. 'They fell from the heavens.'

— The sky?

— Yes.

— Where is that sky, those stars?

— Here. Munira would smile, her hand on her heart. 'They're in my breasts, janab.'

The sky was inside her breasts and my ghazals had dropped from this sky—nobody had ever described it like this before. Only Munirabai could put it this way. She had no monetary relationship

with my ghazals. I clasped her to my breast. She disrobed behind the shield of my body. I seemed to be holding a black, moisture-laden cloud. Begum Falak Ara was a sunlit day in my life, Manto bhai, and Munira was like torrential rain, continuous. New green leaves sprang up on my body; believe me, when I sat in front of Munira, it was only her eyes that I saw, as swift as a doe but stilled every now and then. In those still eyes I could see fear, like a running deer stopping abruptly in its tracks.

They heaped calumny on me, Manto bhai. You're Mirza Ghalib, very well, you may visit a kotha, you may even spend the night with a courtesan, but that doesn't mean you can live with a domni in her house. Are you forgetting your position? What is one's position, Manto bhai? When I was humiliated at the mushairas, she was the only one I could go to. She never said anything, she only sang my ghazals:

دلِ ناداں تجھے ہوا کیا ہے
آخر اس درد کی دوا کیا ہے

What's wrong with you, innocent heart?
What's the cure for this illness?

Deliverance lies where there is sanctuary. So I didn't pay any heed to all the mud flung at me. Why should I tuck my tail between my legs and run away just because a commoner was throwing stones at me? I was never one to do that. I may not have gone to battle like my ancestors, but my life had become nothing but a battlefield, where I had to fight all by myself. To hell with what people said. When I was in bed with Munira I forgot all the humiliation heaped upon me, Munira made me forget it all, and I clung to her more and more with every passing day. As I heard her sing my ghazals one after the other, it occurred to me that for all their jibes at the mushairas, at least one woman was keeping my ghazals alive through her voice. I wanted to have Munira all to myself, I wouldn't let her perform anywhere else. I wouldn't let anyone visit her either. I took on the responsibility for her maintenance. Not that I was particularly well-off—all I had was the monthly pension of sixty-two rupees and fifty paise from the British. It was used to run the household, pay for my drinking and gambling, and now, for Munira's expenses too. But then my mother's sister used to send some money every month, as did Ahmed Buksh Khan from Loharu now and then; even my mother used to send me some money sometimes from Agra. But given my profligate ways, this was never enough. So I had to borrow. Back then, of course, people like Mathura Das or Darbari Mal or Khoobchand never turned down my requests for loans. All told, my days were passing quite enjoyably. And a hundred ghazals were being born around Munira.

جان تم پہ نثار کرتا ہوں
میں نہیں جانتا دعا کیا ہے

I am charitable to you, my love
I do not know what prayer is

But one day some people stormed Munira's house, beating her up and breaking things. Do you know why? So that she wouldn't let me in anymore. But still I went, for I was adamant. Munira only wept, holding my hand. 'Go away, Mirza sahib. If they see you …'

— What will they do? Will they beat me up?

— I don't want your name to be besmirched.

— Do you also want me not to visit you anymore?

Drawing my head to the seclusion of her breast, she continued weeping and said, 'I cannot live without you, Mirza sahib, you are my love. But still …'

I couldn't imagine living without her either, Manto bhai. I was drawn to Munira as the moth to the flame. My life was incomplete without her beauty. Do you know how I felt? As though someone would steal her from me at any moment. I didn't even go into the garden for a stroll with her, for I used to fear that the narcissus would forget its own beauty when it saw her and assume its human form to run to her. The more I explored Munirabai's depths, the more I felt that I did not have her in all her fullness.

یہ نہ تھی ہماری قسمت کہ وصال یار ہوتا
اگر اور جیتے رہتے یہی انتظار ہوتا

That was exactly how I felt. Complete union with her was not in my destiny. The longer I lived, the longer I would wait for her. Only once in my life was I able to love like this, Manto bhai. Firdausi among poets, Hasan Basri among sages and Majnu among lovers—these were the three beacons of the world. If you cannot love like Majnu I don't call it love. I had dreamt of it, but I could not love like Majnu, Manto bhai. It was too arduous a path for me. How many of us can train our body and soul to forget ourselves? I could not.

I was extremely hurt at first, so I cut down on my visits to Munirabai. Gradually the hurt was erased. And so was she. Mughal blood is very cruel, Manto bhai; the same blood ran in my veins too. Do you know what this blood does? It kills the one it loves. I succeeded in forgetting her and getting involved with life in new ways. But Munira had locked herself up within me, no new paths opened up for her. Women are like that. Once they love someone, they cannot escape from the cage of this passion; even if they waste away and die they will confine themselves to the cage. Once upon a time I used to consider their world too narrow for my liking. But someone who can even die out of her love for a man has actually embarked on the ultimate journey, an endeavour to reach beyond the self and lose oneself in another. God did not give this life of noble pursuit to the male, Manto bhai. We are like moths, and they are like flames—they burn and destroy themselves to give out light. This is the love you will see in Meerabai's songs, Manto bhai. Without Giridhari, Meera's life was dark. *Kaise jiyun re mai, Hari bine kaise jiyun.* How will I live without Krishna, how will I live?

One day I heard that Munirabai had died. With her death, this maddening love, this bekhudi mohabbat, left me too. But her eyes didn't leave me. Those eyes, just like the ones painted on a peacock's tail, kept coming back to me. When death finally appeared to take my hand, I realized that I had indeed wanted to love Munira like Majnu did, or else she would not have appeared to me in my final moments.

مدت ہوئی ہے یار کو مہماں کئے ہوئے
جوش قدح سے سرو چراغاں کئے ہوئے
کرتا ہوں جمع پھر جگرلخت لخت کو
عرصہ ہوا ہے دعوتِ مژگاں کئے ہوئے
پھر وضع احتیاط سے رکنے لگا ہوں دم
برسوں ہوئے ہیں چاک گریباں کئے ہوئے
مانگے ہیں پھر کسی کو لبِ بام پھر ہوس
زلف سیاہ رُخ پہ پریشاں کئے ہوئے
اک نو بہار ناز کو تا کے ہے پھر نگاہ
چہرہ فروغ مے سے گلستاں کئے ہوئے
جی ڈھونڈتاہے پھر وہی فرصت کہ رات دن
بیٹھے ر ہیں تصور جاناں کئے ہوئے

It's been long since my love was my guest
Long since the wine warmed the parlour
All these rigid rules choke my breath
I long to wear my torn clothes once more
Will my bleeding heart be mended, asks love
They're just waiting to rub salt in my wounds
I want to be at my beloved's doorstep again
Pleading with the doorman to let me in
My heart again seeks those easygoing days
When hours were spent in thoughts of my love
Don't disturb me, Ghalib, my passion drives me on
I am waiting now with stormy, reckless will

Munirabai was gone. The miserable days became even more miserable, Manto bhai. Begum Falak Ara was a bolt of lightning in the sky of my existence, and Munirabai was the star whose light falls on our courtyard even millions of years after its death.

Night after night I gazed at the darkness of her death, reciting Mir sahib's sher:

سرسری تم جہاں سے گزرے
ورنہ ہر جا جہان دیگر تھا

Munirabai, my love, you left the world carelessly, you did not notice that every spot here held a new world.

16

آغوش گل کشاد ہ وداع بہار ہے
اے عندلیب چل کے چلے دن بہار کے

The rosebuds have bloomed to say goodbye
Let us leave, nightingale, spring is ending

Tell me, Mirza sahib, have you ever considered how many Ghalibs were hidden within you simultaneously? How many of them did you know? Perhaps you never understood some of them all your life, isn't that so? Society is troubled by people like you. It cannot fathom who the real Mirza Ghalib is. Take for instance the letter you wrote to Mirza Hatim Ali Saab Mihr. Do you remember what you wrote to him in 1860? Mirza Mihr's lover had died; he had expressed his grief to you. You replied, I am now sixty-five, I have sized the world up thoroughly in the past fifty years. When I was young a wise man told me, don't be hard on yourself. Eat, drink and make merry, but remember, you're the fly that hovers around the sugar-bowl; never stick to the same flower like the bee. Do you remember what else you wrote, Mirza sahib? You wrote, only the person who will not himself die can mourn a death. Why should you weep? Enjoy your independence instead. Forget your grief. And if it's a relationship that you hanker for, then Chunnajaan is no different from Munnajaan. Sometimes I imagine that I have been taken to paradise, where a nymph has been allotted to me, and I have to live with her till eternity. The thought makes me shiver with fright. Life will become such a burden. The same home in paradise, the same trees all around, and I have to gaze at the same face eternally, whispering words of love to her. Take your heart somewhere else, mian. May new fairies come into your life with every new spring. There is nothing more juvenile than being stuck to the same person all your life. Why did you mock someone else's pain, Mirza sahib? No, don't look at me that way. What did you think of yourself? Was everyone your puppet to play with? Now you want to talk about another letter you wrote to Mirza Mihr, don't you? Yes, I've read that letter too. In it you had admitted that you were the indirect cause of Munirabai's death. When I read that letter, I see a picture before my eyes. A destroyed man—you—gripping Mirza Mihr's arm to tell him:

'May Allah release our lost lovers, mian. And may he pity us, who have borne the pain of separation. Munirabai came into my life some forty years ago. I did not tread that path ever again, but even today I cannot forget her eyes, her grace. I will not be able to overcome my grief for her all my life. If the fire of your love from your youth is still alive within you, place it now at God's feet. Khuda is the last word, all else is a mirage.'

Which of these two letters written around the same time was from the real Mirza Ghalib? Which one was the face, and which the mask, Mirza sahib? I love you, but I cannot accept this duel between

the face and the mask. I really am a straightforward person, who is bewildered by your labyrinth. I cannot dismiss you as a devil, yet at times you appear even worse than the devil. You can mock the very person whom you loved a moment ago. Perhaps this is the royal temper. What's this, why are you going back into your grave? You cannot take what I'm saying, can you? I know, Mirza sahib, you couldn't accept a single statement against yourself. You were the best after Amir Khusrau, there was no one in between. This was something that you could never forget, could you? I too believe, Mirza sahib, that after Amir Khusrau, no one else but you could have written a sher like this one:

بتالب دیں تو مزہ اُس میں سوا ملتا نہیں
وہ گدا جس کو نہیں ہو خوئے سوال اچھا نہیں

If he gives without being asked, nothing tastes better
The finest beggar is he who does not seek alms

But why did you put on all these masks so often? Whom were you afraid of? Whom did you want to protect yourself from?

— Manto bhai …

— Yes, Mirza sahib?

— You cannot tear me into shreds just because you're writing a story about me.

— But I want to understand you.

— Do not try. Do you know why I walked out of Mahroof sahib's house? I was quite happy there. But he used to try to understand me, gauge me, at every step. What right do you have to want to understand me completely?

— But human beings have always wanted to understand one another, Mirza sahib.

— Bakwas bandh kariye. Stop this nonsense. I can't stand all these homilies. Under the pretext of understanding, what you actually want to do is to trap a person on a chessboard. What do you think you can understand about me? Will you ever be able to enter my dreams and nightmares? Will you understand why I used to talk to myself in my sleep through the night? I'm not talking about pain. I had been insulted so much that I no longer took it seriously. Man derives the greatest pleasure from humiliating another man. Do you know how he does it? When he says, I love you very much. Take this down—I never loved anyone. That is why I humiliated people, why I laughed at them and mocked them. But I said, 'I love you' to someone and then threw her into the gutter. I have seen the ways of the world much longer than you have. Can you imagine the same man being the convict as well as the executioner, Manto bhai? That's me—Mirza Ghalib. Just as the ink might overflow and blot the paper when you write, so too is the book of my destiny inscribed with symbols of the exiled night.

— Mirza sahib …

— What is it?

— I am not dissecting you.

— I squirmed if anyone stared at me too long, Manto bhai. Do you know why? Everyone wanted to seek out the real Mirza Ghalib. But I was nothing but a shadow.

— Whose shadow, Mirza sahib?

— I didn't see him even once in my entire life. When I listened to the azan at dawn, it seemed he existed, existed somewhere, while I languished in this world merely as his shadow.

— I am his shadow too, Mirza sahib.

— Very well. Now let us hear a story of your love. I hope you have something suitable up your sleeve. You keep talking of some Ismat. Let me lie back and listen.

A curtain of mist trembles, beyond it seems to be my life.

I'll tell you about Ismat later, my brothers. If I were to admit from my grave today that I loved Ismat —did she not love me too?—the people up there will have a big laugh if they get to hear. Actually both of us evaded the issue, we tried to suppress it; or else our friendship would not have survived. We spoke a lot of love, but I always took the stance that love was just a word that meant nothing. 'What do you think love is?' I asked her once.

— I want to hear it from you, Manto bhai.

— Me? Why me? I've told you so many times that all this love-shove means nothing to me.

— Don't be so stubborn all the time.

I laughed at Ismat's scolding. —All right, let me tell you then. I am fond of my gold zari-embroidered shoes, Rafiq is fond of his fifth wife. That's love.

— What do you think of yourself, Manto bhai?

— Nothing at all. Haven't I told you over and over that I'm a fraud?

— That same litany.

— Now you tell me what love is.

— What's born between a young man and a young woman.

— Oh is that all? Then you could say I had fallen in love too.

— What? Ismat looked at me wide-eyed, as though she could not believe me.

That's the story I'll tell all of you, Mirza sahib. The first rainbow of my life. I was twenty-two or twenty-three. After passing the matriculation exam on the third attempt, I was despatched to the Aligarh Muslim University. My friend Syed Quraishi, who failed his exams eternally, was with me too. But I could not adjust to the strict rules and regulations at the university. However, many of the students and teachers there had come to love me. Because I couldn't adjust, I fell ill. For several years I had chest pains, along with a fever. It got so bad—the pain increased so much—that I had to sit with my knees drawn up to my chest. This posture became my companion for life. I began to drink excessively to overcome the pain. There was no respite except when I drank. I went to Delhi for treatment. X-rays revealed I had tuberculosis, Roohaf. I had to drop out of the university. There was no money for treatment. My sister Iqbal Begum rescued me. She sent me to a hospital in Bataut, paying for all the expenses. Bataut was an extraordinary island in the mountains along the Jammu-Srinagar highway. That was the first and the last time in my life that I saw the finest beauty in the world, my brothers. Just mountains all around, in the distance forests of pine and chinar and majnu that you could reach out and touch, countless snow-capped Himalayan peaks. If I could have spent all my life in a place like this, if I had never felt compelled to write, I would not have had to live through this history of abasement and violence and bloodshed. If only I could have stayed back in the mountain village with Begu!

I've forgotten what her real name was. Yes, I think I called her Begu, sometimes Wazir, sometimes Begu. She was from the land of the mountains, her complexion was exactly like a rose's, and when she blushed her face was like the sun at dawn. Begu was a goatherd. Whenever one of her goats was lost she would bring her hands up to her mouth and call it; the echo of her cry seemed to make the mountains come alive.

This world gets a woman such as this only once. A sharp, long nose. And her eyes? I've seldom seen

eyes such as hers. They seemed to hold the depths of the mountains in them. Long, thick eyebrows. When she walked past me, a sunbeam seemed to be trapped in her eyelids. Her shoulders were broad, her hands round. And her breasts were like wild mountain fowl. I'm not exaggerating one bit, my brothers, you see beauty such as this only in Pahadi miniature paintings. To describe her loveliness I have no choice but to talk of Radha on a tryst in those works of art. The way she walked the mountain trails, the way she hummed, the way she smiled to herself on the way—she was clearly on her way to meet someone. Of course it was a journey to a tryst.

The first time I saw Begu, it felt like a flash of lightning in the darkness of all these years. For several days I spied on her from my position behind a tree. She would call out to her sheep and goats melodiously, as though she were sending a snatch of a song out on the breeze. Its echoes would burst within me like a waterfall. One day I couldn't restrain myself anymore. Running up to her, I grasped her hand, and like a terrified doe she put her arms around me. I wanted to kiss her. I even tried to put my arms around her and kiss her. But Begu shook me off and ran away. I never tried to do it again. But one day she came up to me of her own accord and started a conversation. After that we talked for days on end; I do not remember all that we spoke of, my brothers. As you know, alcohol claims the mind first of all, playing tricks with the memory. Things that did not happen appear to be true.

I told Begu of my love for her. She went into peals of laughter. Then, chewing on the edge of her scarf, she said, 'But you'll go away from this sarai soon. Will you still love me after that?'

— What sarai?

— This sarai.

— This mountain's a sarai? An inn? I laughed.

— My grandmother says …

— What does she say?

Begu didn't continue. I realized that she didn't have the words for all she wanted to say. But she could feel. I understood Begu much later, Mirza sahib, from a story I heard.

Gustakhi maaf, my brothers, but I must tell this other story now. Otherwise you will not understand that it was indeed in a sarai that we—Begu and I—met.

One day, Ibrahim Ibn Adam was seated in the public stateroom, the Diwan-e-Aam. His ministers and other subjects were present. Suddenly a fakir with a long beard, dressed in a tattered gown, appeared before the emperor's throne.

— What do you want? Ibrahim asked.

— Let me catch my breath. I've only just arrived at your inn.

— Are you mad! Ibrahim said stridently. 'This isn't an inn, this is my palace.'

— Whom did this palace belong to before you? The fakir asked.

— To my father.

— And before him?

— To his father.

— And before him?

— It goes back many generations.

— Where are they all now?

— Are they still supposed to be alive? They're all in their graves.

— If people only come and go, what can this place be but an inn? The fakir disappeared as soon as he said this.

Begu's grandmother was right. We merely pass a succession of inns as we go forward towards death.

One day Begu said, 'You won't remain angry with me, will you?'

— For what?

— The other day …

— What about it?

— I didn't let you kiss me.

— I've forgotten that, Begu.

— Everyone behaves that way with me, you know. They tell me, your eyes are so beautiful; when I see your lips I cannot stop myself from kissing them. What do I do? I don't like all this. I thought you were like them too.

— Then what am I like?

Begu looked at me, tilting her face against her palm. 'You're not like them,' she smiled. 'You're decent.'

One day I found Begu's kurta pockets stuffed with many things. 'What's all this in your pockets?' I asked.

— Shan't tell you. Begu smiled, swinging her pigtails.

— Shan't tell? Just a minute. I grasped her hand. —Show me what you've got. You have to.

— Please let me go.

— No, you have to show me.

Looking at me helplessly, Begu fished out one strange object after another from her pockets. Dried chinar leaves, an empty matchbox, a few pebbles, a yellowed photograph clipped from a newspaper, ribbons. But she absolutely refused to show me one of the things she had, holding it tightly in her fist.

— What's that?

— No, I won't show you.

— All right. I laughed. —You can go now.

After going off a long way, Begu returned. I was sitting beneath a tree. From a distance, she tossed at me what she had been hiding in her fist, and ran off. Do you know what it was? A lozenge. I was surprised. Why had she refused to show me this lozenge? And why, for that matter, did she come back to give it to me? That was the last time I saw Begu, Mirza sahib. I never saw her again. I bid goodbye to Bataut a few days later. The lozenge stayed in my pocket. When I returned home I put it in the drawer of my desk. My only memory of Begu. But how long do memories last, after all? One day I opened the drawer to discover a swarm of ants having a royal feast with it.

I told Ismat about Begu one day. When she had heard the whole story, she said, 'What kind of love was this, Manto bhai? I had expected a thrilling love story from you. This is laughable.'

— Why is it laughable?

— A rotten, third-class love story. You returned with a lump of sugar in your pocket and considered yourself a hero. Tchah!

I shut up.

— Well? Say something. Ismat kept prodding me.

— What should I have done, Ismat? What would have pleased you? I should have slept with Begu and given her an illegitimate child, right? That would have made for a thrilling love story, wouldn't it? I could have flexed my muscles and declared there wasn't another man in the world like me. Ha! Is this how you want to see me, Ismat?

Ismat took my hand, both her eyes misting over.

17

طریق عشق میں ہے رہنما دل
پیمبر دل ہے قبلہ دل خدا دل

This heart shows the way to love
This heart is the prophet, the road, the Lord

Munirabai left me, I produced the first volume of my Urdu ghazals, making up my mind to write in Farsi from then on. The lustre of the ghazal is not bright without Farsi. But things went wrong, Manto bhai, fate began its games with me. The relationship between my heart and happiness was destroyed; secretly I bled, one drop at a time. Our relationship with joy is usually very strong, isn't it, Manto bhai? What do we want in life but happiness? But consider the even stronger forces that can break this relationship. One night I told my heart … yes, we can speak only to our heart, it alone is our temple and our mosque, our ibaadatgah. I told my heart, 'Give me the strength to speak, so that I can go to the Jahanpanah and tell him, I am the mysterious mirror, huzoor, polish me till I shine; poetry is born within me. I want a little rest.' My heart chuckled. 'You imbecile, the time for such talk is long gone. If you must speak at all, just say, "I am wounded, give me balm for my wounds; I am dead, resurrect me."' I turned into a hand-drawn, colourless nightingale; not even the fragrance of a hundred roses would bring song to this nightingale's heart.

No, my brothers, don't go back to sleep with such disappointed faces. Now that you have started listening to the stories of this pair of ill-fated souls, you must take the responsibility of staying till the end. But I do not want to end your hangovers from the tales of our romances just yet. And I promise that in the course of this narrative of darkness you *shall* get patches of light and gusts of breeze—every now and then I will tell you such qissas and hikayats, take you to such dastangos, that life will not appear to be a rock weighing you down. Yes, sit up now, for it's stories about love that I want to tell you now. To tell you the truth, the deeper I went into dozakh during my life, the more it was the memory of love that let me survive. This life of ours—the act of being born—what is it but ishq? This is worldly love, ishq-e-majazi. And the closer we approach death, the path of divine love, ishq-e-haqiqi, opens up before us. You have to keep ishq-e-haqiqi only for the Lord. You no longer have Begum Falak Ara before you, nor Munirabai, nor Manto bhai's Begu or Ismat, there's only he, Alhamdulillah. But how many of us can actually tread that path? Maula Rumi did. Each of us is a moth, whirling around in the trap set by ishq-e-majazi. Have you noticed the irony, Manto bhai? Ishq-e-majazi is worldly love, it's like loving a picture or a symbol; and ishq-e-haqiqi, which is only directed at Allah, is true love. What does this mean? We are all shadow puppets, spinning about in a symbolic forest of love. Even if we cannot take the path of ishq-e-haqiqi, even this is not insignificant, Manto bhai. It's no mean achievement to

love a picture. That alone makes this earthly life worthwhile. Some people even choose death out of their love for a picture—and does such a death not look forward to the path of ishq-e-haqiqi?

So, my brothers, let me tell you one of Mir sahib's masnavis. If we have to talk of love, we must talk of Mir sahib over and over again. A man wounded and bent by love was like a caged nightingale to him. As he listened to its lamentations, he felt that he himself was trapped inside the cage. Have you ever read *Darya-e-Ishq*, Manto bhai? Why do you stare helplessly at me? Don't worry, I know you haven't read it. I met many people in Dilli, in Calcutta, who never read any of Hindustan's own books. White men's works were the last word for them. I was also quite enamoured by white skin and their civilization, their tamaddun, at one time. I even thought of them as friends, but 1857 opened my eyes. I realized that under the guise of their tamaddun, they were really here to create killing fields in this country.

No, my brothers, don't get agitated, I will now tell you the story of *Darya-e-Ishq*. You're not supposed to be listening to this story. If you're reborn, you will carry its memory with you. However ill-fated I may have been, I do wish to be born again in this world. Do you know why? We are the Asraf-ul-Makhlakat, the finest creatures of God, Adam; even the Gibrails had to bow before us. When Iblis refused, he was thrown out of paradise. Each of us is a mirror, my brothers, in which the lord sees himself. And love is the shadow hidden deep inside the mirror, which you will never see.

Let me tell you a couple of things first. Don't imagine that the doddering Ghalib is saying whatever comes to mind. There's a certain protocol to telling stories too. The first rule is that you cannot tell a story without yourself in it. But in what ways can you be in a story? You talk about the tree in your garden with all your heart because you love it. You are in the story in the form of this love; you aren't just a flesh-and-blood creature, after all, you are full of mysteries, which are part of your love for the tree. So I thought I'd explain all this. I may not have written Mir sahib's masnavis, but as a reader I am involved with them in some way, and that is the same as being in them; this is how a poet exists in his poetry. When the falcon flies in the sky, its shadow falls on the ground; to be part of a story is like being that shadow. I'm not in the story, and yet I'm in it, in a different form.

The lover exists in your life in the same way. She is not there for you all your life. Even if she seems to be by your side, it's not actually her. Only her shadow remains, which you love all your life. This shadow is like blood that oozes out for many, many years; like a young girl in the nude—tender, about to fall asleep.

Darya-e-Ishq is a story of someone who fell asleep this way. Was this the sleep that the boy had wanted when he loved? No one knows. The girl didn't know either that she would have to go to her love in order to sleep. The boy was so beautiful, my brothers. As tall as a cypress tree, his heart more delicate than wax, love coursing through every vein and artery. Men such as these are born on earth only to die. Or else they're made to slave in jail, or sent to lunatic asylums to be killed. I often dreamt of Mir sahib in his cell, where he had been imprisoned, curled up like a dog. One day Mehr Nigar appeared before him.

— You? Mir sahib murmured.

— You want to live like this?

— My fantasy, Begum. Khwab-e-khayal.

— Just for me?

— No.

— Well then?

— Mehr Nigar. A name had loved me, Begum. It's her I live for.

— And what about me?

— You're no one. You were afraid. You told everyone.

— They wouldn't have let me live, Mir. They would have sent me to my grave.

— I know.

— Do you hate me?

— No. I can still see Mehr Nigar. She still lives in the palace of my heart. She came into my life a long time ago.

— Tell me that you hate me.

— No.

— Why not?

— You aren't in my life today, Begum. Only a name remains. A name given by the lord, it's the name that I love.

Many such names given by the lord are borne away by the river of love.

No, I will not cheat you. I'm going back to the tale of the beautiful boy who drowned to death in the *Darya-e-Ishq*. His name was Yusuf too. The Lord gave him a wonderful day in his life—his eye stopped at a window of a house he was passing. Who was at this window? Call her fate or call her his lover, it was her face he saw. Like a huntress, a pair of eyes stared at him, Yusuf felt as though he had fallen in love with those eyes only so that he could die. He stood transfixed in the middle of the road. The girl didn't even deign to give him a second look; covering her face with a veil she disappeared from the window. But Yusuf was by now lost to love, and impatient. Hafiz sahib seemed to have had an inkling of what was going on in his heart.

دست از طلب ندارم تا سخن من برآید
یا تن رسدبا جنان یا جان ز تن برآید
بے گشائے تراب تنم را بعد از وفات وبنگر
کہ از آتش درونم دود از کفن بر آید

I shall not give up on my desire if it remains unfulfilled
My heart will either reach my lover, or leave my body
When I'm dead dig up my grave, you'll find my shroud
Covered in smoke, for the fire is still burning inside

From that day on, Yusuf remained rooted to the spot like a statue, waiting for another glimpse of the full moon. People who passed on the road looked at him in astonishment, convinced that this young man must have gone mad. Some of them felt a twinge of pain too; they asked him, what is it my friend, what sorrow has turned you to stone? Yusuf didn't speak, only pointing to the window. One day people unravelled the mystery. Oh, this boy has lost his heart to Bilqis. I forgot to tell you, my brothers, that the girl's name was Bilqis. So her father's and brothers' instinct was to have this fellow killed; later they realized that if they were to be arrested for murder they would become pariahs. Do you know what they did? They floated the rumour that Yusuf was mad. After all, there's no responsibility attached to labelling a person mad. Is there a better method for turning a person's life into living hell? This man is mad? Very well, spit on him, stone him, chain him, lock him in a cell. But stoning Yusuf served no purpose, for even with blood streaming from his body he remained rooted to the spot.

حشر دشمنانم ار می کنند قصدہلاک
گرم تُو دستی اش دشمنانم نہ دارم باک
مرا امیدِ وصال تُوزندہ می دارد
وگر ہر زمان از ہجرت است بیم ہلاک

Even if a thousand enemies conspire to kill me
I will not be afraid if you're near me, my friend
I'm sure I shall meet you—this confidence keeps me alive
Because you aren't near, I am threatened by annihilation

Then Bilqis's parents decided that it would be best to send her off to her chacha's house across the river. Bilqis was smuggled out in a palanquin, accompanied by her trusted maid. Yusuf seemed to have scented his beloved; he began to run alongside the palanquin, shouting, 'Have mercy on me my love, talk to me but once.' Bilqis did not say anything, but her maid's heart was in turmoil. Poking her head out of the palanquin, she said, 'Wait a little longer, you will definitely meet my daughter.' The palanquin reached the river. Bilqis climbed into the boat. Yusuf remained on the bank gazing at it; when the boat was in the middle of the stream, Bilqis's maid tossed a single slipper into the water, shouting out to Yusuf, if you really love my daughter, bring the slipper back. The maid really did want Yusuf and Bilqis to be together; she had no idea that Yusuf didn't know how to swim. But Yusuf plunged into the water, and was lost in its depths, gasping for breath. From her boat, Bilqis saw Yusuf die. Who was this? Was he a flower from heaven? Did he love her so much? Bilqis wasn't able to say anything, perhaps she had felt that spring was here, there were even flowers on the boughs, but still, my favourite garden, why did you snatch him away?

Spring and garden. Why does my voice choke when I try to utter these words? When I say these two words, I feel as though rose petals are spreading their wings in my mouth. Why are these two words still shrouded in the fog of death? Bahar and bagh, spring and the garden. Why do spring and the garden only tell me about death over and over again?

Don't worry, my brothers, I haven't forgotten the story. But in the telling of a story, some words make me suffer so much that I wish I could take them in my arms and go to sleep. As I was saying, Yusuf died of drowning. When Bilqis had spent some time at her uncle's house, her parents decided that since the boy had died, they might as well bring her back home. They returned on the same river. Climbing into the boat, Bilqis said, 'Will you let me see this river, Khanum? I have never seen a river like this.'

— See it, beti, see it to your heart's content. Once you have seen a river, you will never stop looking.

Bilqis asked many questions about the river, about who lived in the habitations on its banks, what kind of people they were, what they did for a living—she couldn't stop asking. Eventually she asked, 'Do you know the spot where he drowned, Khanum?'

— Why, beti?

— Is the water very deep over there?

— It's the middle of the river.

— Will you show me?

— What do you want to see?

— I want to see how deep it is in the middle of the river.

— I'll show you, beti. It's so deep there, there's such a strong current—and yet how calm it is. Only the Lord knows how.

Bilqis was mumbling to herself, which Khanum did not hear. Do you know what she was saying? — Why does he flow like the water, talking to himself? God alone knows how Mir sahib found such words and made Bilqis say them. Have you heard this sher, Manto bhai?

When the boat reached the middle of the river, Khanum called Bilqis out. There, beti, that's the spot where Yusuf drowned. Bilqis gazed at the spot for a while. And then, before Khanum could understand her intention, she plunged into the water. The riverbed was scoured and Yusuf's and Bilqis's corpses were dredged out. They were lying beneath the water, holding hands. Death bequeathed on them what life did not. This, my brothers, is what it means to go from ishq-e-majazi towards ishq-e-haqiqi.

We don't get Yusuf's kind of martyrdom, shahadat, in our lives. Do you know why? Because we wander about, lost, all our life—lost in a forest of symbols. Only he who can bet with life itself can reach the vicinity of love. It has no name, it has no beginning or end; the beauty of this universe is infinite. What are the things we call beautiful? Wine, spring, youth, love. These are shed far too quickly. The rose whose loveliness you admire may have sprung from the grave of a beautiful woman. Just as she went to her grave one day, the rose wilted too. The song of the nightingale may hold the poetry of a dead shair, but even this nightingale dies one day. Beauty does not last long in this world, my brothers; the fragrance of the rose, the song of the nightingale and our youth all dissipate in the wind—oh, so quickly. And youth in particular, the spring of this life, dies even quicker. Only the beauty of the lord's worldliness is indestructible.

You can see this beauty in the dust on the street, Manto bhai. Adam was born from this very dust, and all human beings merge with this same dust eventually. There's just the one thing that I've realized, my brothers. It's all right even if we cannot tread the path to the lord, but don't let the bottle of perfume suffer. What is it, Manto bhai, why are you goggling at me? Didn't you understand this simple observation? Obviously I'm talking of the heart. Isn't the heart a bottle of perfume, yes or no? A pir had said as much to Mir sahib, 'Do not break anyone's bottle of perfume, my son. For that is where the lord resides.' How small an object it is compared to the size of our body, and yet the ocean and the desert are both hidden in it. Only he who knows this can say, what do I care whether you're a king or a minister—look at me, am I not a fakir?

I had wanted to take the hand of the dervish who surfaced on the Yamuna to go off into the unknown. He did not take me along. He said, wipe your mirror over and over again, the black magic of words awaits you with its fatal attraction. Then the mirror finally shattered one day, and do you know what I saw? I was still the fakir I had been born as; only a few titles bestowed by wine and women and kings had intervened briefly. How little time it took for all these to wither away.

It was well after 1857. A fakir arrived at my door, singing and asking for alms. I was stunned. This was my own ghazal. 'Who wrote this song?' I asked him.

— All these songs are written on the road, huzoor.

I don't know whether I succeeded in becoming a fakir. But my song did reach the path that fakirs took, Manto bhai. It laid its head at the foot of the one who has treaded the dust. This is the garden of Rizwan.

18

فلک کو دیکھ کے کرتا ہوں یاد اُس کو اسد
جفامیں اُس کے ہے انداز کارفرما کا

It is she I am reminded of by the sky, Asad,
Her cruelty was a copy of God's ruthlessness

The garden of Rizwan. No, Mirza sahib, I did not have the right to enter the garden of paradise, even its aroma never made its way to me. Still I prayed to Allah—snatch this black soul, this Saadat Hasan Manto, from the world, for he always forsakes fragrance to chase bad smells. He hates the glowing sun and always enters the dark warren of streets. Kicking away whatever is decent and civilized, he embraces the naked truth. He prefers the bitter fruit. Instead of being attracted to women in their homes, he wants to attain the seventh heaven of happiness with whores. He laughs when everyone else cries, and when they smile, he weeps. Manto tries to cleanse features blackened with grime because he seeks the original face that lies beneath. Save this devil, this misguided angel, but once, O Lord.

No, my brothers, the lord did not respond to my pleas. What was I to do? I began to accumulate stories in my pocket. Others stored their stories in their head, but mine were in my pocket. Do you know why? I used to take advance payment for my stories, you see. Just like money, my stories also came out of my pocket. People used to consider this man a magician. Where does he get so many stories? Do you suppose there's a dearth of stories, for heaven's sake? Unless you're blindfolded, you can find a story any and everywhere. Provided you're not carrying a measuring tape, every man's story is your story. That was why neither liberals nor mullahs could tolerate me, for they always had measuring tapes in their hand; only those stories that could be measured by their yardstick could be written—the rest had to be purged from life. How could I explain to them that Manto had never wanted to project himself as a writer? A ramshackle wall, the plaster flaking off, and unknown patterns being created on the ground—I was a wall just like that. I am the fifth wheel attached at the back of the car, which may or may not come in use. Believe me, I was never at peace with myself; I never felt fulfilled. There was a constant emptiness somewhere, my brothers, as though something were missing, as though I were incomplete. My temperature would permanently be one degree above normal. I seemed to be trapped in a maelstrom. You might laugh at this, but I feel that people whose temperature is always normal cannot even love a tree or a river, leave alone write stories or poetry. Take it from me, my brothers, nothing can be created, not even love, without madness, without abnormal behaviour. Love cannot be measured out; if you give me this, I will give you that, this isn't love, this is household management—and the funny thing is, people mistake such calculations for love. I have seen real mohabbat, real love in Hira Mandi, on Foras Road—red light areas, all of them. Here people could go bankrupt over love, kill too.

But the way the gentlemen saw it, they were all whores, they conducted transactions with their bodies. What did they know of mohabbat? No Mirza sahib, don't look at me with such helpless eyes. I know that you, you alone, had succeeded in getting to the hearts of the tawaifs. I saw it too. Flesh on sale in one kotha after another, while the glow within the flesh—those fragrant hearts—burnt themselves to cinders because of love.

I began to frequent Hira Mandi when I went to Lahore to work with Bari sahib. It was then that I came across these women to whom the word 'home' was nothing but a dream throughout their lives. Each of them was unique, with a different story. Tolstoy had said that all happy families are alike, but every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way. When I entered the kaleidoscopic world of Hira Mandi, I used to feel as though I was holding a hundred different beating hearts—if one was a Malkosh, another was a Bihag, here a Bhairavi and there a Purvi—what a festival of ragas and raginis. The ragas hold all the sounds—of tears and of blood, of wails of despair, and of knives being whetted. I visited Hira Mandi with Bari sahib, of course, but also on my own. The whores were always there, but I would also chat with the pimps, the flower sellers, and the paan vendors. They would greet me joyously, 'Manto bhai is here, now we'll have some fun.' And, thanks to your blessings, my friend, no one could match me when it came to having fun. When the fun died down though, I saw that the barren patch of land within Manto had not changed; not a single blade of grass had grown on it. But then I always knew there would never be grass on that fallow land. Observe everything as long as you live, and write down what you see. You may find oases within the stories, it's just that they will be full of thorns and thistles.

We used to visit Hira Mandi the way badshahs did. Let me tell you what happened one day. Bari sahib and I had buttonholed the writer Balwant Garg. Since Balwant was an out-and-out innocent, we didn't tell him where we were taking him. We hired a Peshawari tonga. 'Where are we going, Manto bhai?' Balwant kept asking.

Bari sahib twinkled a smile. 'You can't be a writer if you spend all your time in a newspaper office, Balwant,' I told him. 'Let's misbehave a little tonight.'

— Meaning?

— Balwant, for a change do as Manto says tonight. He cannot take you all the way to hell, after all, you'll still remain at a slightly higher level. Bari sahib burst out in laughter.

Our tonga stopped in front of Shahi Masjid. The marketplace for live flesh was right next door. Darkness had fallen, and whores, pimps, flower sellers and kulfi vendors lined the road. The aroma of tikka kebab pervaded; strains from a sarangi wafted in on the breeze, a couple of lines from a thumri too. Grabbing my arm, Balwant said, 'Where have you brought me, Manto bhai?'

— Hira Mandi. Never heard of it?

He stared at me blankly.

— Are you afraid?

— No. Balwant gulped. 'You're with me, right?'

— Have faith, my friend, trust in Manto.

Meanwhile, Bari sahib had started bargaining with a Pathan pimp. Strange man! He couldn't stop haggling even for a good time. A fucking armchair revolutionary, he couldn't do anything without counting his pennies. That's why I couldn't stand the communist swine. As keen as anyone else on having a good time, they would even sneak out for a bit of fun, but with the hammer and sickle inscribed on their forehead—and they would haggle over everything. If you did anything outside their scheme of things, you were a reactionary. Pimps of the Revolution. Who gave you the responsibility of

making everyone equal? Only Sufi dedication can achieve that. This is the path of the fakir and the dervish, there's no room here for Communism. Commitment to equality for all is not for those whose objective is to seize power. Pardon me, my brothers, I have been talking drivel again; I'm a modernist, you see, I cannot even tell a story simply, the genie of lecturing never leaves me.

I told Bari sahib, 'I've told you a hundred times that if you want to haggle, do it only for yourself.'

— But these sons of bitches …

— Are you or I any less of a son of a bitch? Did you forget? Bari sahib withdrew into a shell when I used profanities.

When the Pathan pimp heard what I said he perked up. 'Come upstairs sahib, I have a terrific girl, prepared on a slow fire, ekdum dumpukht.'

It was our first time in that particular kotha. In a room on the first floor we saw a Pathan woman of about thirty-five, obviously the madame. Plump, a thick jasmine garland entwined in her hair, paan-reddened lips. Eminently pleasing, by any standards.

— What are you staring at, mian? She pretended anger.

I was no less of a devil. I played my piece too—a line of yours, Mirza sahib.

عشق مجه کو نہیں ،وحشت ہی سہی
میری وحشت تری شہرت ہی سہی

Without your love, I'll accept exile
Let my exile bring you fame

— Kyabaat, wonderful! Jabbar … Jabbar mian …

— Yes, malkin? The response came from within the house.

— We have guests. Bring the glasses.

The glasses were brought. I asked Jabbar mian to get some soda and tikka kababs. Since Balwant didn't eat meat, an omelette was brought for him. Jabbar took only ten minutes to make all the arrangements. Bari sahib had brought his Johnny Walker along. The whisky was poured into three glasses, along with soda and ice. I knew Balwant wouldn't drink. Offering one of the glasses to the madame, I told her, stroking her thigh, 'Have a drink, meri jaan.'

Her eyes pierced me like a dagger. Taking the glass, she said, 'Do you know what the phrase "meri jaan" means, janab?'

— I do.

— Tell me then.

— *Soorat aine mein tu dekh toh kya soorat hai, badzabani tujhe us mooh pein sazavar nahin.* Your face in the mirror is a memory of such pleasure, profanities do not befit this pair of lips.

— Mir sahib, isn't it?

— Yes, meri jaan.

— *Woh toh kal der talak dekhta idhar ko raha, humse hi hal-e-tabah apna dikhey nah gaya.* Oh, he kept looking at me so long, it was I who couldn't bear to see my plight.

— Mashallah! Leaning towards her, I kissed her feet.

— What are you doing, mian?

— Love is in the feet. I said with a smile.

— How so?

— Have you not seen how Meera's Giridharlal tends to Radha's feet? We humans move downwards, kissing the lips first; but Mohan climbs upwards, kissing the feet to begin with. That is why our love dies eventually, while his love becomes a veritable festival of joy.

— Subhanallah! Who is this angel visiting Hira Mandi this evening?

Bari sahib burst out laughing. —Look, Balwant, what a miracle, the devil has turned into an angel in Hira Mandi.

The 35-year-old whore had gripped my arm, her eyes misting over as though I myself was Meera's Giridharlal. 'Where are the girls?' I asked, clearing my throat.

She could not speak, disbelief surfacing in her eyes.

— Show us the girls. Are we supposed to pass the night like this? I finished my drink in a gulp.

As soon as the madame glanced at the Pathan pimp he disappeared, returning a little later with a young woman in a pink georgette sari. I observed her carefully. I noticed Balwant sizing her up too out of the corner of his eyes. She was quite skinny, her face painted garishly, with thick lines of kohl under her eyes. Winking at me, she asked—for the sake of saying something—'Where are you coming from?'

— From your mother's village.

— What? She stared at me with round eyes.

— Where have you come from?

— Er …

Leave alone talking to such women, you can't even sleep with them. I rejected her. The pimp brought several girls in succession. I didn't care for any of them. Bari sahib would be angry with me over this, every single time.

— What is it Manto, all we'll do is go to bed with them, what's all this interrogation for?

— You can go with one of them.

But I knew that even Bari sahib would not take any of them to bed without my approval.

The girl who came next was quite tall and bright; her smile could be called positively sensuous. But her eyes were hidden behind dark glasses. She sat before us as though she were reading the namaz. I quite liked her. I had questioned each of the others who had preceded her—none of them had been able to answer. Idiots, all of them. I felt this girl would succeed. 'Can you solve a riddle?' I asked.

— Yes, tell me.

— There was a woman named Bhuran. Her whims and fancies were different from everyone else's. One day she wrote a letter to Mirza Mazhar Jaan-e-Janna, 'I am restless for your love. But you love four people at the same time. I can never be that way. It is not right for a woman to love four people.' Can you tell me what Mirza sahib's reply was?

— It is far more religious to love four women rather than twelve.

I was astonished by her response. —How did you know?

The girl replied with a smile, 'A Sunni loves four people—he honours the four Khalifas. And a Shia loves twelve—he is led by a dozen Imams.'

— Where did you hear this story?

The girl smiled without answering. I liked her. How can you spend the night with a whore whom you cannot talk to? But why did she have dark glasses on in the evening? I put the question to her.

She was a glib talker. 'You are so handsome I am blinded, janab,' she answered.

— Kyabaat! Sleeping with you will take me to heaven, meri jaan.

— Let me go first then. Bari sahib shouted. —Give me the opportunity to visit paradise before you, Manto bhai.

— I will, but let me see the truth first. I pulled the girl's dark glasses off. Cockeyed, she was absolutely cockeyed. Returning her glasses, I said, 'If you hadn't put those glasses on, I would have gone to bed with you despite your squint. But I cannot tolerate lies, meri jaan. Get out of my sight, I cannot stand deception.'

This girl left as well. It was nearly eleven at night. More kebabs appeared. We had polished off five pegs each. As I was about to pour myself the sixth, the madame clutched my hand. 'No more, janab.'

— Why not?

— Do as she says, Manto bhai. Balwant told me. —She has your interest at heart.

— My interest at heart? You don't know these people, Balwant. She wants to keep the rest of the booze for the pimp. For heaven's sake, just tell me if you want some for him, I'll get you a full bottle. You don't know these bitches.

I took a sip, and the madame grabbed my hand again. —For God's sake, don't drink anymore, janab. I haven't seen anyone like you before.

— Really? There's no one as beautiful as you either in this world. I ran my hand over her stomach; she did not stop me. Kissing her neck, I said, 'You are Cleopatra. You are Helen. Did you know that? You didn't. Take it from Manto.'

I spent the night at her kotha. I have no idea when Bari sahib and Balwant left. The madame sat with her arms around me. I was in a drunken haze—her tears encircled me like a dead river. When my stupor left me in the morning, I found myself lying with my head in her lap, with her eyes fixed on mine. I had an urge to weep, I don't know why. Burying my face in her stomach, I sobbed loudly. She sat with her hand on my head, without asking a single question.

I took a bath at her kotha. She brought me a cup of tea and breakfast. With delight, I saw her real appearance for the first time. Her skin was pale now, but it was clear that her body had glowed like ivory and sandalwood once. Her eyes had dark circles under them, but these same eyes had once dazzled like emeralds. She was crumbling now, but once she had been as perfect as a chinar tree.

— What's your name? I asked.

— Kanta.

— When did you come here?

— I cannot remember.

— What do you remember, Kanta?

— Nothing, janab.

— Don't you remember anyone?

After a long silence, Kanta said, 'I remember Khushia at times.'

— Who's Khushia?

— My pimp. He used to bring customers for me.

— Is Khushia dead?

— I don't know.

— You don't know where he is?

— No.

— Then tell me about Khushia. I took her hand.

— Khushia misunderstood me.

— Why?

— Because I wasn't embarrassed in his presence. Why should I be? He was Khushia, after all, he belonged to my kotha.

— What did Khushia do?

— You'd better leave now, janab, you shouldn't be in this neighbourhood in the daytime. I need to sleep, too.

— Will you tell me about Khushia one day?

— I will. If you come back. But come alone, not with other people.

— Why not?

Kanta laughed—What can a whore have to say? She can only take her clothes off so that you can do whatever you like with her. Some people ask me my real name; some ask why I'm in this business. Pardon me, janab, I feel like pissing on these dogs' faces. You're here to fuck me, so fuck me. Why do you want to know me? You're here for an hour—feast your eyes on my body, do what you have to, get the hell out. But you'll come again, won't you? To this day I don't know why Khushia behaved the way he did, janab.

19

سبز ہوتی ہی نہیں یہ سر زمیں
تخمِ خواہش دل میں تو بوتا کیا ہے

These breasts will never give you a harvest
Why do you keep sowing the seeds of desire in them?

One morning, a dream made me shoot upright in bed with terror. My throat was parched, my hands and legs trembled uncontrollably, I tried to call for Kallu but no sound emerged. I couldn't forget this dream all my life. A caravan, a kafila, was wending its way through the desert, where a blue glow was visible everywhere. The camels and the people were not real—it was like a convoy of shadows. They didn't speak to one another. Only a collective, stricken cry was heard from the distance every now and then, as though a battle was in progress somewhere. I could make out that those cries were the sounds of encounters with death. I desperately wanted to talk to my fellow travellers. I had no idea where I was going as part of this caravan. Why was I even part of this group? 'Where are we going, janab?' I asked the person next to me.

He didn't answer.

A little later I asked another person, 'How much futher?' He didn't respond either.

Could these people not speak? Or wouldn't they speak to me? Why had they added me to their group then?

A dark shadow spread over my heart. I asked some of them for water, but they only looked at me, neither offering me water nor saying a word. I decided I would have to escape. I tried to turn my camel in a different direction, but it refused to be detached from the kafila. Finally it threw me off its back with a jerk. Falling on the sand, I saw the convoy moving ahead. But, incredibly, I didn't have the strength to get up, my brothers; the desert seemed intent on gobbling me up. Eventually a dense mass of darkness descended over me. Yes, a bird with enormous wings, its long neck covered in spikes. I had never seen such a bird before. Where had it come from, why was it swooping down on me? Trying to escape, I found myself unable to make the slightest movement. The bird perched on my chest, its wings outspread, staring at my face. It had no eyes, only sockets. Now its long beak came down on my chest, and the bird began to peck at me. It was intent on piercing my skin and consuming my marrow and my blood; it kept jabbing at me, tearing at my flesh …

That was when I woke up. To tell you the truth, Manto bhai, for the first time in my life, I was afraid. What did this dream mean? Was my day of reckoning at hand, then? Although I was a glutton, I could not eat all day. Every time I looked at food I saw the pointed beak of the murderous bird instead. Maybe Kallu had carried the information into the ladies' chambers, for Begum visited me in the

evening.

— I believe you haven't eaten all day. Are you not well?

— No, Begum.

— What is it then?

Conversation with Umrao Begum had virtually ceased, you know. But I wanted to tell her about the dream. Maybe she would be able to offer me some comfort, no matter how meagre. Men become helpless sometimes, Manto bhai; instead of seeking the hand of God they seek the company of a woman.

— A nightmare has made me nauseous all day.

— Tell me what you saw.

I described my dream to Begum. A twisted smile played on her lips. —You deserve this dream, Mirza sahib.

— Yes …

— You may not have eaten anything because you're nauseous, par sharaab to piya na? You've had a drink or two, haven't you?

I didn't respond.

— You're sunk in alcohol and gambling; what other dream can you possibly expect? Pleasant dreams are not for you, and you don't want them either.

I slapped myself mentally. Why did I have to tell Begum of my dream? Now I would have to hear what a deviant I was, and for someone who does not follow the Shariyat, all of life was a nightmare. I knew only one way to defend myself in such situations, and that was to dismiss the whole thing with a joke. This was the only resource at my disposal. I told Begum, 'Pray for me then, Hazrat Musa ki behan.'

— Pray for you? You don't believe in the Shariyat, you don't even read the namaz, leave alone keeping rozas. How can I pray for you? God alone knows what will happen to you …

With a smile I said, 'My afterlife will be no worse than yours. It will be better, in fact.'

— How do you know?

— I can see it.

— What can you see?

— You will be accompanied by shaven-headed holy men in your afterlife, dressed in blue, tooth-scrubbing twigs fastened at their waists, holding little pitchers of water, and wearing morose expressions.

— Really? Even Begum smiled. —And who will your companions be?

— Formidable, tyrannical kings, all of them. Fara'un, Nimrod. Swords in scabbards at their waists. With a waxed moustache, I will strut about with them. Angels will escort me on either side.

— Very well, that is how it shall be. Begum rose to her feet. —I'm going now. Do have something to eat at night. Drinking on an empty stomach isn't good.

— Begum?

— Yes?

— Is the Shariyat so strict that it's an act of infidelity to even listen to someone who does not follow it? Do you have time to listen to a story?

— Whose story?

— Shaikh Abu Sayeed's. A Sufi saint from Khorasan. One day the shaikh was asked by his students, who is the cleanest person in this city? The shaikh said, why, it's Lokman, of course, is there a man as

clean as him? His disciples were astonished. Lokman was a lunatic, his hair was matted, he was dressed in a dirty, tattered robe, he uttered profanities constantly. The shaikh explained, 'Do you know who a clean man is? Someone who isn't involved with anything at all. That is why no one is as pure as Lokman.'

— Do you consider yourself just as pure?

— No, Begum. All I know is that there is no purity in following your Shariyat alone. If the truth only hammers away like a rock, it has no value for me. It's better to live with lies. None of us know where we will be on Judgement Day.

Begum remained standing for a while before disappearing into the mahalsarai.

I was twenty-nine then, Manto bhai. I was too young to see the Day of Judgement in a dream. It was that same year that my brother Yusuf Mirza went completely insane. My father-in-law Mahroof sahib had died the year before. My life was straightforward, financed by my paltry pension and a combination of charity and debt. But now I reached a dead end. Mahroof sahib's death had shaken my very core. My creditors began to pressure me to return their loans. Since I could not change the lifestyle I was used to, there was only one option— find some money somewhere, somehow. Increase your income Ghalib, I used to tell myself continuously, or how will you live? And if you cannot live the way you want to, how will you write ghazals? Has anyone in this world given birth to beauty on a starvation diet, Manto bhai?

I was now forced to take stock of the pension I received from the British. Don't imagine it was only for my own expenses—I also had to look after Yusuf Mirza's family, their servants and maids, and his children. Yes, it is true that I lived my own life of pleasure, but I never thought of abandoning anyone. How could I have? I existed only because they were around me. What power would I have if I lived in isolation? You know, don't you, Manto bhai, that even writing a couple of lines needs the company of other people.

I had never expected to get involved in financial matters. Of course I needed money to enjoy the pleasures of life, but whenever I considered such questions as how to get hold of it, it was like the sky falling on my head. But then, is there anything a man cannot do if put to it? He can float with the clouds like one of them; he can also burrow under the earth like a worm. So I had no choice but to examine the British pension closely.

I must explain to you in detail, or else you won't understand. We used to receive the pension granted by the British from Ahmed Buksh Khan, the Nawab of Loharu-Ferozepur. As it happened, he was my father-in-law Mahroof sahib's elder brother. My uncle Nasrullah Beg Khan used to work in the Maratha forces. After the Marathas lost to the British in 1803, his position became precarious. Ahmed sahib's sister was married to my uncle. Ahmed sahib was a polished gentleman. He was the emissary of the king of Alwar for talks with Lord Lake and the British. He was appointed the nawab of Loharu and Ferozepur by keeping both the king and the British happy at the same time. So he got my uncle a position in the British forces. After my uncle, Nasrullah Beg, died in 1806, Ahmed sahib convinced the British that it was their responsibility to look after Nasrullah Beg Khan's family. But he would perform the task on their behalf, provided they excused him the annual fee of Rs 25,000 that nawabs had to pay. In return, he would not only take care of Nasrullah Beg Khan's family's board and keep, he would also maintain a company of fifty cavalrymen for the British. Making enquiries about the pension, I discovered that while Rs 10,000 had been allotted for the upkeep of my uncle's family, only Rs 5,000 was actually provided. I used to get Rs 750, and there was nothing allotted to my brother. Meanwhile someone named Khwaja Haji, who had nothing to do with my uncle, was pocketing the rest of the money. It was a complex knot, and as you know, Manto bhai, no knot related to money can be

unravelled easily.

In the meantime, there was yet another problem. Ahmed Buksh Khan had two wives. Shamsuddin was his son by one of the wives, while Aminuddin and Ziauddin were his sons by the other. Aminuddin and I were great friends. In 1822, after seeking permission from the king of Alwar and from the British, Ahmed sahib had declared Shamsuddin his heir. The younger brothers were furious. Their mother was an aristocratic Muslim, while Shamsuddin's mother was a commoner from Mewat—how could Shamsuddin be the heir? Since Amin bhai was my friend, I got into trouble. Shamsuddin began to play games with me. Sometimes he gave me far less than my due, sometimes he didn't send my pension for successive months. After Mahroof sahib's death I was in dire straits. So many mouths to feed, and pressure from creditors on top of that. I wrote several letters to Ahmed sahib in the hope that he would make some arrangements. But there was no response from him. One day I arrived in Ferozepur. He was in a terrible state. His body riddled with sores, he somehow managed to sit up in bed. I told him directly, 'Either you must keep your word, janab, and ensure that we get our dues, or else I will appeal to the government.' Grasping my hand, he began to weep. I realized that Ahmed sahib had no say in the matter; he was bound by Shamsuddin's diktat. I decided to meet Shamsuddin and settle things once and for all. I would have to determine my own course of action now. The May 1806 agreement between Ahmed sahib and the British said that Nasrullah Beg Khan's heirs would have to be paid a stipend of Rs 10,000. But in another agreement dated June of the same year, the amount had been reduced to Rs 5,000. How was that possible? This was nothing but a counterfeit document. I met Shamsuddin. He spoke and behaved very courteously with me. When I brought up the subject of my visit, he said, 'I don't know anything about the agreement, Mirza.'

— Then what am I supposed to do?

— Whatever you think best.

— But you're not sending the money on schedule.

— Do you think the trees shower money on us?

— Meaning?

— I can only send the money if I get it myself.

— But how am I supposed to run my household?

— What household, yaar? Liquor, whores, ghazals—that's all. You're a great poet, we respect you, why do you hanker for money? Stay with us for a few days, enjoy yourself.

— Yusuf mian isn't well. He gets bouts of high fever, goes into a delirium.

— Leech him, get the poisoned blood out, he'll be fine.

— We'd all be fine if you'd only send the money on time, Shams bhai.

— Let's see. As the lord pleases.

That phrase 'as the lord pleases' was Shamsuddin's final nail in my coffin. I decided that I would have to go to the capital, Calcutta, and expose the counterfeit agreement in the royal court. I told myself, you flit about in the sky, Mirza, and write your ghazals, let's see you confront life for once and get your dues. Let's see what you're capable of, let's see you fly in the sky and keep yourself grounded in financial calculations at the same time. Only then will you prove to be a poet. If Mir sahib could take so much humiliation, if he could withstand the punishment of being branded a madman, only for loving Mehr Nigar, can you not do this? So many people are looking to you just for their two square meals a day; the beauty of the ghazal and of living a good life are not distinct from each other, Mirza. So I had to go to Calcutta to present my case at the court.

But how was I to go? I had no money; besides the cost of travel, I had to think of my family's daily

expenses. There was no telling when Shamsuddin would send money, after all. On top of which, Yusuf mian had gone raving mad. It was heartbreaking to look at him. He just sat by himself, muttering incomprehensibly. Frequently he disappeared for several days at a stretch before returning. Sometimes I'd be tempted to send him to the asylum. But they chained people there. Yusuf was very tender hearted, Manto bhai. I couldn't imagine him being chained and whipped. There's no one as helpless in the world as lunatics, people can do whatever they please with them; but do we have the right to do this? Is a person who always judges the world only with logic any less mad? He who lives on reason alone is a lunatic asylum himself. Who will explain, tell me, that the thinnest thread separates the insane from the sane? Some people can smother their dreams, others cannot; the one who cannot goes mad, while the other one behaves like a normal person, but what he has been hiding might well come out one day, for he has no control over it. That is why I used to think all human beings are on the road to madness, although no one can predict just when the djinn will possess them.

One day I pinned Yusuf down. Patting his head, I asked, 'Tell me what's bothering you.'

All he did was smile, as though he hadn't even understood what I said.

— Yusuf …

— Yes?

— What goes on in your head, Yusuf?

He didn't respond. I asked him many questions, but he only stared at me. I realized, Manto bhai, that no matter how powerful our reasoning is, we will never be able to penetrate a lunatic's mind. Their language is different from ours; he had forgotten our language.

I had no time for distractions. I simply had to go to Calcutta. The issue of the pension had to be settled once and for all. I would have to prove that the agreement of June was counterfeit. I went off to tell Begum the whole story.

— You'll go to Calcutta? I believe it's a long way away.

— But I must go. Or else we will starve to death one day.

— Will you succeed, Mirza sahib?

— I have to, Begum.

Putting her hand on mine, Umrao said, 'But quarrelling over money is not for you, Mirza sahib.'

— But that's what I must do now.

— And your ghazals?

— My ghazals! Are you concerned about my ghazals, Begum?

— No, but I do understand that they make you happy.

I saw Begum in a new light that day, my brothers. For the first time she spoke about my ghazals.

I said, 'You will have to take charge of things for a few years, Begum.'

— Don't worry. But this long journey will need money, where will you get it?

— I'll borrow.

— Again?

— I'll come back victorious, Begum. I'll clear all my debt.

— Will anyone lend you money anymore?

— Of course they will. I'm going to Calcutta to realize all my dues, Begum. I've been cheated for a long time, now they cannot cheat me anymore.

— But you love to be cheated, Mirza sahib. Begum smiled.

— No, Begum, no, no one can cheat me. Don't I have a stomach to feed even though I compose

ghazals?

Mathura Das, Darbari Mal and the rest placed bets on my chances of success when they heard I was going to Calcutta. I convinced them that I would definitely win the case, and they would get their money back with interest. It seemed exciting. So the game was gathering pace. I simply had to win. When I looked at myself in the mirror, I seemed to see a jackal. Let's go, mian, let's go to Calcutta and find out whether our fortune changes or not.

20

سب کہاں کچھ لالہ و گل میں نمایاں ہو گئی
خاک میں کیاصورتیں ہوں گی کہ پنہا ں ہو گئی

Only a few surface as lovely crimson flowers;
Other beautiful faces remain trapped below

Sit up, my brothers, I shall now tell you the story of those Rupmatis whose beauty and youth burnt to cinders in the brothels of Hira Mandi and Foras Road and GB Road. I have seen many lovely heroines in the Bombay film industry, but none of them could leave the slightest of marks in the book of my heart. And as for the housewives posing like brides in paintings, I couldn't even stand them. They were all the same— litanies of love on their lips but hollow inside, where there was nothing but calculations of money and gold and jewellery. For heaven's sake, love needs madness; you cannot measure out your love. Believe me, those girls from the brothels know what ishq is. Do you know why? They sell their bodies to earn their meals, so they know the difference between love and pretence. I learnt from them that heaven exists within women; but the very same women become bloodsuckers within the confines of family and society and a cloistered existence. Don't imagine I'm trying to ascribe greatness to them, my brothers. There's no such thing as greatness. All there is are the fragmented truths of life, and there too, one person's truth is of no use to another. Our lives would be much simpler if we could accept this. Their lives had become easier. Do you know why? Because they never pretended; they wanted to be seen as they actually were.

Let me tell you a story. I couldn't eat for several days after hearing it. I felt as though I was living in a tunnel with reptiles. One evening, a man was leaning against a lamp post on the road outside Kaiser Road. No, it wasn't me, don't try to match my life with every story I tell. His name? I've forgotten, but it does help to have a name, doesn't it? Very well, let's call him Sajjad. So Sajjad was waiting for a friend, glancing at his watch frequently because the time for the friend's arrival was long past. Swearing at his friend in his head, he was considering crossing the road for a cup of tea at the restaurant on the other side. Suddenly someone called out to him, 'Sahib … sahib …'

Sajjad saw a gaunt man. He was dressed in an oil-stained shirt and pyjamas that hadn't been washed in a long time. 'Were you looking for me?' asked Sajjad.

— Yes.

— What do you want?

— Nothing, huzoor. The man approached him, giving off an odour that made Sajjad's stomach churn. —Do you need anything, janab?

— Need what?

— A woman, huzoor.

After a silence, Sajjad said, 'Where's this woman of yours?'

As you can imagine, Sajjad had no requirement whatsoever of a woman at the time. But he enjoyed adventures. He had just this one failing—do something new, tread the path you're not familiar with.

— Nearby, huzoor. There, that house across the road …

— Such a big house?

— Yes, huzoor. The man smiled, revealing rotting teeth. —I'll go on ahead, follow me.

Trailing behind the pimp, Sajjad entered the building. It was better to call it a ruin. The plaster had flaked off, exposing a skeleton of bricks. Rusted iron pipes and garbage could be seen everywhere. It was pitch dark inside. He followed the pimp up the stairs. Halfway up the staircase, the pimp turned around and said, 'Just a minute, sahib. I'll be back in a minute.'

Sajjad waited. The pimp was nowhere to be seen. Spotting a light at the top of the stairs, he resumed his journey. When he was near the light, he heard the pimp's voice. 'Are you getting up or not, you bitch?'

A female voice was heard. —I told you I won't. Let me sleep.

— Get up. I'm warning you, if you don't …

— What can you do? Kill me. I can't get up now. Spare me this time.

— Get up, get up, my love. Don't be stubborn now, how will we survive if you behave this way?

— I don't want to survive. I'll starve to death. Let me sleep now.

— So you won't get up, you bitch?

— I've told you already. No, no, no!

— Don't shout. People will hear. Look, get up now. How long can it take? You'll earn forty rupees.

The woman burst into tears. —I beg of you. It's been so long since I've slept. Let me sleep a little today.

— Shut up! How long can it take? A couple of hours at most. You can sleep as much as you like afterwards.

There was silence after this. Sajjad tiptoed his way to the room where the conversation had been taking place and peeped through a crack in the door. A young woman was lying on the floor of the tiny room. There was nothing else in the room besides a set of utensils. The pimp was sitting next to her, massaging her feet. Laughing, the pimp said, 'Get up now. You'll be back in a couple of hours, after all. You can sleep as much as you want after that. I won't disturb you anymore, my love.'

— My love? The woman laughed. —Bloody swine. She jerked upright.

Sajjad tiptoed back downstairs. He wanted to run away from this city, this country. But go where? And why should he go? Who was this woman? Why was such cruelty being inflicted on her? What power did the pimp have over her? When he peeped in, the light had seemed very bright for such a small room. At least a hundred watts. Even after he returned to the darkness the intensity of the light seemed to prick his eyelids. Sajjad wondered how anyone could sleep in such bright light.

He heard footsteps a little later. A pair of shadows appeared beside him. 'Check for yourself, sahib,' said the pimp with a smile.

— I have already.

— She's all right, isn't she?

— All right.

— Forty rupees.

— Taking the notes out of his pocket, Sajjad tucked them into the pimp's hand. —Count them.

— Fifty, huzoor.

— Keep fifty.

— Salaam, sahib.

Sajjad wished he had a large rock at hand to crush the pimp's head with.

The pimp mumbled, 'Take her, sahib. But don't hurt her too much.'

Without answering, Sajjad went out on the road with the woman. There was a tonga nearby. He climbed into it with her. He heard the pimp's voice again, saying, 'Salaam, sahib.' Sajjad wondered why he hadn't found a large rock.

Sajjad took the woman into a hotel room. For the first time, he scanned her from head to toe. Her eyelids were puffy. She wouldn't look him in the eye. She seemed like a dilapidated old building which would collapse at any moment.

'Look at me,' said Sajjad.

— What do you want?

— Nothing. Talk to me.

Her eyes were a fiery red. She stared at Sajjad with eyes that said nothing.

— What's your name?

— I have no name.

— Where are you from?

— Where would you like me to be from?

— Why are you talking this way?

The woman seemed to wake up suddenly. —Do what you have to quickly. I have to go back soon.

— Go where?

— Where you brought me from.

— You can go right now.

— Do what you want to. Why do you talk so much, sahib?

— I want to understand you.

She flared up. —There's no need to understand me, sahib. Do what you have to so that I can leave.

Sajjad sat down next to the woman and put his hand on her head. She threw it away with a jerk. — Don't needle me, sahib. I haven't slept in a long time. I haven't been able to sleep since the day I came here.

— Go to sleep here.

Her eyes grew redder. —I didn't come here to sleep. This isn't my house.

— That house, is that your home?

— Spare me your bakwas, sahib. I have no home. Do what you have to. Or else take me back and get your money back from that fucker.

There was no more conversation. Sajjad took the woman back to the building.

No, my brothers, the story doesn't end here. Does any story ever end so easily? Even the story has a demand of its own, doesn't it? It's not an orphan who can be abandoned anywhere you want to.

The next evening, Sajjad was telling his friend about the previous day's events over a cup of tea at a restaurant near the same Kaiser Park. Very upset, the friend asked, 'Was she young?'

— I don't know. I didn't even get a good look at her. All I keep wondering is why I didn't get a

heavy rock from the road and smash the pimp's head in.

Sajjad didn't enjoy his friend's company that evening. He had not yet been able to shrug off the previous day's incident. After his friend left, he went out and stood on the pavement, looking around for the pimp. The dilapidated building was directly across the road. Sajjad entered, climbing the stairs on tiptoe. Eventually he reached the spot outside the room with the dazzling light. There was no sound anywhere. Sajjad peeped in through a crack in the door. Blinded by the brightness of the light, he saw a woman lying on the floor, her face covered by a scarf. Was she dead? Entering the room, Sajjad realized she was sleeping. And then he saw the man, lying on the floor nearby in a pool of clotted blood. A bloodstained brick lay next to him. Blood was still oozing from his head.

Sajjad was never seen near Kaiser Park again. He had to be admitted to a lunatic asylum later. I have no idea what happened to him eventually.

The women of the kothas are very strange. Even after all they went through, survival was like a drug for them. What was Saugandhi's life like? Madhava had betrayed her day after day; when she realized this, she kicked him out, but she didn't try to kill herself. Why should she? No one had offered her even a bit of love—she was simply in love with her own life.

What's that, my brothers? Ah yes, you want to hear Khushia's story. That's true, I didn't tell you about her. I was thinking of telling you Saugandhi's tale. Very well, let's talk about Khushia instead. I was quite interested in him. Why did he misunderstand Kanta? To find out, I visited Kanta one day in her kotha, alone.

— Ah, it's Manto sahib! But where are your friends today?

— You told me to come alone.

Kanta laughed. —Did I tell you to come alone? But what do I have left to give you?

— You have so much, Kanta. How many girls can twirl their waists like you?

Kanta burst into laughter. —So you're here to see me twirling my waist?

Running my hand over her stomach, I said, 'This gosht has a unique taste.'

— Stop your nonsense. All you're good for is words.

— I can't help it, Kanta. These one-second episodes don't fulfil me. I want long stories, which will go on for a long time, robbing me of my sleep and rest.

— Then why do you come here, Manto sahib?

— In search of stories. You'll tell me Khushia's story today.

— Khushia?

— That's why you asked me to come alone. Don't you remember? Send for the drinks, and let's listen to Khushia's story over a glass or two.

We went up to the terrace.

— Khushia was very nice. I couldn't even have imagined that he would behave so strangely.

— What did Khushia do?

— He was the one who used to get hold of clients for me. He'd happily do anything I asked him to. I had only just entered this business. Sometimes he'd stare at me in a way that made me think he was suffering because of me. I felt sorry for him too. Such a lovely boy—he couldn't have been more than twenty-seven or twenty-eight—forced to survive by pimping for a brothel. How well Khushia could tell stories.

— What stories did he tell?

— It was he who told me the story of Yusuf and Zulekha.

— Hmm. And then?

— What?

— Go on, Kanta.

— One afternoon there was a knock on my door. I was bathing. Who is it, I asked loudly. Khushia, it's me, Khushia. Oh, Khushia. But why at this hour? This isn't the time for clients. Wrapping a small towel around my wet body, I opened the door. Khushia's eyes changed when he saw me. 'What is it, Khushia?' I asked. 'I was having a bath. Oh no, don't go away, come inside. You could have brought a cup of tea since you were coming. Ramu ran away this morning.' Khushia couldn't look at me, but he didn't know where to look either. That was how simple he was, Manto bhai. After standing there a long time, staring at the floor, he said, 'Go finish your bath. How could you open the door? I could easily have come back later.'

— You were embarrassed too, weren't you, Kanta?

— No. Why should I be embarrassed? It was only our Khushia. Why should I be embarrassed by him?

— Had Khushia ever seen you this way?

— No. But Khushia was one of us. He wasn't a client, after all.

— And then?

— Do you think Khushia went mad, Manto bhai?

— Why?

— He went away. Evening became night, but Khushia didn't come. I had no client that day. Suddenly someone knocked on the door. When I opened the door I found a stranger. 'Will you come?' he asked. 'Sahib's waiting in the car outside.'

— Bring him here.

— He won't visit a kotha.

— Why not?

— I told you, he doesn't visit kothas. Come along if you want to. How much? Advance payment.

— Did you go? I asked Kanta.

— What could I have done? No Khushia, no clients. I had to earn, didn't I? Those who won't visit kothas actually pay more. What choice did I have? The taxi was parked on the main road. The pimp helped me in and took his cut immediately. The taxi began to move.

I didn't recognize him at first in the darkness inside the vehicle. When my eyes adjusted to the light, I saw it was Khushia. —You? Khushia?

— Have you got your money?

— Khushia …

— Shut up! Now that you've got your money you must do as I tell you.

— What did Khushia do?

— Nothing. After we had driven a long way, he made me get out of the taxi.

— And then?

— I had no idea where I was. I stood there by myself. I fell asleep on the road. When it was morning, I returned to the kotha. Can you tell me why Khushia behaved this way with me, Manto bhai?

I couldn't explain to Kanta that evening. I often thought of Khushia afterwards. Vengeance is a primal instinct for human beings. Khushia wanted revenge. He might have been a pimp for a brothel, but he was a male too. Kanta's view of him as her pimp had made her forget this truth, which was why

she could be practically naked in his presence and still say, 'But you're our Khushia, why should I be embarrassed?'

The male ego is a terrible thing, my brothers; when it rears its head it wants to destroy the very world. Do you know why? Because it's a glass doll. Throw it on the floor and it'll shatter. So it becomes furious at the slightest threat. Don't imagine it's limited to men; women have it too. Do you know what the male ego is: I'm the last word, nothing can be greater.

For heaven's sake, who gave you the authority to have the last word? You want to have the last word in a world whose beginning or ending we have no idea of? That was why I couldn't tolerate the progressive writers. They had seen nothing of life, they would make up their stories, and then claim theirs was the last word. Are you a renowned prophet whose statement I must accept as the last word on life?

21

تاکے یہ دشت گردگی کب تک یہ خستگی
اس زندگی سے کچھ تمہیں حاصل ہے ،میر کہیں

How much longer of this vagrant's life?
Why live like this, why not die?

I'm telling you what Indra, the king of the Gods, told young Rohit; listen closely. This is about giving up everything and taking your life out to the road. How many people can actually do this? If we can do it even once, Manto bhai, the opaque film before our eyes will be cleared. And then we'll know the kind of divine sport, the leela, that we're part of. Yes, let me tell you about Indra, the king of the Gods. 'Remember,' he told Rohit, 'he who cannot leave his home and go out on the road will never find happiness. A prolonged existence within human society turns even good men into sinners. That is why I say, make the road your home; discover your life through travel. The voyager's feet are like flowers, his soul blooms every day and gives birth to a bounty of fruits. The weariness of the road purges all his sins all the way down to the roots. So, travel, Rohit, do not stop.'

My life was also enriched with fruits and flowers during the three years that I travelled, away from Shahjahanabad. I suffered in no small measure during this time, and swallowed a good deal of humiliation as well. Eventually, I couldn't even settle the matter of my pension. But still I spent these three years in a wonderful picture gallery. I was a different man when I returned to Dilli; do you know why? Before this, I had blamed other people, even the lord himself, for my misfortunes. But the Ghalib who came back to Dilli after travelling across different lands had realized that you must accept life in whatever manner it comes to you. If you have to die like a worm, die that way, but complaining will not fetch you anything extra.

No, don't become restive, my brothers, I *am* going to tell you the tales of my travels now. At times I thought of writing an account of this period in Farsi. But I didn't get the time. More significantly, after returning to Dilli I was ensnared in so many different webs that my fingers refused to move when I considered writing. But had I been able to write about those days, I could have opened up a new horizon in Farsi prose. Come, let me also taste Mirza's account of his travels once more with all of you.

The spring of 1827. Mirza Ghalib left Shahjahanabad in search of his fortune. His ancestors used to travel with a company of horsemen, raising a cloud of dust, whirling their swords—the journey of valiant soldiers. And Mirza Ghalib was only going to Calcutta to plead for his pension, accompanied by just two or three servants. He lumbered on, sometimes on horseback, sometimes in a bullock cart. Spend the night at an inn, and if you don't find one, you must make arrangements to pitch tent by the road and camp right there. The days passed somehow, with the road stretching endlessly before him,

but the nights were a mass of black, with no trace of the road visible. How long can you converse with your servants? So you speak to yourself. And you know what talking to yourself means, my brothers. With each of your sentences you will deceive yourself, erecting towers of dreams that will crumble the very next moment.

Mirza fell quite ill when he reached Kanpur. But there was no doctor to be found. So there was no choice but to carry on to Lucknow. Mirza wasn't keen on visiting Lucknow during this trip, but many of Lucknow's eminent citizens had requested him to visit their city when they had heard that he was on his way to Calcutta. Mirza was no less attracted by Lucknow. Dilli had long lost its lustre. Whatever was left of Mughal culture was all centred in Lucknow. Poets like Sauda and Mir sahib had long abandoned Dilli for the capital of Awadh. Thinking it over, Mirza decided to pay the city a visit after all. He was bound to receive a gift from the nawab, and he might even earn some money reciting his ghazals at a mushaira or two; all this would help pay for the journey. A palanquin was ordered; Mirza crossed the Ganga in it and arrived in Lucknow.

How can I describe it, my brothers? I do not have words for the Lucknow that he reached. All I can say is that it was the Baghdad of Hindustan. And what can I say of Lucknow by night? You wanted to hold it in your arms every moment. Every night was a night with a new face, nights for staying awake with desire, like the unfinished kisses that remain after every single kiss. Do you know who the finest poet in the city was at the time? Nasikh sahib. He wrote nothing but ghazals. You might just find an echo of Nasikh sahib in my early ghazals. He invited me home. I asked him, 'Can I not hope to visit the nawab, Nasikh sahib?'

— Those days are gone, mian.

— Meaning? Are you saying that the nawab will not meet me?

— You have to climb several rungs these days before reaching him.

— Such as?

— The nawab's prime minister, his Wazir-e-Azam, is Motamud-Daulah Agha Mir. The next minister in line is Subhan Ali Khan. You have to earn his pleasure before you can get to Mir sahib. And only when Mir sahib desires it can you appear before the nawab. After all, this isn't the era of Nawab Asaf-ud-Daulah, who had invited Sauda sahib to his court. Begum Shamsunnisa was a poetess too, a shaira. Do you know what she wrote as a riposte to a ghazal of the nawab's?

— Tell me, janab.

خوشی دل میں ہم اپنے کم دیکھتے ہیں
اگر دیکھتے ہیں تو غم دیکھتے ہیں
نہ قطرہ کوئی خوں کا باقی ہے دل میں
نہ آنکھوں کو ہم اپنی نم دیکھتے ہیں
تُو آئے نہ آئے یہیں ہم تو ہر شب
تیری راہ تا صبح دم دیکھتے ہیں

I see little happiness in my heart
If I find anything at all it's pain
Not a drop of blood remains in my heart
Nor is there a tear in my eye

Whether you come or not, I will still
Be here every night till I see dawn

— Kyabaat, janab, wonderful! I lost a piece of my heart.

— No one loses a piece of his heart in the times of our Nawab Ghaziuddin Haider, mian.

— Dear God! Still, will you please try? Just in case this poor man gets a chance to earn a little money.

— I know, mian, you have to travel a long way. Let me try. First you have to go to Subhan Ali.

I did succeed in getting an audience with Subhan Ali. I didn't have enough time to compose a qaseeda for him; I only managed to write an encomium in prose. But you know what, I didn't enjoy writing qaseedas, but still I had to. To tell the truth, half my life has been wasted writing poetry in praise of nawabs and badshahs and their ministers, Manto bhai. Is a poet born to write verses eulogizing these asses? But what could I do, for the sake of my belly I had to drag my poetry down to the level of garbage. But this cannot be the way of the poet. I knew that I had deviated from the honourable path of poetry. But there's something you have to observe. Compared to the way in which I poured my heart and soul into the first few lines, by the time I got to the encomium I merely said a few perfunctory things. After reading my prose, Subhan Ali sat grimly, striking up conversations with other people, but not even looking at me.

— Janab.

— Do you have an appeal to make, mian?

— I'd like to pay my respects to the nawab bahadur.

— Pay them here, this is the kingdom of the nawab bahadur.

— Please arrange for a visit to his court, huzoor.

— Let me see what I can do.

— But I have a couple of things to say, janab.

— Now what?

— I am a shair from Shahjahanabad. I hope I will receive the respect due to me at the court. You know very well how the elders look after poets.

— We'll see …

— And …

— What, there's more?

— I cannot offer the nawab bahadur a gift. I'll have to be excused.

Subhan Ali looked at me with round eyes. Then, chewing his paan deliberately, he said, 'Go back home, mian. How can you expect to meet the nawab bahadur without a gift? Don't you know the etiquette of a court visit?'

Mirza did not get the opportunity to meet Nawab Ghaziuddin Haider. He had harboured hopes of some sort of reward if only he could have appeared in the nawab's presence. Subhan Ali poured cold water on those hopes. Still, Mirza stayed on in Lucknow for some time more. The mushaira nights of Lucknow did not turn him away, after all; they revelled in praise of his ghazals, the conversations and discussions helping Mirza realize that even if moribund Delhi did not understand his worth, the heart of Lucknow had responded to his poetry.

And then back on the road. I reached Kashi via Banda and Allahabad. Zulfikar Ali, the nawab of Banda, even contributed to my travelling expenses. I simply could not stand Allahabad, Manto bhai. A wayward city, with no culture to speak of. I was able to take a deep breath only after reaching Kashi. It

was an extraordinary city of lights. It felt like the kind of city that I had been trying to reach all this time. Everyone called it Benaras, Benaras, I hated the name, did we have to use that name just because the British did? Call it either Varanasi, or Kashi. The city's real identity was under the name of Kashi. Renting a house in Naurangabad, I spent about a month in Kashi. If only I could have lived my entire life in this city of the supreme God Maheshwar, I used to tell myself as I sat on the steps of the Dasaswamedh Ghat or the Manikarnika Ghat. I wouldn't have become a beggar at the mercy of nawabs and badshahs. I wouldn't have written ghazals. I could have spent the life of an itinerant man, wandering about on the streets of Kashi, listening to the songs of the courtesans, watching the rituals at dawn and dusk, gazing at the Ganga flowing by from the steps of the ghats.

Don't be annoyed, my brothers, I have to talk about Kashi in some detail. I believe that he who has not seen Kashi even once in his lifetime has not even been born yet. Have you ever been to Kashi, Manto bhai? Never? Then you will certainly be reborn, for only then will you realize that you had actually been born on earth. Your previous life? Oh no, Manto bhai, it was just a dream. Believe me, you haven't been born yet. Only when you've seen Kashi will you know what life and death mean.

You could say Kashi is the entire world. Kashi comprises very pilgrim spot and every drop of sacred water in India—it is the city of light, my brothers. The supreme God Shiva lived here. Kashi was the kind of illumination that makes everything visible. No, don't expect to see anything spectacular in this light—you will only see everything that exists on this earth clearly. Moreover, only if we die in Kashi are we released from the cycle of rebirth. I learnt so many aspects of Kashi's greatness; I'm a worm from hell, I have forgotten all of this long ago. But yes, I have not forgotten the story of Manikarnika's birth, Manto bhai. On the evenings that I didn't go to the brothels—or even on the evenings that I did—I used to go and sit on the steps of the Manikarnika Ghat. Manikarnika is the spot at which the creation and the destruction of the world have merged. Do you know why? The God Vishnu had created a sacred pool here at the very beginning of time, and here too is situated the great cremation ground, where everything will burn to ashes at the end of time. Do you want to hear how Manikarnika was born, my brothers? Only in our country is it said that even listening to a story of good deeds can mitigate your sins.

There was a time when … no, I'm wrong, time had not even been created. There was only darkness and a torrent of water. There was no sun or moon—where would the stars or planets spring from? There was no such thing as day or night. There was no sound or smell or touch or taste or form—nothing. There was just him, eternal Brahma, who cannot be reached or touched in any way whatsoever. But how long was he to live alone amidst this infinite silence, this impenetrable darkness? So he created a God. This was Shiva. Then Shakti was born from a part of Shiva's body, she was both nature and illusion. Together they created a piece of land ten miles in length—Kashi. One day, Shiva and Shakti thought of creating one more entity, who would in turn create the earth and look after it as well. That was when Vishnu was born. Shiva and Shakti instructed Vishnu to create the earth and everything on it.

Vishnu began a strict penance. With his Sudarshan Chakra, his divine wheel, he created a lotus pool, which was filled by his own perspiration. Frozen into stone on the bank of the circular pool, he remained sunk in meditation. Five hundred thousand years passed in the twinkling of an eye. Why are you gaping, my brothers? Millions and billions of years were like moments to them. It was extraordinary.

One day, Shiva and Shakti noticed Vishnu as they were passing that way. He was blazing like a flame under the effect of his intense meditation. Shiva told him to ask for a boon, whereupon Vishnu said, I ask for nothing more than your proximity, O Lord. Shiva nodded with such joy at Vishnu's

devotion that the ornament in his ear—the manikarnika—was shaken loose, falling into the water of the pool. 'So be it,' Shiva told Vishnu, adding that this circular pool would henceforth be known as Manikarnika, after the ornament in his ear. The ghat beside the pool acquired the same name. It is in the cremation ground next to this ghat that human beings offer their physical bodies to the hands of death, and then ascend to heaven in another body. I used to sit on the steps of Manikarnika Ghat till midnight, Manto bhai, watching the flames licking at one corpse after another. I would hope that, were I to be born again, my body should be burnt on just such a pyre, so that I might merge into space. There were so many stories that I heard from people. One of them said, it is better to be an ass on the roads of Kashi or fly in its skies like a bird than reign as a king elsewhere.

No, my brothers, I haven't come here only to tell you about death. No account of Kashi can be complete without telling you of what lies on the other side of death, which is desire. Desire is not just for the woman's body, it exists in music and dance and in the very touch and fragrance of the air, in everything. Our lust and longing have so many stories about them. Kashi's courtesans were incomparable, Manto bhai, whether you talk of beauty or of the expression of love. I had heard of a courtesan from the times of the Buddha. What she used to charge for a single night was the equivalent of a single day's taxes paid to the king of Kashi. Alongside death, this was a different Kashi, its desiring body daubed with soothing sandalwood ointment. This Kashi was a woman. Why else would the sage Agastya have been in such a state on leaving Kashi? He had been forced to go away from Kashi to the southern parts of India. Even when he wandered about on the banks of the Godavari, he could not overcome the sorrow of his separation from Kashi. Embracing the northern wind, he would ask, tell me how my Kashi is. It was in Kashi that I wrote for someone:

پھر کچھ ایک دل کو بے قراری ہے
سینہ جوائے زخم کاری ہے

My heart in turmoil again
is looking for an assassin

Pardon me, Manto bhai, I don't remember her name, but the dagger was wedged in my heart till the day I was buried. She told me so many stories; to tell the truth, I used to visit her for her fragrance and her stories, not to sleep with her. She told me about the epic poem *Kuttaneemat*. Have you heard of Damodar Gupta? He was the prime minister to Jayapirh, the king of Kashmir. He wrote *Kuttaneemat* during his advanced years. The oldest of the sexual manuals after Vatsayana's *Kamasutra*. The story in this poem is set in Kashi. What sort of a city was it? Pardon me, my brothers, it is impossible to describe this city in our mangy tongue. Imagine Damodar Gupta amidst us today, describing the beauty of Varanasi and her ladies of the night. Now hear it in his own words:

— All hail Madandeva, the lord and master of the desire that is gathered in the glance from the corner of the eye of a woman reddened by passion, the desire that makes Madan eager to kiss the lotus mouth of his wife Rati repeatedly like the bee.

Enriched by an abundance of wealth and beauty, the jewel of the entire world, Varanasi is luminous with a gathering of sages who have acquired knowledge of God. The majesty of this city is so resplendent in tradition that, although its citizens are addicted to partaking of the fruits of prosperity, it is not impossible for them to attain the company of Mahadeva, arraigned against the backdrop of the moon in all the glory of his matted locks. The ladies of the night of the city of Varanasi are bedecked in a profusion of gold ornaments. They are affluent and always spend their time in the company of a

multitude of suitors. Their bodies are as tender and beautiful as that of Pashupati, the lord of all creatures. The painted flags fluttering atop the sky-kissing pinnacles of the temples to the Gods make the heavens as beautiful as flower gardens. Wandering hither and thither, the ladies of the night have turned the earth sanguine with the scarlet imprint of the soles of their feet. The ground appears to be covered with lilies. The air rings with the tinkling sounds of their ornaments, distracting students from their lessons, forcing lapses in concentration that their teachers are unable to rectify.

Just as the city of Amravati in heaven, inhabited by Gods and Goddesses, is adorned by the pomp and grandeur of the Nandanvan and served by numerous soldiers of the Gods, so too is the city of Varanasi occupied by many cultured individuals, and, gratified by the service of the flowing Ganga, it reigns like another Amravati in the middle of the world made by the creator of the universe.

Now Damodar Gupta speaks of Malati. Listen closely, my brothers, for we lost this epic a long, long time ago.

— In this selfsame Varanasi there lived a lady of the night named Malati. Just like the enviable physical prowess of Kamdeva, Malati was the name of the most enviable ornament of the sisterhood of prostitutes. Just as female snakes in their pits are overcome by sorrow at the sight of the Garuda, so too are luxuriant harlots overcome by jealousy at the sight of Malati. She proved irresistible to the hearts of the wealthiest among men in the same way that Parvati, daughter of Himalaya, had proved irresistible to the heart of Mahadeva, the God of the Gods. As the Mandar mountain was bound by the coils of the Sheshanaga after the churning of the ocean, so too were the eyes of the sensual constantly bound to Malati. Like the demon Andhakasura poised at the tip of Shiva's trident, Malati too was positioned at the top of all the ladies of the night. She was soft-spoken, playful, loving, partial to humour, and adept at conversation. One day, as Malati was walking around on her terrace, she heard a song:

Discard now, o temptress,
Your beauty and maddening youth
Learn, instead, with care the art
Of stealing the lustful heart

Malati told herself, 'The singer is advising me as a friend should. I must now seek the counsel of Bikarala, who is experienced in all the matters of the world, in whose home amorous men spend all their hours.'

Do you know who Bikarala was, Manto bhai? She was an aged whore. Her teeth had fallen, her skin was sagging, her breasts had shrivelled, and she had only a few hairs left, all white. But all the whores surrounded her. Why? For advice on how to select a worthy man, on how to steal his heart. When I heard this, I felt as though all living lust and desire had arrived at the door of death; only death could instruct them how to get pleasure from life. And so even a prostitute like Malati had to go to Bikarala.

Kothas to indulge sexual desire on one side, the Manikarnika Ghat of death on the other—only Kashi could wear both of these together. I heard an unusual qissa about the sage Narada. This was a story about mystic agony; a story where several lives seemed to have passed in a dream. Lust and desire and death are all mingled here. You won't understand mystic agony, my brothers, unless I tell you the story about Narada. One day Brahma instructed Narada to take a dip in the Ganga. As soon as he emerged from the water, do you know what he saw? A wondrously beautiful woman. They were married; they had children, grandchildren too. Then one day, there was a pitched battle between the father and the husband of the woman. Both of them died in the battle, as did several of the woman's children. The woman joined her husband on his pyre to die alongside him. The flames were lit, but how strangely cold it was inside, as though she were standing under water. Narada saw that he had only just emerged from

the river. Had all this happened in such a short time? This is the miracle of Kashi, Manto bhai. Do you know what Mahadeva, the God of Gods, told his consort Parvati? The joy I experience in Kashi cannot be derived from any yogi's heart, Parvati, not even from Mount Kailash or Mount Mandar. There are only two eternal forms in this world that I love, Parvati. You, my Parvati, my Gauri, who is the mistress of all the arts; and this Kashi. There is no other place for me besides Kashi. In Kashi is my happiness, in Kashi is my exile. We will live in Kashi eternally.

I had no wish to depart from this city of lights. But I was travelling to make an appeal for my pension, I had to go to Calcutta. How else was I to earn a living? Those faces in the haveli at Shahjahanabad were all looking to me for survival. And then there were the creditors. I could easily have stayed on in Kashi. But the creditors would have put my family out on the street. I may not have loved Umrao Begum, but I could not allow her honour to be ground in the dust. Meanwhile, the lovely woman from the brothel at Kashi wouldn't let me go either, telling me repeatedly, stay here, mian, I will happily spend my entire life with you. But who would give me money in Kashi, Manto bhai? I knew only too well that love always ran out when money did. Even the woman who was full of love for me would not hesitate to kick me out when I became a pauper. I bid farewell to Kashi with the memory of only one person. I'm very sleepy today, my brothers, I will tell you about him another time. How can I tell you about Sant Kabir in just a few words? Just like Kashi, he has been living eternally. I could not have met him otherwise.

22

رو میں ہے رخش عمر کہاں دیکھئے تھمے
نہ ہاتھ باگ پر ہے، نہ پا ہے رکاب میں

The horse of life gallops on, let's see where it'll stop
My hands are not on the reins, nor my feet in the stirrups

You went to Calcutta, Mirza sahib, and Bombay called me. I was sitting in Amritsar without any work whatsoever. After my father's death even the responsibility for looking after my mother fell on me. But we had no income. We lived on bibijaan's savings, but how long would they last? Unless I started earning, both mother and son would have to starve to death. Suddenly fortune smiled on us. Nazir Ludhianvi summoned me from Bombay. Come and see me in Bombay immediately. Bibijaan burst into tears when I told her. 'How will you go to Bombay alone, beta? Do you know Bombay? I've heard it's a very big city. Who's going to look after you?'

Yes, my elder sister Iqbal did live in the neighbourhood of Mahim in Bombay, but her husband couldn't stand me. He had never let me enter their home.

— What will I do in Amritsar, bibijaan? I won't get a job here. Something or the other is bound to turn up in Bombay. And since Nazir sahib himself has called me …

— I've heard your sister say people don't spare even a moment for one another in that city, beta …

— What's wrong with that? Let me make an attempt at least, bibijaan.

I was twenty-four then. Leaving bibijaan in the hands of the lord, I responded to the call of Bombay. If I hadn't seen Bombay, my brothers, I would never have known the variety of methods that people in this world use for survival. No other city has the kind of disparities that exist between the upper and lower levels of Bombay. In the upper storeys, money flies around all the time; there are dazzling lights and glamour everywhere. And downstairs there is a matching degree of hunger, darkness, murder. But there are secret passages between the two levels too. Extraordinary stories, all of them.

Nazir Ludhianvi put me to work. I became the editor of his weekly magazine *Musawar*. The salary was forty rupees a month. I was delirious with joy. It was like having the bloody moon in my hands. I made arrangements to live in a room at the office, but it didn't prove convenient. Because I lived in the office, Nazir sahib began to disturb me at all hours. How could I explain to the man that I had not been born to slave away at a newspaper? I had to do my own reading and my own writing; most important, I wanted to be left alone. So I decided that I would have to rent a place to stay in.

My monthly earnings were forty rupees. You couldn't get decent accommodation in Bombay at that price. I moved into a shack, a kholi, with a monthly rent of nine rupees. Some shack it was! Only if you saw it would you realize how hard it was to tell whom it was meant for—a human or a rat. Forty

cubbyholes in a ramshackle two-storeyed building that never got any sunlight. It was perpetually damp, and you needed lights even in the daytime. Mosquitoes, rats, insects—you name them and they were there. It was in that kholi in Bombay that I first saw dozakh, Mirza sahib. Even if you were to die in one of those kholis no one would come asking after you. No one knew how many men and women and children occupied those forty shacks. Just two bathrooms with broken doors for the whole lot of us to shit and piss and bathe in. I would wake up before everyone else, bathe and get out. I'd be in office all day and return late at night, roasting in the fatigue of the day and the heat of the shack as I fell asleep.

Since I'm telling you about my days in this slum, I must tell you Muhammad bhai's story too. Of all the unusual people I met in Bombay, Muhammad bhai was unique. My kholi was in Arab Gali. I must explain. Foras Road was famous for its whorehouses. A bend in the road after Foras Road led to Safed Gali. It was full of cafes and restaurants. There were brothels everywhere, with whores of all castes and creeds from India. Beyond Safed Gali was a cinema hall, Playhouse, where films ran round the clock. A man standing outside would be shouting constantly, 'Come in, come in, only two annas for a first-class ticket.' He would even force uninterested people into the hall. There was another interesting breed there—the masseur, the maalishwala. People would stop on the road at any time of day or night for a head massage. Some of them would sing as they soaked up the pleasure with closed eyes. I enjoyed the sight. The women would operate in tiny rooms behind bamboo blinds. Their charges? Anywhere between eight annas and eight rupees. Or between eight rupees and eight hundred. In this market you could examine all the wares and buy fresh meat according to your wish.

About twenty-five Arabs lived in Arab Gali; apparently their business was trading in pearls. The others who lived in this lane were either Punjabi or Rampuri. Muhammad bhai used to live in this same Arab Gali. Whether the rest of us kept track of one another or not, I was told that Muhammad bhai kept track of everyone. Being a native of Rampur, he was an expert with both the stick and the knife. Overcoming two dozen opponents at one go was all in a day's work for him. I heard many tales about his prowess with the knife. Apparently his skill was so silken that the victim did not even realize that he had died. But everyone swore unanimously that Muhammad bhai did not chase women. I'd heard that he helped poor beggar girls. His helpers would give them some money every day. I didn't know what his line of business was, but I heard that his clothes were immaculate, that he ate well, and that he moved about the neighbourhood with his cohorts in a glittering tonga. But most of his time was spent at the Irani café. So, I had long wanted to meet this Muhammad bhai. But because I left early in the morning and returned late at night, I'd had no opportunity. I had heard an extraordinary story about him from Ashiq Husain, who used to live in the kholi next to mine. He was a dancer in films.

One day, he happened to say in the course of a conversation, 'No one can match up to Muhammad bhai, Manto sahib.'

— Why, has he done something for you?

— When I got cholera, Muhammad bhai got to know and turned up. Do you know what happened after that? Every doctor on Foras Road appeared in my kholi. Muhammad bhai only said, if anything happens to Ashiq, I won't spare a single one of you. The doctors were quaking in their boots.

— And then?

— I recovered in a couple of days. He's an angel, Manto bhai, nothing but an angel.

There were many other tales about Muhammad bhai. Apparently he always had a sharp dagger strapped to his thigh. He often displayed his skill with it, with the smile intact on his face. All these stories had me conjure up a certain image of the man. Tall, muscular, a figure who made your blood run cold at first glance. But I hadn't actually seen him yet. I realized I simply had to take a day off work for a

look at him. But there were many pressures at the magazine, where I had to do practically everyone's job—from the editor's to the bearer's.

One day, I was struck down by a bout of fever. I couldn't even get out of bed. Ashiq had gone home to his village. I spent two days alone in my kholi. A boy from the Irani café came by with food at regular intervals. Who would enquire about me in Bombay? Even Nazir sahib did not know where I lived. Had I died, no one would have got to know.

On the third day, I decided that I simply had to get to a doctor somehow. Suddenly there was a knock on the door. I thought the boy from the café was here. —Come in.

Opening the door, I found a man outside. The first thing that caught my eye was his enormous moustache, which he was twirling with both hands. It occurred to me that he was so ordinary that no one would give him a second glance if it weren't for the moustache. He entered the room with four or five people in tow. Then he said in a soft voice, 'Vimto sahib …'

— Manto, not Vimto.

— It's bloody same. This isn't good, Vimto sahib. Why didn't you let me know that you have a fever?

— Who are you?

Flashing a look at his companions, he said, 'Muhammad bhai.'

I sat up in my bed with a start. —Muhammad bhai, Muhammad bhai … dada?

— Yes, Vimto sahib, I'm Muhammad, dada. The boy at the café told me you're very sick. This bloody hell isn't good news. You didn't let me know. Bloody Muhammad bhai loses his temper when such things happen. Now he looked at his cohorts. 'You … what's your name, you swine? Go to that bloody doctor. Tell him that Muhammad bhai has asked him to come, on the double. And tell the bloody doctor to bring all his instruments.'

As I watched Muhammad bhai, all the stories I'd heard about him ran through my head. But this wasn't the Muhammad bhai I had imagined. All I could see was his moustache, and it seemed to me that a man with a gentle disposition had become the dada of the neighbourhood only on the strength of an enormous moustache. I had no chair in my room. So I asked him to sit on the bed. Waving an imaginary fly away, he said, 'No need to worry about all this, Vimto sahib.'

Muhammad bhai began to pace up and down in my suffocating kholi. At one point I saw his famous dagger flashing in his hand. He was scraping his dagger against his arm, and the hair kept falling off. As I watched, I felt as though my fever had dropped several degrees. 'The dagger is very sharp, Muhammad bhai,' I stammered. 'You might cut yourself.'

— The dagger is for my enemies, Vimto sahib. Why should I cut myself with it? Caressing it, he said, 'Can a son ever hurt his father?'

The doctor arrived. It was very funny, Mirza sahib, I had become Vimto and the doctor's name was Pinto.

'What's wrong?' Doctor Pinto mumbled.

— Do you expect me to bloody tell you? If you cannot make Vimto sahib well again, you will bloody well have to pay the price.

Examining me carefully, Doctor Pinto told Muhammad bhai, 'There's nothing to worry about, Muhammad bhai. It's malaria. I'll give him a shot.'

— I don't understand any of this, doctor. If you want to give him a shot, give him a bloody shot, but if anything bad happens to him …

— He'll be fine, Muhammad bhai. I'm giving him the shot then. Doctor Pinto took a syringe and ampoule out of his bag.

— Wait, doctor! Muhammad bhai shrieked. Frightened, the doctor put the syringe back in his bag.

— I cannot take all this bloody injection business. Muhammad bhai left the room with his followers.

Doctor Pinto gave me a quinine injection with great care. 'How much?' I asked him.

— Ten rupees.

As soon as I'd taken the money from my wallet and given it to him, Muhammad bhai re-entered. — What the hell is all this?

Doctor Pinto said, his voice quivering, 'I swear on God, Muhammad bhai, I didn't ask for anything.'

— If you want bloody money ask me. Return Vimto sahib's money to him at once. Turning to me, Muhammad bhai continued, 'How can a doctor from my area take money from you, Vimto sahib? Can this bloody well be allowed? I'll shave my bloody moustache off if it is. Keep in mind, Vimto sahib, everyone in my neighbourhood is your servant.'

When the doctor had left, I asked, 'Do you know me, Muhammad bhai?'

— Of course I do. Is there anyone here whom bloody Muhammad bhai doesn't know? My friend, Muhammad bhai is the king of the neighbourhood, he keeps track of everyone. Do you know how many people I have? They inform me of everything. Who's visiting, who's leaving, what everyone's up to. I know everything about you.

— Is that so?

— If not me, who bloody else? You've come from Amritsar, right? You're a bloody Kashmiri, am I right? You work for a magazine. You owe Bismillah Hotel ten rupees, which is why you don't take the road that runs past it. Am I right? The paan-seller in Bhindi Bazaar abuses you all the time. You owe him twenty bloody rupees and ten annas for cigarettes.

I stared at him open-mouthed. I thought I was sinking through the floor. Did this man have eyes everywhere?

— No need to be afraid, Vimto sahib. I have paid back all your dues. You can start afresh. Why are you embarrassed, Vimto sahib? Many things happen in our long lives. I've told every bloody one not to trouble you. You have Muhammad bhai's bloody word, no one can mess with it.

I don't know whether Muhammad bhai heard me or not, but I muttered, 'May the lord keep you happy.' Twirling his moustache, Muhammad bhai left with his cohorts.

I recovered in a fortnight. Muhammad bhai and I hit it off. He would often listen to me in silence. Bhai was about five years older than me. His moustache was even longer compared to my age. Later I heard that Muhammad bhai took care of his moustache by putting butter on it every day. I used to wonder which the real Muhammad bhai was—his moustache or his pointed dagger.

One day I met him in front of the Chinese restaurant in Arab Gali. In the course of our conversation, I asked him, 'This is the era of guns and revolvers, Muhammad bhai. Why do you use a dagger?'

Running his fingers over his moustache, Muhammad bhai answered, 'There's nothing as bloody annoying as guns, Vimto sahib. Even a child can fire a gun. Press the trigger, and you're done. But a dagger … I swear on the lord … using a dagger is something else. What was it you said the other day? Yes, art. Listen, Vimto sahib, using a dagger is an art. And what's a revolver? A bloody toy.' He pulled his shining dagger out as he spoke. 'Look at it, just look at it, look at the bloody edge on it. There's no sound when you use it. Plunge it into someone's stomach and give it a twist, that's it, all over. Guns are

rubbish.'

The more time I consorted with Muhammad bhai, the more I wondered why everyone feared him so much. He had nothing besides that enormous moustache to be afraid of. Fear does not flow from anything outside of ourselves, Mirza sahib, it lurks in the darkness within our own hearts.

On my way to office one day, I heard outside the Chinese restaurant that the police had arrested Muhammad bhai. How could this be possible? Bhai was quite thick with the police. Here's what had happened—there was a prostitute named Shirinbai in Arab Gali. She had a young daughter. The day before bhai was arrested, Shirinbai had thrown herself at Muhammad bhai's feet. Someone had apparently raped her daughter.

— You're the dada of the neighbourhood, bhai, and someone rapes my daughter! Aren't you going to take revenge?

Bhai had apparently abused Shirinbai roundly, and then said grimly, 'Do you want me to slit the motherfucker's belly? Go to your kotha, you bitch, I'll take care of things.'

It was over in half an hour. The man was murdered. But how did the police arrest Muhammad bhai? Bhai didn't leave any witnesses to such acts, and even if someone had seen, they wouldn't say anything against him. After two days in the lockup, Muhammad bhai got bail. But he was a different man after he came out. When I met him at the Chinese restaurant, he looked bedraggled, overwhelmed. Before I could say anything, he said, 'He took so much bloody time to die, Vimto sahib. It's all my fault. I couldn't stab him properly.' Consider, my brothers, how strange it was. He had no regret for killing a man, only for not using his dagger properly.

The closer we got to the day of the court hearing, the more fretful Muhammad bhai became. Talking to him, I realized that he had no idea of what a court was like, and hence his fear. Never mind appearing in court, bhai had never even had to stay in custody. One day he gripped my arm and said, 'I'll bloody die rather than appear in court. I've never even seen a court.'

Bhai's cohorts from Arab Gali explained to him that there was nothing to be afraid of. There was no witness, and no one would testify against him. But yes, the magistrate might form an unwelcome impression because of his enormous moustache. A man with a moustache like this had to be a criminal.

One day, while we were sitting at the Irani café, Muhammad bhai took his dagger out and flung it on the street. 'What are you doing, Muhammad bhai!' I exclaimed.

— Everyone's betraying me, Vimto sahib. They're saying the magistrate will clamp me in bloody jail the moment he sees my moustache. What should I do, tell me?

After a long discussion I said, 'There's no evidence against you, but when the magistrate sees your moustache he may well think …'

— Should I get rid of it then? Muhammad bhai looked at me helplessly, twirling his moustache.

— If you think so.

— It doesn't matter what I think. What's important is what the bloody magistrate thinks. What do you suggest?

— Then get rid of it.

I saw Muhammad bhai the next day, moustache-less, and even more helpless.

In court it was declared that Muhammad bhai was a dangerous ruffian. He was ordered to leave Bombay. He had just a day in hand. All of us were in the court. Muhammad bhai came out in silence when the verdict was announced. His hand kept stealing its way up to a point beneath his nose.

In the evening Muhammad bhai was having a cup of tea at the Irani café with about twenty of his

cohorts. I sat down opposite him. I saw his eyes were focussed on the distance, far beyond the café and the neighbourhood. 'What are you thinking of?' I asked.

Muhammad bhai exploded. —The bloody Muhammad bhai you knew is dead.

— Why are you fretting? You have to live, after all. If not in Bombay, somewhere else.

— Listen, Vimto sahib, I don't care whether I live or die. I took your advice, the bloody idiot that I am, and shaved my moustache off. Since I have to go away, I might as well have taken my moustache along. They should have hanged me instead.

I never saw Muhammad bhai again. I often wondered why he was so attached to his moustache. Was the moustache the real Muhammad bhai? I still don't know. A few days later I got a letter from bibijaan in Amritsar. She wanted to come to Bombay, she missed me very much. I wrote back, come to Bombay, bibijaan, I am also very lonely here, I never wanted to be so alone.

23

سراپا آرزو ہونے نے بندہ کر دیا ہم کو
وگرنہ ہم خدا تھے گر دل بے مدعا ہوتا

I'm a bundle of desire from head to toe,
and so a mere man
If my heart had been bereft of yearning
I'd have been God

On some nights I would go to the Manikarnika Ghat at midnight and sit on the steps. I had no wish to stir from Kashi. The cool breeze from the Ganga soothed all my dissatisfaction and distraction. I wondered why I should bother to visit Calcutta. Why was I killing myself going on this long journey just for a little money! The flames from the pyres at Manikarnika burnt down all my yearnings and desires; some people I couldn't see sprinkled holy water on their ashes. I even considered throwing away the shell of Islam and spending the rest of my life on the banks of the Ganga with the sacred Hindu mark on my forehead and prayer beads in my hand. May my existence be obliterated, may I be lost like a drop of water in the flowing currents of the Goddess Ganga. Are you laughing, Manto bhai? So you should, for what is this that Mirza Ghalib, so steeped in lust and sensuality, is saying? Believe me, there at the Manikarnika Ghat the mind would become a blank page, as though I had no past, as though a new life were about to begin. But why should the accursed Shahjahanabad let me go? I had lived off it; I would have to settle my accounts. A city of lights like Kashi was not for a hypocrite like me.

I had been sitting on the steps of Manikarnika Ghat on the eve of the day I left Kashi. I didn't visit the brothel that night; I knew that I would be trapped by my lover if I went there; I would have no choice but to stay on. But as you can well understand, my brothers, I couldn't afford to linger there, I had to reach Calcutta as quickly as possible. I knew that she was waiting for me, that she would stay awake for me all night; perhaps the same fate as Munirabai's awaited her after my departure from Kashi. I wonder what happened to her. Perhaps she forgot me. That was what I wanted too, that she should forget me. I had prayed to the Goddess Ganga, may your current sweep away all memories of me. But the funny thing was that I couldn't forget her; the memory of her body clung to me, her voice wafted to me across the lanes of Kashi. And I thought of Rabeya Balkhi. I could see a stream of fresh blood flowing down the steps of Manikarnika Ghat.

Do you know anything about Rabeya, Manto bhai? You're unlikely to. The mullahs had wiped out Rabeya's life. She was the first woman, the first poet, of the Islamic world who killed herself. A complex pattern of poetry, love, and death had been etched on the ground that Rabeya walked. She was the princess of Balkh; born with a terrible curse on her head, she considered herself without any refuge in

this world. Rabeya had been seduced by poetry in childhood—she had even earned some fame as a poetess. But fate was lying in wait for her with a different script. Which was why she met Bakhtas one day. An ordinary young man, he was Rabeya's brother Hareth's slave. The flames of love leapt up at first sight. They began meeting in secret. Poems were written. Bakhtas, Bakhtas—Rabeya's poetry was only about his beauty and wonder, just as Meerabai's songs were only about her blue-skinned Shyam, about the playful ways of her lover Girigovardhan.

One day Hareth came to know of Rabeya's secret trysts. Bakhtas was evicted from the capital; it was learnt a few days later that he had been murdered. The news reached Rabeya. Evening was descending then, Manto bhai. Standing at the window, Rabeya saw a flock of cranes piercing the canopy of the sky. Then she went into her bathroom, slit her vein with her hairpin, and stared in entrancement at the blood flowing out. With this blood she wrote her last poem on the wall—sip poison if you will, Rabeya, but may its taste be sweet on your tongue. I was very anxious that night, Manto bhai, what if, like Rabeya, my lover too … but why … in my world people didn't love one another; why should a prostitute whom I had spent a few days with love me? How many of us can taste our own blood for the sake of love, Manto bhai? As I pondered over all this at Manikarnika Ghat, I heard someone hum:

कौन मुरली शब्द सुन आनंद भयो
जोत बड़े बिन बाती
बिना मूलके कमल प्रगट भयो

फुलवा फूलत भाँति-भाँति
जैसे चकोर चन्द्रमा चितवे
जैसे छत्रिक स्वाती
तैसे संत सुरतके होते
हो गए जनम संघाती

The flute's playing, but who's playing it?
The lamp is burning without wick or oil
The lotus is blooming but it has no roots
When one flower blooms, so do a hundred
Just like the moonbird thinks of nothing but the moon
And the rainbird thinks of nothing but rain
The lover too has only one desire
He thinks of nothing but his beloved

A shadowy figure was seated at a distance. He was the singer, I realized. Nodding to himself, he continued:

चरखा चले सूरत बिरहन का
काया नगरी बनी अति सुन्दर
महल बना चेतनका
सूरत भाबरी होंठ गगन में
पीढ़ा ज्ञान रतन का
मिहीं सूत विरहिन कांटी
माझा प्रेमे भगतिका
कहें कबीर सुनो भई साधों
माला गूँथोई दिन रैन का
पिया मोर एहन पगा राखी हैं
आँसू भेंट देहो नयन का

Parted from her lover, she spins the wheel
Makes a lovely city of the body
And a palace of the mind
The love-wheel spins in the sky
Jewels of knowledge make a seat
Subtle are the threads she weaves
Made fine with love and reverence
Kabir says, listen to me,
I weave a garland of day and night
When my lover's feet touch me
I shall offer my tears as a gift

As he sang, I went up to him to sit at his feet. A lean man dressed in nothing but a loincloth, and beads around his neck. Believe me, Manto bhai, this was no song, but sobs suppressed for many years. His eyes were closed, tears streamed down his face. The more he sang, the more he wept, and the more his face brightened. Looking at him and listening to him sing, I grew calm inside, soon I began to sing with him, 'Charkha chale surat birhan ka.'

— Guruji …

— What guru, mian! I am only the servant Kabir. We're servants of the same teacher.

— Who is this teacher?

— The heart flutters here and there with its material desires, mian. The teacher will not show himself until the hawk has pounced on this bird and taken it away. But mian, you're leaving Kashi tomorrow, are you not?

— You know already?

Kabir sahib smiled. —I see you every day, wandering about the streets. I see a little more of you every day, and reach within you a little more every day. Isn't this how one knows?

— Reach within me? How do you do that?

— I got that wrong, Mirza sahib. I don't have the power to reach within you! These two beams of light that you see—Kabir sahib pointed to his eyes—things reach within me through these beams of light. Something interesting happened this way once, Mirza sahib. There was a pir named Shaikh Tuki here in Kashi. He complained to Sikandar Lodi about me, alleging that I claim I have seen God. Isn't it funny? Why should God show himself to an ordinary servant like me? Never mind. The king issued a warrant to have me arrested, despatching people to my home to have me appear in his court. Why is an

ordinary man like me being summoned to the king's all-important court of justice, I asked them.

— You will be put on trial. One of the soldiers informed me.

— The emperor's job is to deliver a verdict. Let him do this, by all means. I will accept whatever punishment he imposes on me. But why do I have to be present?

— Have you forgotten that you live in Jahanpanah's kingdom?

— I am a subject of Ramrahim's. I reside in his district. I don't have the power to live in the boundless kingdom of your emperor.

— Then we have to tie you up and take you there.

— You'd better do that. You must demonstrate your power. But let me bathe first.

— Why?

— How can I appear in Jahanpanah's court in an unclean state?

I took refuge in the breast of mother Ganga while the troops waited on the bank. As I swam and floated, morning turned to afternoon. The troops kept screaming at me, heaping abuses on me, but the fellows wouldn't get into the water. The uniforms provided by the emperor would get wet, you see.

It was almost evening when I was tied up and brought to the royal court. I stood before Jahanpanah in silence. After a briefing from his troops, the emperor said, 'I sent for you in the morning, and you have appeared in the evening. Does it take you so much time to bathe?'

— No, Jahanpanah. I don't even bathe every day.

— Well then?

— I couldn't get out of the water today because of the sights I saw while bathing.

— What did you see? Thousands of alligators rushing towards you?

A wave of laughter rolled around the court.

— It was a most interesting sight, Jahanpanah. You have seen the eye of a needle, haven't you?

— A needle? What's that?

— Pardon my insolence. Why should an emperor ever have seen a needle? How do I explain …

'Bring a needle,' Sikandar Lodi roared. 'What is this object that I have never set eyes on?'

I laughed. 'Why do you laugh, infidel?' the emperor roared even louder. 'What's so funny?'

You see, Mirza, there is no end to the misery of those enraged by laughter. I recited a poem to myself as I gazed at the emperor.

Who will police this city?
There's so much flesh everywhere
That vultures are the protectors
The rat's a boat which the cat rows
The frog sleeps, the snake is on guard
The bull gives birth, the cow is barren now
So he suckles the calves every night
The jackal fights the lion every day
Who understands what the poet says?

A needle was brought to the court. The emperor examined it closely, peering through its eye. Then he turned to me and said, 'What were you saying about a needle?'

— Did you see anything through the eye of the needle, emperor?

— No. It's impossible to see anything through the eye of a needle.

— Now let me tell you what I saw … a row of camels passing through a lane narrower than the eye of a needle.

— Stop this nonsense, you liar.

— I'm not lying, huzoor. You know how far paradise is from this world, Jahanpanah. Millions of elephants and camels can pass through the gap between the sun and the moon. We view them through an opening the size of a point in our eyes. As you know, Jahanpanah, this opening in the eye is even smaller than the eye of a needle.

The emperor looked at me for a long time. Then he set me free. You can conceal many things, Mirza sahib, but not what the eye says. In joy and in sorrow, our hearts will always speak through our eyes. They make for such a wondrous pool. I can see deep within it. I see you every day, Mirza sahib, and I reflect, even though you have touched Ramrahim's feet, you still have to slave away. It is not your lot in life to sit still.

I found this funny. I told Kabir sahib, 'If there is such a thing as the greatest infidel in the world, it is me. I am not worthy of touching Ramrahim's feet.'

— You worship words, Mirza sahib. He was born from words. Can he possibly keep you at a distance?

— But there is no pursuit of a mission in my life such as in yours.

— Do you suppose pursuing a mission is easy, mian? I do not have the ability. I have merely tended to the garment that the Lord weaves for ten months, so that it isn't soiled. The garment will have to be returned to its rightful owner one day. Can one return a garment in a soiled state?

— I can return nothing but a soiled garment, Kabirji.

— How is that possible? You simply cannot do that, Mirza sahib. When the time comes, He will have the garment cleaned by you. Let me sing you Kabir the servant's song, then:

साहिब है रंगरेज
चुनरी मोरी रंग डारि
स्याही रंग चुराए के रे
दियो मजिथा रंग
धोये से छूटे नहीं रे
दिन दिन होते सुरंग
भाव के कुण्डी नेह के जल में
प्रेम रंग डाई बोरे
दुख देह मेल लुटाये दे रे
खूब रंगी झकझोरे

साहिब ने चुनरी रंगी रे
प्रीतम चतुर सुजान
सब कुछ उन पर वर दूँ रे
तन मन धन और प्राण
कहत कबीर रंगरेज पियारे
मुझ पर हुए दयाल
सीतल चुनरी ओढ़के रे
भई हूँ मगन निहाल

The Lord is a master dyer
It's he who dyed my scarf
He has replaced all the stains
With the shades of love
Far from fading when it's washed
It brightens every day
He poured this colour in a tub
Whose water brims with feelings
He scrubbed the sorrows and the filth
And dyed the scarf with skill
The Lord who did all this work
My beloved, wise and kind
My body, heart, wealth and life
Are all just for him
Kabir says the great dyer
Looks kindly upon me
Shielded by this cooling scarf
I am so fulfilled

— It is he who has dyed your garment in the colour of love using the water in this pool of the world, mian. He has given it, and he will take it back, but not till he has coloured it with beauty and emotion and feelings. You don't have the power to hand him a soiled garment. Go back home now, mian, it will soon be dawn, and you have to resume your journey.

— Aren't you going home?

— Not till I have sung the Bhairavi for mother Ganga.

— I don't want to go anywhere, Kabir sahib. I will stay on here in Kashi. I don't enjoy rushing around.

Kabir sahib began to shake his head. —No mian, this isn't right. You must travel along the road that life has opened up before you. No matter how much the suffering and the deprivation on this road, you cannot deny the path that the lord has ordained for you. Who else will travel on your road if not you?

— Will I get what I want in Calcutta?

— Maybe you will not get what you are looking for. But you will get many other things, which Shahjahanabad could not give you, which Kashi cannot give you. Did you know, mian, that I went away to Maghar from Kashi before my death? When people heard, they said, why do you want to leave a sacred place like Kashi for Maghar? If you die there, you will be born as an ass in your next birth. So be it. If the lord desires that I should be reborn as an ass, so be it. But it is he who has decreed that I must die in Maghar. Before reaching Maghar, I lived in the village of Kasarval by the Amee River for some time. Bijli Khan was the ruler of Maghar at the time. He arranged a place for us to stay. Maghar was passing through its twelfth year of drought; there wasn't a drop of water to be found anywhere. A holy man named Gorakhnath came to live with us. Stamping his foot on the ground, he produced a stream of water. But even this did not solve the crisis. Then everyone came up to me. The more I tried to explain that I was not a holy man like Gorakhnathji, that I had no powers of any kind, the less they believed me. Honestly, mian, I did not have the power to make water flow. I told them, call out to Rama together, the Lord will do whatever is needed. Everyone began to call out to Rama. Believe me, mian, that collective incantation did bring forth rain. The Amee River swelled. I saw for myself on my way to Maghar what calling out to Rama could achieve. It was for this that the benevolent one had taken me from Kashi to Maghar. Even if I was born as an ass after this, what difference would it make?

Rising to his feet, Kabir sahib took my hand. —Come, mian, let me take you home.

— I can manage on my own.

He smiled. —You have not yet learnt to walk by yourself, mian. You have to stomach more humiliation. Not before that.

— How much more humiliation will I have to stomach?

— You have not yet faced humiliation in your life, mian. But you will now. I pray to Ramrahim to give you the ability to endure it. I know you have no home. May Kabir's prayer be granted, so that you find your own home within words. Words are your roots, mian.

He planted a kiss on my brow as he spoke. Then, putting his hand on my shoulder, he said, 'Let me tell you a story before you go, mian. You will leave with a happy heart. I shall tell you the story on our way.'

As we wound through the lanes of Kashi, Kabir sahib wove his story. 'After many years of wandering about in the desert, a dervish arrived at a village. But this place was almost a wilderness too; there was no greenery to speak of anywhere. The people here made their living by tending to cattle. On the road the dervish asked one of the villagers whether there was somewhere to pass the night.

Scratching his head, the man answered, "There's nowhere to stay in our village right now. No one comes here anyway. But you can try Shakir sahib's house. He's happy to let people stay."

— So he's a very good man?

— Yes, there's no one hereabouts like him. He's very rich, too. Haddad is nowhere near him.

— Who's Haddad?

— He lives in the next village. Let me show you the way to Shakir sahib's house.

Shakir and his wife and daughters gave the dervish a warm welcome. Instead of a single night, he stayed for several days. When he left, Shakir gave him plenty of food and water for his journey. Blessing him, the dervish said, "May Allah make you even more prosperous."

Shakir smiled. "Don't get taken in by what you see, baba. This too shall pass."

The dervish was surprised. What did Shakir mean? Then he told himself, my way is not to ask questions. I must only listen in silence. The meaning will reveal itself one day. This was what his Sufi training had taught him.

Five more years passed in travelling through different lands. The dervish returned to the same village and made enquiries about Shakir. He learnt that Shakir now lived in the next village, where he worked at Haddad's house. The dervish went to meet him. Shakir appeared much older than before, and his clothes were tattered. He greeted and looked after the dervish with the same warmth.

— How did things come to such a pass for you? The dervish asked.

— There was a terrible flood three years ago. All my cattle were swept away. So I had to seek help from Haddad bhai.

The dervish spent several days at Haddad's house. When he was leaving, Shakir brought him food and water, just as he had the last time. The dervish told him, "I am saddened to see you in this condition. But I also know that the Lord does nothing without a reason."

Shakir smiled. "This too shall pass."

What did this mean? Would Shakir be able to turn himself around from his predicament? How? Although the questions occurred to the dervish, he pushed them aside. Wealth would come on its own.

After a few more years of travel, the dervish returned to the same village. He found Shakir a rich man once again. Haddad had no children. He had bequeathed all his property to Shakir before dying. This time too, the dervish spent several days with Shakir. And before he left, Shakir repeated, "This

too shall pass."

This time the dervish visited Mecca before returning to meet Shakir. Shakir had died. Visiting his grave, the dervish was surprised to see the inscription on it, which said, "This too shall pass." The poor can become wealthy, mused the dervish, the rich men can become poor too, but how can a grave change? After this, the dervish visited Shakir's grave every year and prayed next to it. On one visit, he found that everything had been swept away by a flood. Shakir's grave had vanished too. Sitting in the ruined graveyard, the dervish looked at the sky and muttered, "This too shall pass."

When he was no longer capable of wandering about, the dervish settled down. Many people used to throng to him for advice. Word had spread that no one was as learned as he was. The nawab's prime minister heard this too.

It was an interesting affair, mian. The nawab wanted a ring with an inscription that would make him happy when he was melancholy, and depressed when he was joyful. Many jewellers came, many wise men appeared in his court, but the nawab was not pleased by any of their suggestions. Then his prime minister explained everything to the dervish in a letter, saying that this problem cannot be solved without your help. You must come to the court. The dervish was too old to travel. He wrote back with his suggestion.

After a few days, the new ring was presented to the nawab. He had been miserable for quite some time; putting the ring on, he glanced at it despondently. But when he read the inscription, a smile appeared on his lips, and then he burst into laughter. You know what was inscribed, of course, Mirza sahib. "This too shall pass."'

The very next moment, I found myself alone on a road in Kashi. Kabir sahib was nowhere to be seen.

24

پنہا ں تھا دام سخت قریب آشیان کے
اڑنے نہ پائے تھے کہ گرفتار ہم ہوئے

The trap had been laid close to my nest
I was caught before I could take wing

I know you've been fidgeting for a long time, my brothers. Mirza sahib told us a solemn story, but we're street dogs, all of us—we cannot digest such good food. See how we're shedding our fur, Mirza sahib. Not to worry, my brothers, what's Manto here for? I have already scavenged some bones from the dustbins, which you can gnaw on to your heart's content.

Sometimes I'm amazed, Mirza sahib. How did I fall into the trap, damn it? When I got to Bombay I was having fun on the whole; even if I had to live in a slum, the joy of living alone can't be matched. No obligations, nobody to be answerable to, live as you please. As Hafiz sahib had said:

عشق بازی وجوانی
و شراب لالہ فام
مجلس انس و حریفے
ہم داب و شُربِ مُدام

Did you get the sense, my brothers? Give me youth, give me love, give me red wine, let companions gather, let my best friends be present, let me get food, O Lord. What else can a man living by himself want? Does anyone else have the freedom to live like this? But this damned Manto also fell into the trap. That's the story that I'll tell you now, my brothers.

Bibijaan arrived in Bombay from Amritsar. Arrangements were made for her to stay at my sister Iqbal Begum's house. I barely managed to fit my own life into my shack; I could hardly let my mother stay there. I would meet bibijaan on the streets, we would have a cup of tea somewhere and talk. An infidel like me was not allowed into my sister's house. Iqbal Begum's badshah could not stand me, after all. Every day bibijaan would entreat me, where do you live, beta, take me there. I've come only for you. But I couldn't possibly take bibijaan in there. To tell the truth, I didn't want to show her how filthy a man's existence could be. Would it have been right to soil her beautiful heart? But I couldn't stop her indefinitely. One day she insisted on coming along with me to my kholi. Running her eyes around the dark cell, she stared at me, and then tears welled up in her eyes. I had never seen bibijaan weep this way. My eyes smarted too. Still I said with a smile, 'What does a man need a bigger room for?'

— Manto …

Holding my arm, bibijaan sat on my dirty bed. Sitting by her side, I tried to run my hand over her back and shoulders and calm her down. Still she wouldn't stop weeping, interspersing her sobs with cries of, 'What have you shown me, O Lord!' When her eyes finally dried, she began to gather my dirty clothes scattered around the room.

— What are you doing, bibijaan?

— You're coming with me right now.

— Where?

— To Iqbal's house.

— You know there's nothing but hatred for me in that house, bibijaan.

— That doesn't mean this hell has to be your …

— I'm fine, bibijaan. I swear on the lord, I'm very well. It is much better to live alone like this than to eat at a feast of hatred.

Bibijaan sat there in silence. Putting my hand on her shoulder, I said, 'Let me take you back. This is why I didn't want to bring you here. I didn't want you to suffer, bibijaan.' I had held myself in control all this time, but I couldn't do it anymore, Mirza sahib. I broke down in tears. Not because I lived in a kholi, but because bibijaan had had to see this hellish existence.

After many long years, bibijaan put her arms around me again and kissed me over and over, as though I was a baby, muttering a single ruku from the Quran repeatedly. I couldn't even understand what she was saying. I had never read the Quran, after all. The night before I died, when I was vomiting blood, I think I could hear her muttering. For the first time I wished I had understood the meaning. But how would it have helped? It was my final vigil.

As we walked along the street, bibijaan asked, 'Can't you earn a little more?'

— Why?

— Then you wouldn't have to live in this garbage bin …

— I am fine, bibijaan. What would I do with more money? I get by comfortably on what I earn.

— No, you don't. I know you don't. But then you didn't complete your studies, how will you earn more?

I had never been angry with bibijaan. But I lost my temper at this. Still, I controlled myself, saying, 'Didn't I just tell you I get by on what I earn? It's possible to earn a lot even without an education.'

— Why don't you try?

Now I decided to display a sense of humour. And this turned out to be my undoing. 'Why do I need to earn more?' I declared. 'If I had a wife, it would have been different.'

— God is glorious! You want to get married?

— Yes. Why not?

This was mere repartee. But I did not realize how foolish I had been. Bibijaan asked me to visit Mahim next week. That's where Iqbal and her husband used to live. I had set a trap for myself, Mirza sahib. I didn't understand it then, but I did in Mahim next Sunday.

I was standing on the road outside Iqbal's house. Spotting me from the third floor window, bibijaan came downstairs.

— Why did you ask me here?

— Come with me, beta.

— Where?

— Close by. Just come along …

— What's going on?

— I've found a bride for you.

— What do you mean?

Smiling, bibijaan said, 'Shafia. Very nice girl. She can take care of you.'

— Who told you I'm getting married now?

— Why, you did, the other day. I liked Shafia very much the first day I saw her. I spoke to her uncle as soon as I returned. We're Kashmiri and so are they, they agreed at once.

— Bibijaan …

— What's the problem?

— You know how much I earn. How can I get married?

— Everything will be fine when you have a wife. Come on, you'll like Shafia too when you see her.

Bibijaan dragged me along with her. I was dying to escape. But she held my arm in an iron grip.

Making me sit down near a man the size of a hippopotamus, bibijaan disappeared inside the house. His name was Malik Hasan. He was Shafia's uncle, and used to work in the detective department. A barrage of questions followed. I answered them all, and, as soon as I got an opportunity, informed him that I was in the habit of drinking every evening. I was trying to cut my way out of the trap. How could this marriage be possible? These people were aristocrats and I was a Bombay street dog.

When he got all his answers, Hasan sahib kept saying, 'Excellent, excellent,' as he paced up and down. Then he instructed someone, 'Ask behenji to come here.' Bibijaan arrived a little later. Grasping her hand, he said, 'What a son you've brought up, behenji!'

Bibijaan looked at me. I assumed that both of us would now be thrown out. What could be happier news?

— It's over.

— Meaning? I heard bibijaan croak.

— The marriage is settled. First, I will not let Shafia marry anyone besides a Kashmiri. And your son! Absolutely pure at heart. Even confessed that he drinks every evening. I wanted an honest man.

What kind of ill luck was this Mirza sahib, that made a detective like Malik Hasan assume I was an honest man? What a mistake I had made not telling him about the nights at Hira Mandi. And then I further entrapped myself through what happened next. 'Bring the girl in, behenji,' said Hasan sahib.

Shafia arrived, her face hidden behind a scarf. I saw her indistinctly, like a shadow. I wanted to touch her. For the first time I realized I was not someone who enjoyed living alone; I needed company even for solitude. Shafia Begum had to pay for my whims all her life. Whenever we were happy together for a couple of days, I would ask myself, what's the use of all this writing, Manto? Make at least one person on this planet happy. Burn your paper and pens. Put your head on her breast and close your eyes, and let her draw invisible pictures in your hair while you go to sleep slowly.

The wedding day was fixed. I simply couldn't believe it. I hadn't imagined such a thing even in my dreams. It was like the sky falling on my head. How could I think of getting married when I didn't have a penny in my pocket? I tried my best to explain to bibijaan, but she refused to listen. 'It will be fine, beta,' was all she would say. 'Your wife will change your fortune. Hasan bhai would not have agreed unless the lord had willed it.'

What else was there for me to do but to submit myself to fate? I cast the boat off, take it where you will, river. I had been working as a part-time storywriter at the Imperial Film Company for some time.

But the company was about to go belly-up. Else I could have got an advance. Suddenly I remembered that the company owed me fifteen hundred rupees, damn it. I asked Seth Ardeshir for my dues. In dire straits himself, he had no money to give me, but he arranged for some jewellery and saris for my future wife. Just imagine, my brothers, no money in my pocket, but the jewellery and saris for the bride were in place. This is what you call Manto-magic. So I made all the arrangements for the wedding myself. This was how, bit by bit, I came to love Shafia.

So bloody Manto got married eventually. Shafia continued to live with her uncle, while I went back to my kholi. Yes, my brothers, on my wedding night. As I lay in my mite-infested bed, I wondered whether I really had got married, damn it? Or was I dreaming? I still had some dry fruit and cardamom in my pocket. Which means you did get married today, Manto. I still couldn't believe it. Only a madman would allow his daughter to marry Manto.

A year or so passed with Shafia still living at her uncle's house and I, in my kholi. Hasan sahib was keen on our staying together, but I couldn't possibly make my wife live in that shack. Eventually I couldn't hold out anymore. Who can, my brothers? Your young wife lives elsewhere, while you dream of her every night in your filthy bed before falling asleep. I rented a flat for thirty-five rupees a month. This was Manto-magic too. A salary of forty rupees, and rent of thirty-five rupees. Five rupees a month to run the household!

But the film producer Nanubhai Desai owed me eighteen hundred rupees. I had written some stories for his films. I had to throw a party when bringing my wife home. I went to Nanubhai for my money. The bastard laughed and wept alternately, saying, 'Check for yourself, Manto sahib, I haven't a penny in my pocket. How will I pay you?'

I explained everything to the seth, but he simply wouldn't understand. Eventually we were about to come to blows. Nanubhai got his people to throw me out of his office. On my part, I decided not to budge from the door till I had been paid. I'd go on a fast if necessary. What did they think writers were? That we'd be gratified because our stories had been accepted? The writer is supposed to starve, is he? Damn it, you can pay everyone for their services, but when it comes to stories, you expect to get them free? Are stories like leftovers lying around? It was the same thing with newspapers. The short story writers got the smallest payments. Why? Don't dreams have any value? You can measure the world with money, but dreams are worthless?

Baburao Patel got to know of my battle against Nanubhai. I believe no part of the camel's body is straight. Baburao would feature on this list immediately after the camel. He used the words 'bastard' and 'motherfucker' constantly. His eyes were small, his nose and lips thick, and his teeth were decayed, but his forehead was quite broad. The editor of *Film India*, Baburao also ran an Urdu magazine named *Caravan*. I had worked there for a few months. Apparently he had left home when still young because he couldn't get along with his father. 'That bastard is a swine,' he'd say whenever the subject of his father came up. It was funny. If old man Patel really was a swine, Baburao was several jumps ahead of him. And whenever he saw a woman, he began to chase her. You know, he used to have a secretary named Rita, Mirza sahib. He used to slap her bottom in full view of everyone and cackle. So Baburao telephoned Nanubhai and gave him a piece of his mind, and finally went to Nanubhai's office himself. After much bargaining, the final settlement was fixed at eight hundred rupees. I was over the moon. With cash in my hand I was a king.

After buying more saris and jewellery for Shafia and a bottle of Johnny Walker for myself, I found my pocket as penniless as before. When we moved into our new home, I found it even emptier than my pocket. There was no furniture whatsoever. But then, my brothers, I've always noticed that people

always stand by people, eventually. The head of the family next to ours made arrangements for me to buy some furniture on instalments. But still both rooms looked like deserts.

Nazir Ludhianvi sahib printed the invitation cards. It was a raucous party. All the film people came. Kardar sahib, Gunjali, Bilimoria sahib, Baburaoji, Noor Muhammad, Padma Devi, and many more. Padma Devi wasn't well-known yet. But Baburaoji transformed her. He turned her into the 'Colour Queen'. Her photos appeared in every issue of *Film World*, with Baburao personally writing the captions. You get the game, don't you, my brothers? This was what the film world was like. If you made it into the bed of the right person, you were bound to be successful.

It was a grand party. When it came to food, Mirza sahib, I was just like you. There was no question of being miserly or offering anything less than the best. All the food was cooked in the Kashmiri style. Baburaoji began to dance; meanwhile, Rafiq Ghaznavi, Nanda and Agha Kashmiri were abusing one another. Hell in uproar. After it was all over, bibijaan, Shafia and I drove in Bilimoria sahib's car to our new home. How do I say this, my brothers, the next day I saw that I had half become Shafia's husband already. But it felt good, too. It was an entirely unique sensation.

The next evening, I had just uncorked the bottle after returning home when Shafia grasped my hand. There was no indication of behaving like a new bride. Looking into my eyes, she said, no more drinking, Manto sahib.

— Why not?

— It'll harm you.

— I can't write without drinking.

— Do people have to drink to write?

— It's not that …

— Then give it up.

— All right. But let me have my drink today.

— No, not a single drink more.

— It's a very special day, Shafia.

— Why?

— My first day with you.

— Then what do you need a drink for?

— I do, I do. I put my arm around her waist. —How else will you get the real Manto in bed?

Laughing, Shafia put her arms around me. This was Shafia— simple, straightforward, capable of saying what was on her mind. She could love as strongly as she could protest. There was no pretence about her. But her life shouldn't have been linked to Manto's, my brothers. Manto grew up playing hide-and-seek with himself. He preferred losing himself in the labyrinth to taking the direct road. Shafia tried very hard, but she couldn't wean me off alcohol. I told many lies, cheated her many times, for the sake of a drink. Yes, Mirza sahib, I would give up drinking for long stretches. I felt wonderful then, as though I'd been reborn. But then I went back. Ultimately I couldn't get off that path ever in my life. Many years later Shafia said, 'If you weren't a writer, Manto sahib, our lives would not have been ruined this way.' Perhaps.

25

اپنی ہی خواہش دل مُردا کو روئیے
تھی ہم کو اُس سے سینکڑوں امید واریاں

Weep for your dead desires
I had such high expectations from them

It was spring when I reached Calcutta after passing through Murshidabad. My heart overflowed. Spring barely exists in Dilli, but Calcutta … Bengal … endless green everywhere. Had I not been to Bengal, I would never have known how nature plays with this one colour. An exquisite breeze blew there in spring; my friends used to say that the lure of romance was mingled in it. I felt it too. It was like muslin, and the lightest of its touches turned you wistful, as though an elusive lover were waiting somewhere for you. And then you would want to lose yourself in that spring breeze. 'If only I could drift away on it,' you'd tell yourself. I remembered Mir sahib's sher:

جیسے نسیم ہرسحرطائر کروہوں جستجو
خانہ بہ خانہ در بدر شہربہ شہر کوبکو

Like the breeze, I seek you at dawn every day
In houses, doorways, lanes, all over the city

My friend Shohanlal arranged a room for me in Mirza Ali Saudagar's haveli in Shimla bazaar, at a rent of ten rupees a month. Selling the horse I had travelled on, I hired a palanquin for getting about. I decided not to spend more than fifty rupees per month in any circumstance. Do you recognize the Mirza you knew, Manto bhai? I had realized on my way from Shahjahanabad to Calcutta that it would be impossible to survive without a series of compromises. And I would have to compromise anyway. After all, I had come to Calcutta with a mountain of debt on my head, in order to settle my pension. But I failed. I went back to Dilli as much a pauper as I had left it. I had been to Calcutta hoping for justice from the British, but I had to return with my forehead bruised from being dashed against brick walls. I don't want to burden you with those details. The upshot was that I had to accept an unchanged pension of five thousand rupees a year.

But how can I forget what Calcutta did give me, my brothers. A city as lively as this in this world could only be a gift from the lord. A seat on the green grass of the maidan offered greater pleasure than the emperor's throne could have. And oh, that breeze wafting in from the Ganga—where would I get

the likes of it again? White women rode on the maidan every morning and evening, the Arab steeds as sturdy as the beautiful ladies on their backs. A new painting seemed to be born every minute against the backdrop of the green grass. The ladies' postures changed with the speed of the horses, each pose an arrow piercing the heart. The governor's residence was equally formidable, and how much I coveted the houses set amidst gardens in the Chowringhee area. Each of those houses belonged to an Englishman. Believe me, Manto bhai, if it hadn't been for the responsibility of looking after my family, I would have stayed on in this city till the time I would be despatched to my grave. Shahjahanabad did not have air and water so pure. Heaven, it was absolute heaven.

کلکتہ کا جو ذکر کیا تُو نے ہم نشیں
اک تیر میرے سینے میں مارا کہ ہائے ہائے
وہ سبزہ زارہائے مطرا کہ ہے غضب
وہ ناز نیں بتان خود آرا کہ ہائے ہائے
صبر آزما وہ اُن کی نگاہیں کہ حف نظر
طاقت ربا وہ اُن کا اشارا کہ ہائے ہائے
وہ میوہ ہائے تازہ شیریں کہ واہ واہ
وہ بادہ ہائے ناب گوارا کہ ہائے ہائے

The moment you mentioned Calcutta, my friend
My heart bled, pierced by an arrow
The wondrous spread of green
The beauty of the women
The glances, the gestures
Weakened even the strongest of hearts
Blessed is its fruit, sweet and fresh
Memorable is its full-bodied wine

I had never tasted wine as fine as the one in Calcutta. Nor mangoes. I fell in love with mangoes immediately upon my arrival in Calcutta. I had tasted the fruit before, but Bengal's mango was like the lover's kiss after a prolonged wait. My tongue would drip at the very sight of the fruit. My eyes closed in joy as I put a piece in my mouth. Even if every fruit in heaven were laid out before you, Manto bhai, you would never forget the Calcutta mango. I was such a glutton that I even wrote to the Mutawalli at the Imambara in Hooghly to send me some mangoes. I want the kind of fruit, Mutawalli sahib, that not only looks beautiful when used to adorn the dining table, but also pleases the heart. As you know, only the mango can boast of this quality. And Hooghly's mangoes in particular are peerless, like flowers freshly plucked from the garden. If you deign to think of me once or twice before the mango season ends, I shall be grateful. Mutawalli sahib responded to my plea. My servants would soak the mangoes in water; I would have a mango every morning, and then again in the afternoon. Do you know what chilled mango tastes like, Manto bhai? As though you're running your tongue over the body of your favourite woman.

Since the subject of mangoes has come up, let me tell you a story or two, my brothers. They're not really stories—but then my life is nothing but a story now. Rajiduddin Khan, a doctor from Shahjahanabad, was a great friend of mine. He abhorred mangoes. We were sitting in the balcony of my

house one day when a man passed along the lane with an ass. The ground was littered with mango peel, which the ass sniffed but didn't eat. The doctor chortled, saying, 'Look, Mirza, even an ass won't touch the mangos you love so much.'

All I said was, 'That is true. An ass cannot savour the taste of mangoes, doctor.'

The doctor laughed initially, but began to look grim suddenly. 'Meaning?' he asked.

Laughing, I said, 'No ass has ever enjoyed a mango.'

'I see,' he said, and left.

Where mangoes are concerned, Manto bhai, only two things are important. They must be very sweet, and there must be a sufficient quantity for me to carry on eating as long as I want to. Calcutta ensured both. I didn't just eat the mangoes, sometimes I would simply run my fingers over the fruit soaked in water. What a joy it was! Such a pleasure for the eyes too. Consider the Himsagar—the light orange hue of the sunrise is gathered in its body. Or take the Langda—green all over, with streaks of pale yellow. The Gulabkhas is a striking red in part, the rest being green or yellow. No other fruit can boast of such a play of colours, Manto bhai. You can never say enough about the beautiful mango. I was so besotted with them that friends and associates from near and far used to send me different varieties of mango. 'Considering how much you love mangoes,' Begum told me once, 'why don't you give up drinking?'

— You know I have a life outside the house, Begum. But have I left you? I want both.

— And what about what I want?

— You want me to become the perfect husband. Not in this lifetime, Begum. But I cannot leave you either. Or else I would have divorced you long ago.

— Why can't you, Mirza sahib?

— You're the one sanctuary in a life gone astray.

— Really?

— Why do you think I return to this house after all's said and done? Even if we don't talk all day, why do I feel I still have a home?

I didn't tell Begum any of this, Manto bhai. All of this is a dream—things I said in my dreams. I only talked to Umrao Begum in my dreams. She must have talked to me the same way. How else could we have spent all those years together? There must have been some soul somewhere, which neither of us recognized.

Soul! Such an elusive word. It wasn't until I went to Calcutta that I learnt it. Nawab Sirajuddin Ahmed, my friend in Calcutta, said to me one day, 'Come with me, Mirza, today I shall take you to someone who will fill your heart with delight.'

— Who?

— Nidhu-babu.

— Where is this babu from?

— Oh no, he isn't a babu. But everyone calls him Nidhubabu. His real name is Ramnidhi Gupta. He composes songs, and sings them too, though he cannot sing anymore now.

— Then why should we go?

— You'll enjoy talking to him, Mirza.

It was a small room in a two-storeyed house in a lane that remained dark even in daylight. We arrived in the late afternoon. He was still asleep. When his servant awoke him, he sat up, stretching, and asked Sirajuddin sahib, 'Why at this odd hour, nawab sahib?'

— I have brought a friend of mine.

— A musician?

— A poet. From Dilli.

Greeting me, he said, 'The nawab sahib has brought you here. I'm nearly ninety now. Your servant has no means to entertain you. I cannot sing anymore.'

— You could give us a song or two if you like. Sirajuddin sahib spoke.

— I do wish I could. But my voice does not come alive anymore, nawab sahib, how can you sing when there is no life in the singing? You know that.

— Heaven will materialize on earth if you sing.

— It isn't possible, nawab sahib. Both of us know that. Why are you lying? The notes come from the navel—the melody comes from the notes—how will there be melody when the navel is shrivelled? You know very well that fooling people by croaking like a crow is not my calling. Please sit down, gentlemen, don't keep standing.

There were no sitting arrangements in the room; we took our seats on Nidhu babu's bed. 'Are you in Calcutta on work?' he asked.

I explained everything to him. After a few moments' silence, he said, 'These bastards have come here to suck this country dry. They will do nothing for you and me. You've never heard Sadhak Ramprasad sing. Do you remember him, nawab sahib?'

আমার আশা আশা কেবল আশা মাত্র হলো
চিত্রের কমলে যেমন ভৃঙ্গ ভুলে গেল
খেলব বলে ফাঁকি দিয়ে নামালে ভূতল
এবার যে খেলা খেলালে মাগো আশা না পুরিলো

I came full of hope, but all in vain
Like the bee deceived by the flower in the picture
You said you'd play, but you threw me back to earth
Your games this time have dashed my hopes

Like the Englishman, this city has no heart either, Mirza sahib. You won't get anything here. Go back to Dilli. We have a new breed of gentlemen in this town now, who claim that all of Nidhu-babu's songs are obscene. You shit-eaters, will the English now decide what is decent and what is not? Where will you make room for Bharatchandra then? Will you wipe Vidyasagar off altogether? That bloody foreigner—that damned Derozio—is teaching people to drink and eat meat and claim that an English education is the best education. Do you think we drank any less or ate any less meat than you? We had our kept women too. Doesn't mean we became dissolute rakes. Listen to this song:

প্রাণ তুমি বুঝলে না আমার বাসনা
ওই খেদে মরি আমি তুমি তা বুঝো না
হৃদয় সরোজে থাক মোর দুঃখ নাই দ্যাখো
প্রাণ গেলে সদায়াতে কি গুণ বলোনা

You never understood my desire, my soul
The regret kills me, but you don't know
Let the lotus claim the heart, I don't care
What value in a soul that dies of only virtue?

Tell me, is this song of Nidhu-babu's obscene?

He sang a succession of tappas for us. And each of them included the word 'soul'. He seemed to be offering us a fully-bloomed flower with every utterance. Exhausted with this singing, he sat in silence for a long time.

'How fortunate I am!' declared Sirajuddin sahib. 'I have heard you sing again after such a long time.'

Turning to me, Nidhu-babu said, 'Go back, mian, go back to Dilli. Calcutta will offer you nothing at all. All you'll get is humiliation. The blind have the best eyesight today. People here care for nothing but scandal. Mahananda Rai Bahadur, the maharaja of Murshidabad, used to spend a few days in Calcutta from time to time. He had a fixed whore named Srimati. I used to sing for his pleasure every evening. I cannot tell why, but Srimati was fond of me too; she would ensure I was looked after while I was there. People began to whisper that she was my whore. I may have composed many of my songs with her in mind, but did that make her my whore? This is how Calcutta interprets things. The longer you stay here, the more you'll come to understand. Talent has no value here, what you need is the gift of the gab. All this is the result of Western education, Mirza, they do not think of anyone beside themselves as human beings.'

When we were leaving, Nidhu-babu put his hand on my shoulder and said, 'Don't despair, mian sahib, you have a long road ahead of you. I am done, which is why I was babbling.'

Since I've mentioned Nidhu-babu, I must mention another poet too. The poet Ramprasad Sen had died long before Nidhubabu. He was a devotee and a poet, Manto bhai. It was said that the goddess Kali had appeared in the guise of his daughter and joined in the work of mending the fence around his house. There were many other stories about him. Devi Annapurna from Kashi had come to listen to him sing. He used to write his songs in the ledger of the office where he worked. One of his tunes, in Pilu Bahar, buzzed around my mind like a bee for many years; but it too was lost. All colour, all melody bid farewell to me gradually.

What Nidhu-babu had said made me see a different Calcutta through his eyes. And this same Calcutta—which did not know how to honour its noblest—soon sucked me into its quagmire. A big mushaira used to be held on the first Sunday of every month. Even Dilli did not have mushairas as large as this one. Nearly five thousand people would gather. After my ghazals, a group of people questioned the language and style of my work, citing Qateel. No matter what people say, I never considered Qateel one of the great Persian poets. How could I? He was actually Dilwali Singh, a Khatri from Faridabad who converted to Islam later. Yes, I can accept it if you talk of Amir Khusrau. When I said as much at the mushaira, people started shouting. I remembered what Nidhu-babu had told me. I went home without prolonging the argument. But my silence didn't matter. Why should Qateel's followers spare me? They began to harass me. I thought it over and decided that I was in Calcutta to settle my pension; there was nothing to be gained by antagonizing people, for there was no telling who could prove useful. I wrote a poem in *Baad-e-Mukhalif*, seeking forgiveness. But I did not abandon my stance, Manto bhai. People were astonished. 'What have you done, Mirza sahib?' asked Raja Shohanlal.

— What do you mean?

— Why did you have to demean yourself this way?

— Don't you know that even the ant kicks the elephant when it falls into a pit? The elephant has to plead with the ant for rescue.

— But still, you …

— I'm no one. You could say I'm an eternal slumber.

— Meaning?

As if I knew the damned meaning. I just said things that popped into my head. If I could have thought things out carefully before speaking, life would have become a bed of velvet, Manto bhai. But I didn't want that either. I went back to Dilli from Calcutta filled with despair, but I couldn't forget Calcutta. Many small incidents come to mind, you know. I met many senior English officers in pursuit of my case; I don't remember them anymore. But there was a fishwife whom I cannot forget. I used to visit Shimla bazaar every day with a servant in tow to buy fish and vegetables and fruits. I became friendly with a fishwife in this market. She used to get topshe for me regularly—what the English referred to as 'mango fish'. Small fish, orange in colour. It was a delicacy when fried. Especially with a drink. After a brief exchange of pleasantries, this fishwife used to tell me a new story every day. If someone came up to buy fish during this time, she would snarl, 'Get out, can't you see I'm having a heart-to-heart with mian?'

'Heart-to-heart?' the customer would ask. 'So you won't sell fish now?'

— No I won't. It's my fish, none of your business whether I sell it or not. Turning to me, she would say, 'Now listen, mian, you'll die laughing when you hear what Bhattacharya the Brahmin said.'

The lure of the story would make me sit down by her side.

— All that these Brahmin Bhattacharyas did was to pore over their textbooks and stare at the sky, rapt in thought. Nothing in the world caught their eye. One of these Brahmin's wives was making dal in the kitchen. Suddenly she ran out of water. Leaving her husband to watch over the dal, she went out to fetch some water. While she was gone, the dal began to boil over. This was a crisis. Do you know what he did eventually? Winding his sacred thread around his hand, he held it out over the dal and began to read the scriptures. Have you ever heard of such a thing, mian? Imagine reading the scriptures to stop the dal from boiling over!

— And then?

— When his wife returned and saw what had happened, she said, 'What! Couldn't you have put in a little oil?' As soon as she poured oil into the pan, the boiling dal subsided. Do you know what Bhattacharya did then, mian?

— What did he do?

The fishwife rolled against me with laughter. She was shameless. Running her hand through my beard, she said, 'The Brahmin put his head on his wife's feet, saying, who are you, Goddess? Even I admitted defeat, but you conquered all simply by sprinkling a drop of oil.'

— And then?

— What do you think? 'What nonsense!' shrieked his wife and left. The fishwife asked, laughing, 'Can a man ever compete with a woman, mian?'

If it's masculinity you want to talk about, Manto bhai, there's only one man I can think of, and that's Rammohan Roy. I never saw him myself. But I heard about him everywhere in Calcutta. Apparently courtesans used to dance at the feasts he hosted at home. There were many famous courtesans in Calcutta at the time—Begumjaan, Hingul, Nannijaan, Supanjaan, Zeenat, Syed Buksh. No, my brothers, I didn't see any of them. They were contracted to the rich gentlemen of Calcutta. I had no connection with these babus. I was told that babu Rammohan used to publish a Farsi newspaper named *Meerat-ul-Akhbar*. But it had closed down before I reached Calcutta. However, another Farsi newspaper named *Jamijahanuma* was still being published. Not to mention several other newspapers in English and Bengali. Calcutta got me addicted to reading the newspaper. There were no newspapers in Dilli yet. How could there be? Newspapers needed printing presses, after all. And Calcutta had so many such presses. Sirajuddin sahib showed me a book. Bharatchandra's *Annadamangal*, which, he said, was

printed by someone named Gangakishore Bhattacharya. I also heard of someone named Panchanan Karmakar. He was the first to create a Bengali typeface for printing.

I was talking of Rammohan Roy, wasn't I, Manto bhai? I never saw him with my own eyes, though I heard many canards about him. But when I heard about his fight against the Sati system, none of those other things mattered anymore. I saw an act of Sati being committed at the Nimtala cremation ground. And I saw people on their way to death. Dying people would be carried to the bank of the Ganges and put in a room there; every day, when the tide rose, his family would submerge him partly in the water. It was called the antaryali yatra, Manto bhai, dying in the holy water of the Ganges. They would die after days and weeks of suffering under the sun and in the rain and the cold. After minimal rites, their bodies would be floated out on the currents. During the Sati ceremony, the pyre would be made with sandalwood and the flames lit with ghee; the wife would be burnt to death along with her husband's body. Incantations would be chanted, bells would be rung, drums would be beaten—it was like a celebration. No one could hear the painful sounds of a woman being burnt alive. When I saw this scene for the first time, Nidhu-babu's songs kept reverberating in my breast—soul. I learnt afterwards that Rammohan's efforts did lead to the end of this practice.

I abandoned all my hopes when I left Calcutta. I went away only with memories such as these. Yes, Manto bhai, a wondrous spring breeze may indeed blow there, but I had to return from the same city with my forehead bloodied from banging against walls. When I returned to Dilli, it was with a debt burden of some forty thousand rupees.

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Our work on translating Manto's novel was held up for a long time. For, Tabassum had become the mother of a little angel. So I didn't disturb her for a couple of months. She had named her daughter Falak Ara. Meanwhile, I too had passed through an unfamiliar phase in my life. My drinking had unexpectedly increased so much that I had had to be admitted to a hospital. During the fortnight that I spent among addicts and the insane, I realized that these individuals also had their own dialogue. It was just that they were not like our normal, everyday exchanges. Instead, they were much more strongly coloured by dreams and incoherence. Sitting at the window of the mental hospital, I sensed the sour smell of the sky that Sukumar Roy wrote about in his nonsense verse. Madness is nothing but the name of a soul without an address.

To tell the truth, I was losing interest in translating Manto's novel. Because those people in the mental hospital were drawing me to themselves; over and over again I wished I could return to their midst. Why, when, where, how—questions like these did not exist there; only the continuous monologues from some, and the shadow of silence from others, cast a long way in the distance.

One day I phoned Tabassum to find out how Falak Ara was.

— You cannot imagine how much this baby can smile. Come and see for yourself. What kind of tarbiyat is it to merely enquire over the phone?

— One of these days.

— And what about our work?

— You mean Manto's novel …

— You seem to have forgotten it completely.

— I haven't.

— Then come on over, let's resume our work.

I was silent.

— What is it? Why don't you say something, janab?

— I'm wondering …

— What?

— Why Manto's ghost chose to possess me of all people!

I heard Tabassum laugh. —You allowed him yourself. Do you want to shake him off now?

— How would it be if I did?

— No, janab. Don't do that. I read the entire novel while I was carrying Falak Ara. How I've fallen in love with Manto sahib as I read. A writer—no pretence, no airs—who has presented himself through Mirza Ghalib. Don't be unjust to such an honest writer. Come, we shall definitely finish the translation.

— How did you know Manto is an honest writer? I laughed.

— I can tell. I'm not a writer, so I can't explain it. Just like a person can tell when it's real love.

— How do you tell?

— I don't know.

In my head, I said, preserve your ignorance, Tabassum. So long as you do, I can keep visiting you.

— Why are you silent?

— Can I visit you tomorrow?

— Of course! You don't have to ask. And you must see Falak Ara too.

— Hmm. The novel that's just been started.

— What novel?

— Falak Ara. She's a novel too.

— You only have novels in your head, don't you?

— My head only holds shit and dung and garbage.

I went to Tabassum's house the next day. Her daughter Falak Ara was truly a necklace of stars; she seemed to have been painted by the artist Bihzad's brush. I couldn't tear my eyes away from the child.

— What are you staring at? Tabassum asked with a smile.

— Mir sahib wrote a sher.

— Which?

— *Alam-e-husn hai ajab alam, chahiye ishq is bhi alam se.*

— Honestly! Mir sahib's sher for a baby?

— You'll never know when and from which direction the dagger of beauty will strike.

— Have you been struck by such a dagger recently?

— All the daggers are rusted, Tabassum. They don't make the blood flow freely. They cause infection within.

— I see you've mastered courtly dialogue.

I laughed. —That's why I like you, Tabassum.

— Why?

— Because of this.

— What do you mean?

— I don't know.

— Wait, let me find someone to take care of this girl.

As soon as Tabassum left, the ravenous mirror on the wall swallowed me. Agra's Charbagh appeared in a mirror in the distance. There … there they were … Asadullah standing before Begum Falak Ara with bowed head. And here in Tabassum's house in a lane of central Calcutta another Falak Ara had been born. People don't return, but names do, over and over. In some time I saw Tabassum in the same mirror.

— What do you keep looking at in this mirror?

— So many paths are concealed in this mirror of yours.

— Paths?

— Never mind. Tell me about Manto sahib.

— Hmm. Let's resume, shall we … Opening her cupboard, she took Manto's manuscript out. Sitting on the bed and leafing through its pages, she said, 'Will you write today?'

— I didn't bring my notebook.

— So many excuses not to work.

— I'll take it down tomorrow. Let me just listen to you reading today.

— But you must complete this translation.

— I will, most certainly I will. Read now.

Tabassum began to read.

I started my story about Mirza Ghalib at a time when my days were numbered. I was done for after moving to Pakistan. My heart felt like a plot of fallow land. Only a few damaged, thorny weeds had survived on it. I could not decide what to do. At times I thought I should stop writing; at other times, I felt that I must keep writing irrespective of what people said. I reached a point where I wished that I could give up my pen and ink and just curl up in a quiet corner, that I could guillotine any ideas that popped up in my head; if even this little bit of peace proved beyond my reach, I'd earn money on the black market, make fat profits by selling poisoned liquor. I needed money, needed it desperately. Not even the stories and newspaper articles I wrote all day and night brought in enough money to run the household. I worried about what would happen to my wife and three daughters if I died suddenly. Call me what you will—writer of obscene stories, reactionary—but I was a husband and a father of three daughters. If one of them fell ill I would have to go around with a begging bowl. And besides household expenses, I also needed money for my alcohol. I could no longer write a single sentence unless I was charged with liquor. Tell me, Uncle Sam, is this what fate should hold for a writer?

I got back from hospital again yesterday. Shafia had left no stone unturned in trying to get me to give up drinking. They didn't understand that alcohol was consuming me now. I spent a lot of time at some of my friends' places simply in order to drink. They had nothing to do with my writing. They didn't even know who Manto was. I didn't want to tell them either. All I saw was my mind and body rotting away by the day. I really found myself repugnant sometimes. I always wanted to keep everything neat and clean; I even cleaned the house myself because Shafia wouldn't be able to do it all by herself. I wouldn't be able to rest unless I had removed every speck of dust. Shafia used to say I was obsessed. But unless our surroundings are well maintained, we cannot be beautiful inside. Drinking was not just an addiction for me, I would also follow the etiquette of drinking flawlessly. I had bought many different kinds of glasses when we lived in Bombay. And now I hid the alcohol bottles behind the commode in the bathroom. At times Shafia asked me why I visited the bathroom so frequently. I lied. I needed to urinate, or I wanted to splash water on my face. I didn't have qualms about any kind of lie. But I had never lied to Shafia earlier. My addiction was taking me down the road to moral degeneration.

But what could I do? My pen wouldn't move without a drink. And if I didn't write there would be no money. I knew I was whirling around within a labyrinth. I knew there was no respite from this situation except through death. But I must finish this story about Mirza before I go. I had sat down with paper and pen in the morning. For a few days after returning from the hospital I didn't usually feel like a drink. I felt as though my body was covered with fresh grass; I could get its aroma—how clean it smelled. Every single time I vowed to myself, No! Never again. I'm not going to touch alcohol anymore. I like chatting with Shafia and my daughters. And a few days later I was back to queuing up at the liquor shop.

I was trying to write. I kept doodling on the paper, but not a single word emerged. My mind was a complete blank. I couldn't even decide how to begin. I knew a drink was all I needed for my pen to start racing. Suddenly someone screamed in the lane outside, 'Khaled mian … Khaled mian …'

The pen slipped from my fingers. I had a premonition of a terrible calamity; maybe the house would collapse. 'Jujiyaji … Jujiyaji …' I called out loudly.

This was the name I used affectionately for our youngest daughter Nusrat. She ran up to me from wherever she had been playing. I scooped her up in my arms and began to kiss her. Shafia entered at that moment. Smiling, she said, 'Father and daughter seem very much in love today.'

— Sit down, Shafia.

Setting Nusrat back on her feet, I asked her, 'Were you playing?'

— Yes, abba.

— Run along, then.

As thin as a grasshopper, she ran off laughing.

I looked at Shafia. How early she was ageing—because she had come into Manto's life. Shafia came up to me and put her hand on my shoulder. 'Why the tears, Manto sahib?' she asked.

— Do you ever think of Khaled mian?

Shafia sank her nails into my shoulder. She was turned to stone in an instant.

— I thought of him today after a long time.

Shafia flopped down on the floor like a tree felled by a storm. I sat down opposite her. Her head was bowed for a long time; finally she raised her face. A face which, it seemed to me, had just been sculpted in stone.

— I wrote a story about Khaled mian, Shafia. I never gave it to you to read.

— Why not?

— It would have made you miserable.

— Khaled died in my arms, Manto sahib, didn't I endure it?

— Death can be endured, Shafia, but memory cannot. We can bear many hard blows in life, Shafia. Maybe we don't even remember them afterwards. But some written words can make us cry every time. A story holds nothing but memories, after all.

— Will you tell me the story today?

— Do you want to hear it?

— For Khaled's sake.

— My name was Mamtaz in the story. Mamtaz would wake up early every morning and start sweeping the three rooms they lived in. So that there wasn't a speck of dust anywhere. His son Khaled had just begun to walk on unsteady legs. Children of this age pick up whatever they find on the floor and put it in their mouths. Mamtaz would be surprised to discover that no matter how much he cleaned the rooms, the boy would inevitably find something to put in his mouth. It might be plaster flaking off the wall, or a burnt matchstick overlooked in a corner of the room. And Mamtaz would berate himself mentally.

The closer Khaled's first birthday approached, the more an irrational fear spread over Mamtaz's heart. He was afraid all the time that Khaled would die before he was a year old. He had even told his wife this one day out of fear. She was dumbfounded. Mamtaz didn't believe in such superstitions. 'Incredible,' his wife said. 'How can you say such things? Let me tell you Mamtaz sahib, our son will live to be a hundred. You will be amazed at the arrangements I've made for his birthday.' Still he remained in the grip of the fear.

Khaled was quite healthy. His cheeks seemed to be rouged. Before going to office, Mamtaz bathed his son in a tub of water every day. But of late, dark clouds gathered in his mind while bathing Khaled. 'My wife is right,' he told himself. 'How did this fear of Khaled dying crop up in my mind? Why should he die? He's healthier than most children. Is the fear because of my love for him?'

Mamtaz enjoyed sprawling on a mat after he had swept the floor every morning. Khaled's birthday was just a day away. Suddenly sensing something heavy on his chest, Mamtaz opened his eyes to discover Khaled lying there. His wife stood next to him. Khaled had apparently tossed and turned all night, trembling constantly in fear. Holding his son in his arms, Mamtaz said, 'Lord, please protect my son …'

— Why worry so, Mamtaz sahib? It's just a fever; by God's grace it will go away quickly. His wife left. Mamtaz cuddled and kissed his son.

Mamtaz's wife had made elaborate arrangements for Khaled's first birthday. All their friends and relatives had been invited. She had ordered new clothes for Khaled. Mamtaz wasn't in favour of such ostentation. He wanted the first birthday to pass quietly. There would be nothing to be afraid of after that.

Khaled got off his chest and tottered into the other room. Mamtaz remained as he was. Suddenly he heard his wife scream, 'Mamtaz sahib, come quickly, Mamtaz sahib.'

Running into the room, Mamtaz found his wife standing outside the bathroom with Khaled in her arms. He scooped the boy up from her. His limbs were twitching violently. Khaled had had a fit suddenly while playing in the water. His body was contorted horribly in Mamtaz's arms. Mamtaz laid him down on the bed. Khaled thrashed about for some time before falling unconscious. He was still. 'Khaled is gone,' Mamtaz sobbed.

'Ya Allah, what are you saying!' his wife snarled back. 'He's having convulsions—he'll be fine soon.'

Khaled opened his eyes a little later. Leaning over him, Mamtaz said, 'Khaled, my son, what is it, where does it hurt?'

A smile appeared on Khaled's lips. As soon as Mamtaz picked him up and took him into the next room, his convulsions began again. Khaled trembled like a patient of epilepsy. Mamtaz could not quieten him down. Then Khaled became calm again. Mamtaz went out to fetch a doctor. Examining him, the doctor said, 'Children have convulsions like this sometimes. It might be because of worms. I'm prescribing medicines. Nothing to worry about.'

But Khaled's condition deteriorated, and his fever rose. The doctor came again the next day. 'Don't be frightened, mian,' he said. 'Looks like bronchitis. He'll be fine in three or four days.'

Khaled's temperature kept rising. Besides the medicines prescribed by the doctor, he was given holy water on their servant Jamshed's advice. A different doctor came in the afternoon. Suspecting malaria, he gave the child a quinine injection. Khaled's temperature rose to 106 degrees. Mamtaz decided that Khaled would have to be taken to the hospital. Calling a carriage, he left with Khaled and his wife.

Mamtaz had been feeling thirsty all the time. How much water he had drunk! On their way to the hospital, he decided to stop for a drink of water. And someone seemed to tell him, 'Remember mian, if you have a drink of water your Khaled will die.' His throat felt parched like sandpaper, but he refused to drink water.

As they were about to reach the hospital, he lit a cigarette. He threw it away after a couple of puffs. Someone seemed to say, 'Don't smoke, Mamtaz, or else your son will die.' Who was saying all this in his ears? Nonsense. He tried to light another cigarette, but failed.

When Khaled was admitted to the hospital, the doctor informed them, 'He has bronchial pneumonia. It doesn't look good.'

Khaled was unconscious. His mother sat by his side on the bed. Mamtaz felt thirsty again. As he was about to drink some water from the tap near the ward, he heard the same voice again. 'What are you doing, Mamtaz? Don't drink any water, or your Khaled will die.' But Mamtaz couldn't stop; he felt as

though even an ocean would not quench his thirst. When he returned, he found Khaled had turned even paler. If I hadn't drunk water, he wouldn't have wasted away so quickly, reflected Mamtaz. But the same voice within him kept saying, Khaled will die before he turns one.

Evening was descending. Several doctors examined Khaled. He was given many different medicines and injections. But Khaled did not recover consciousness. Suddenly the same voice said, 'Leave the hospital at once, Mamtaz, else Khaled will die.'

Mamtaz left the hospital. The voice in his head kept giving him different instructions. Following the orders, he went to a restaurant and ordered a drink. When the drink was served, the voice told him, 'Throw it away.' When he did, the voice instructed him again, 'Order some more.' Another drink was served. The voice said, 'Throw it away.'

Paying for the drinks and the broken glasses, Mamtaz came out of the restaurant. He felt as though all other sounds besides the voice had disappeared from the world. He returned to the hospital; as he was on his way to Khaled's ward, the voice said, 'Don't go there, Mamtaz. Khaled will die if you do.'

He lay down on a bench inside the hospital. It was nearly ten at night. Only the clock outside the hospital could be seen in the darkness. 'Khaled will survive, won't he?' he mumbled. 'Why do children come into this world to die? Why does death consume them so soon after they're born? Khaled must have …'

The same voice told him, 'Stay in this position, Mamtaz. Don't move an inch till Khaled recovers.'

Eventually Mamtaz screamed in his head, 'Merciful God, save me. Kill Khaled if you must. Why are you making me suffer so?'

Two people near him were talking to each other.

— Such a beautiful child.

— I couldn't bear to look at his mother. She kept begging and pleading with the doctors and sobbing.

— The child can't be saved.

Suddenly they spotted Mamtaz. —What are you doing here?

Mamtaz went up to them.

— Who are you? One of them asked.

Mamtaz's throat was parched. 'I'm a patient, doctor,' he croaked.

— Why are you outside if you're a patient? Go inside. Why are you here?

— Sir, my son … in the ward upstairs …

— Your son …

— You were probably talking about him. My son, Khaled …

— You're his father?

Mamtaz could only nod.

— And you're lying around on this bench? Go upstairs at once.

Mamtaz ran. As soon as he climbed up the stairs to the ward he saw Jamshed. Grabbing his arm, Jamshed broke into tears. 'Khaled mian has left us, sahib.'

Entering the ward, Mamtaz found his wife had fainted on the same bed. She was surrounded by the doctors and nurses. Mamtaz went up to the bed. Khaled lay with his eyes shut. The peace of death reigned over his face. Running his hand through his son's silky hair, Mamtaz said, 'Want a lozenge, Khaled?'

Looking at Khaled, he muttered, 'Won't you take my fear away with you, Khaled mian?'

Mamtaz thought Khaled was nodding, saying, 'Yes, abba.'

As she listened to the story, Shafia gripped my hand. In surprise I saw that her eyes were glittering like the desert. She got to her feet, calling out, 'Jujiyaji … Jujiyaji …'

Shafia had never addressed Nusrat by that name before.

27

کچھ خوب نہیں اتنا ستانا بھی کسو کا
ہے میر فقیر ،اُسکو نہ آزار دیا کر

Is it right to cause a person such pain?
Mir is already destitute, don't hurt him more

Just consider the writ of destiny. I went to Calcutta with the intention of returning with a bagful of money. I came back instead with the tattered pouch of a pauper. I was reminded of a Sufi tale, Manto bhai. It was stories like these that kept me alive, or else I would have given up long ago. One day a Sufi saint told his disciples, no matter how much you try to help a man, there's always something within him that prevents him from meeting his goals. Many of his followers did not accept this. A few days later, he told one of his disciples, take a sack of gold coins to the bridge over the river and leave it there. To another, he said, search the town for a person overburdened with debt. Bring him to the bridge and tell him to cross it. Then observe what happens. The disciples followed his instructions. As soon as the man chosen to cross the bridge arrived on the opposite bank, the saint asked, 'What did you see in the middle of the bridge?'

— Why, nothing at all.

— You didn't see anything?

— No.

— How can that be possible? One of the disciples asked.

— When I was crossing the bridge I wondered what it would be like to walk with my eyes shut. Would I still make it across the bridge? I did.

The saint smiled at his followers.

This story haunted me on my way back from Calcutta. There were plenty of gold coins scattered along the road, Ghalib, but on a whim you travelled with your eyes shut. So you got nothing. When I thought about it afterwards, I realized that my life could not have turned out any other way. I made a string of mistakes. I could never quite grasp the rules of worldly living. Things inevitably turned out differently from the way I imagined them. I wonder why, Manto bhai. It wasn't as though I was oblivious to reality, I did travel all the way to Calcutta to secure my pension, didn't I? I did things for people who needed help. I annoyed the people whom it was fun to annoy. But still I ended up like that man, crossing the bridge with my eyes closed because of a whim.

In fact, that was why it took me so long to get a place at the royal court in Dilli. You couldn't call it a place, really. I barely held on to it. I didn't understand court machinations, and then the era of the white men was about to begin. All told, Manto bhai, it was a mess. Politics seemed beyond an idiot like

me. I would probably have grasped some of it had I tried, but I didn't bother. Zauq was on top of all this. Which is why Jahanpanah Bahadur Shah couldn't bear to let him out of his sight. But how many of Zauq sahib's shers do you remember today? One man cannot do two jobs, Manto bhai. Politics and poetry belong to two different worlds. If you want victory in one of them, you have no choice but to face defeat in the other. I could not score a victory in the world of politics. Zauq sahib would smile every time he saw me. I would say in my head, all right mian, smile some more, but while you dance to the tune of the court, poetry is deserting you, and you're not even aware of it. One day, Zauq sahib asked me in jest, 'Why can't people understand your shers, Mirza? Why do you make them so difficult?'

With a smile I answered, 'Your heart has not turned to stone, has it?'

— Meaning?

Instead of answering, I recited a sher of Momin sahib's:

رویا کریں گے آپ بھی پہروں اسی طرح
اٹکا کہیں جو آپ کا دل بھی میری طرح

You will weep too every hour, just like me
If your heart is trapped, just like me

The more I became embroiled with the Dilli durbar, the more I realized that politics and poetry could never be friends. Our Bahadur Shah Zafar wrote thousands of shers, all of it rubbish, garbage. And because I was his servant I had to correct all of them. For some time I banked on the British with the hope that they would bring about a change. But after 1857, I realized that it was all a power game. And a poet must keep himself away from this jockeying for power, Manto bhai, or else, take it from me, poetry will desert him. He can spout eloquently in court, he can air his opinion on numerous subjects, it's all … all meaningless. What we wanted from a poet was poetry. But what did he give us instead? Encomiums for Emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar. What more were poets like Zauq sahib, who had sold out to one political power or another, capable of giving anyway? Their market price had been decided in advance. Honestly, Manto bhai, I would have delivered a mighty kick on the posterior of that Zauq if I could have. Such a betrayal of the ghazal! Once you've entered politics, you won't even know when treachery seeps into your blood and spreads through it. Politics is actually a game of changing your mask. There was no lustre to Bahadur Shah Zafar's court, for everyone had sold out. But still I saw many conspiracies and cases of backstabbing.

Badshah Akbar Shah, that is to say, Akbar Shah II, was on the throne. Yes, it must have been around 1843. I got my first opportunity to be present at the royal court. Zafar, or Bahadur Shah, was to become the next emperor, but I knew that Akbar Shah wanted another son of his, Saleem, as his successor. He was even conducting negotiations with the British about this. I thought I would have to support Saleem, for Zafar had admitted Zauq to his inner fold by then. In a qaseeda written for Akbar Shah, I sang praises to Saleem; this was the method for securing proximity to kings and emperors. But reality turned out differently. The British did not accept Saleem; Akbar Shah died three years later, and Zafar ascended the throne under the name of Bahadur Shah. You can imagine my situation. I was unceremoniously rejected by Bahadur Shah. I wrote several qaseedas addressed to him, but I neither won his approval, nor found my way to his court. He did accommodate me in his court afterwards on the recommendations made by Kale sahib and Ahsanullah Khan, but as far as he was concerned I was a thorn in his flesh.

Whims are terribly dangerous things; anyone who is at the mercy of whims is certain to find his life overstepping the squares on the chessboard. And then there was my blind belief that Mughal blood coursed through my veins, that no one since Amir Khusrau had written Farsi ghazals the way I could. I refused to acknowledge that blood counted for nothing without money; if you were poor, people would trample all over your ghazals. I could have got a job to teach at the Dilli College. They needed a professor of Farsi. Thompson sahib, secretary to the Indian government, had come to interview candidates. The poet Momin Khan, Maulvi Imam Baksh, and I had been recommended for the post. I was the first to be sent for by Thompson sahib. I took a palanquin to his house, sent word that I had arrived and waited outside. Why should I enter unless he escorted me in personally? If a Mirza arrives at your door, etiquette demands that you escort him in yourself. The Englishman appeared after a long time. 'Why are you waiting outside?' he asked.

I informed him of the protocol of welcoming a Mirza. 'When you appear at the governor's court you will certainly be welcomed suitably,' he laughed. 'But you're here for a job now, Mirza.'

'It is for additional respect that I have determined to enlist for a government job,' I told him. 'Instead, I see that whatever little respect I command now will no longer be mine.'

— There is nothing I can do about it, Mirza.

— Then you will have to excuse me. I shall not accept this job.

I did not give him a second glance and got into my palanquin. The job would have improved my situation. Umrao Begum would have had a smile on her face. But the Lord had planned a different game for my life.

Shahjahanabad turned into a jail for me after my return from Calcutta. I was in debt to the tune of forty thousand rupees. I had no idea how to repay it. Alone in my room, I tore my hair out in despair. Whenever I went out my creditors pounced on me. 'What happened to all your promises before you left for Calcutta, mian?'

'Give me some more time,' I had to mumble. 'Something will be settled soon. My case is in the High Court now.'

But I knew very well that nothing would ensue. The report sent to the High Court was like the Negro's mop of curls, like the blood shed by the lover's heart, like the death sentence being read out on the execution ground.

Creditors on one side, Shamsuddin's entourage of flatterers on the other. With rolling eyes and sly smiles they would ask me, 'Tell us what happened in Calcutta, mian.' They were aware of all that had taken place. But people love rubbing salt in others' wounds. I became an object of laughter for them. I no longer wanted to leave the house. Alone in my diwankhana, I wrote a string of letters to Nasikh sahib and Mir Azam Ali and Hakir. It was like conversing with them. I had no one else to talk to either at home or in Shahjahanabad. All my conversations were with people far away. Gradually I realized that I had no country of my own in this world, I had been sent here in exile.

Umrao Begum appeared unexpectedly in the diwankhana one afternoon. I was drafting a new ghazal in my head and knotting a strip of cloth. You don't know this business of putting knots on cloth, do you? It was an old habit of mine. No one knew when or how a ghazal would suddenly pop up in my head. It was not my practice to settle down with paper and quill. So I would draft a new ghazal and put knots in a length of cloth. Each knot represented a new sher. Eventually I would ask someone to write it all down. As I undid each knot, the corresponding sher would emerge. I didn't have many requirements, Manto bhai. I had never thought of having my own house; I had no regrets for not having any savings either. All I had wanted was that the family could live well, eat well, that I could get

the drink of my choice every evening. I never even bought a book in my life—I borrowed them all. I had no books at home, Manto bhai. What use were they? What had the lord given us the book of our hearts for?

I've been digressing again. Yes, Umrao Begum came to me one afternoon. A particular sher was whirling around in my head.

موت کا ایک دن معین ہے
نیند کیوں رات بھر نہیں آتی

I really was in such a frame of mind then. It felt all the time as though only death could free me from such humiliation and disgrace. But death would not come simply because I wanted it to—it would come when it was time to. But why did sleep elude my eyes all night? It was like sitting before my own grave. I had no option but to imprison myself at home. Creditors surrounded me the instant I stepped out. Sometimes they invaded my house too. Then two of them lodged a complaint in court. The sentence was pronounced—either pay five thousand rupees, or go to jail. Where would I get five thousand rupees? So I stopped going out altogether. There was an unwritten law for aristocrats in Shahjahanabad. Even if there was a warrant for arrest, no one was arrested in his own home. So I had to accept incarceration at home. My friends didn't pay me visits either. This was what was probably called an infidel's life, Manto bhai. But my agony was twice as much as that of the infidel's who spends a hundred years in hell. Urfi's poetry came to mind all the time. The bitter aroma of the poison that destiny had poured into my cup burnt my heart to ashes, making it swing between hope and despair.

'I'm told you don't leave the house at all, Mirza sahib,' said Begum.

'Do you actually keep track of my life, Begum?' I asked with a smile.

— Can't you ever speak without sarcasm?

— Why should I be sarcastic? You live in the mosque, how can news of the infidel reach you?

— I am probably the greatest enemy of your life, am I not?

— Why do you say that? Don't you get a joke? Sit down, Begum. I told her the entire story.

— But how will you survive like this, Mirza sahib?

— I am surviving, Begum.

— No, people go mad if they have to live this way. Why do your friends not visit you?

— Who are these friends? I have just one. Death. I have no idea when he will visit.

— Ya Allah! Why do you talk of death?

— What else can I ask for from life? I lead a life without purpose. I don't see a design. There was supposed to have been a design. For quite some time now I've been thinking of Shamsuddin Tabrizi, Maula Rumi's guide. Shamsuddin sahib was a young man then. He couldn't sleep for days on end; he lost his appetite. His family kept asking him, what's the matter, Muhammad … yes, his real name was Muhammad Malekdad … why can't you sleep, why don't you eat? Shamsuddin sahib answered, 'Allah created me from the dust. Why doesn't he talk to me? Why should I eat or sleep then? I want to learn from him why I was created, when I came here, where I will go next. Only if he answers me will I be able to eat and sleep again.' If only I could see the design of my life, Begum.

— Then why do you make fun of me, Mirza sahib?

— I don't make fun of you, Begum. But our paths are different. Your Allah lives in the mosque, you read the namaz five times a day for him. Maulvis and mullahs show you the way. And my lord lives in

the dargah, where Maula Rumi sings and dances the Sama. My way is not for you, Begum; I seek the lord through pleasure and celebration.

— So do I, Mirza sahib. But you don't even talk to me. Umrao burst into tears as she spoke. For the first time, Manto bhai, it occurred to me that she too had been imprisoned for a long time. If only I could have extended my hand towards her even once. But I could not. Once you've been misdirected, Manto bhai, how long does it take to be pure again?

Umrao Begum went off to the mahalsarai. And instantly I put a knot in the cloth.

دکھاؤں گا تماشا دی اگر فرصت زمانے نے
میرا ہر داغ دل اک تخم ہے سرو چراغاں کا

Listen to me, Begum, this is for you:

If I get the opportunity I will show you that
each of the wounds in my heart is a seed that has sprouted

I did have one friend during my days as a prisoner—my ghazals. I asked this deep secret, this melody, tell me why my destiny has condemned me to lifelong imprisonment. Do you know what it said in reply? Do you consider yourself a crow that will be trapped in a net only to be set free? You've been locked up in a cage because you're a nightingale; you will sing for many unborn generations. How well we create mirages for ourselves! No words can express Ghalib's failure, Manto bhai. My house is sunk in darkness. I am nothing but an extinguished candle. I am too ashamed to look at my own darkened face.

The days were passing in this fashion. I could not keep track of time. It felt as though I had been imprisoned in this room since birth. My only conversations were with Kallu now and then. When he brought my drink in the evening, Kallu would sit with me for some time. He had only one addiction—stories. He didn't speak, only waiting with wide eyes for me to talk. Once I did, he would plead for a story. I never saw such a strange man, my brothers. He didn't say a word when the story ended. Who wants to tell stories every day? But I would tell him stories sometimes. How would Kallu live without his stories? I told him an interesting story about love once. I'll tell you too, you'll enjoy it as well, my brothers. How long can you listen to stories from Ghalib's shroud-covered life?

This is a story about a beautiful woman. Her name was Jahanara. What was her beauty like? As Mir sahib wrote in a sher:

اُس کے فروغ حسن سے چھکے ہے سب نے
شمع حرم ہو یا کہ دیا سومناتہ کا

Everything's indebted to the brightness of her beauty
Whether it's the flame at Kaba or the lamp at Somnath

Three young men came to the nawab's court with the intention of marrying Jahanara. All three were well-matched; the nawab could not decide whom to give his daughter in marriage to. Eventually he left the choice to her. Such was the Lord's desire. The months rolled by, but Jahanara could not make up her mind. She could not get married for a sudden illness claimed her life. The three young men laid her in her grave together. The first one remained at the graveyard. All he could think about was the twist of destiny that had snatched his beloved so soon from this world.

The second young man became a wandering fakir. He wanted to find out the reason for the death of the woman he had loved. And the third young man stayed back with the nawab to console him.

The one who became a fakir arrived at an unknown land. He heard that an extraordinary man lived here, capable of miracles. The young fakir arrived at his house. When they sat down to dinner that night, the grandson of the wise man began to cry. At once the wise man rose and flung the boy into the fire.

'What have you done?' shrieked the young fakir. 'I have seen many sins and horrors in this world, but can anyone commit such a dastardly act?'

Smiling, the wise man said, 'Don't be distraught. Even ordinary events seem unusual without proper knowledge.' He recited an incantation, whereupon the child walked out of the fire.

The young fakir memorized the incantation. He returned to his own land after some time. As soon as he recited the incantation at the grave of his beloved, Jahanara appeared before him. The nawab launched a nationwide celebration when his daughter returned. The three young men came once more to marry Jahanara. Do you know whom Jahanara chose? She chose her lover. Do you know who her lover was, Manto bhai?

Why are you staring at me that way? I cannot acknowledge you as a writer unless you can tell me the answer.

Yes, you're right! I knew you could do it. The young fakir gave Jahanara her life—it was humane behaviour on his part. The third young man comforted the nawab like his own son. But only the first … yes, he was the only lover, who had remained by the beautiful woman's grave all this while. Even death had not been able to push him away.

The days were passing in this fashion. Suddenly I heard that Fraser sahib, the Resident of Dilli, had been murdered. Ya Allah!

28

تم سے بے جا ہے مجھے اپنی تباہی کا گلہ
اس میں کچھ شائبہ خوبی تقدیر بھی تھا

How do I tell you you're the cause of my ruination
The ten hands of fate had something to do with it too

The city of Bombay used to talk to me, Mirza sahib. And why shouldn't it, after all? There were so many similarities in our lives, Bombay's and mine, that sometimes I thought the city had been waiting for my arrival. Even when I went to Lahore after the Partition, my brothers, I felt as though I was still in Bombay. My love affair with Bombay lasted twelve years; when I left the city, I felt like a bird crippled by the loss of its wings. It was Bombay that had offered shelter to a vagabond like me. Whether you earn two paise or ten thousand rupees a day here, Manto—Bombay had whispered in my ear—you can enjoy yourself thoroughly if you want to. Or you can spend your life here as the unhappiest man in the world. You can do exactly as you please. No one will try to find fault with you. No one will badger you to become a good person. You will have to do all the difficult things yourself, yes, you will have to take the most important decisions all by yourself too. You can live on the pavement, or you can live in a palace; it makes no difference to me. It won't even make any difference to me if you leave me. I will be exactly where I am now. Bombay took me by the hand and familiarized me with all its lanes and bylanes, with its refined neighbourhoods, with the sea, with its nights and days, with its thrills and delights, and sins and downfalls. Sometimes I feel that if I ever loved anyone, it was this city, and nobody else.

My life was very insignificant compared to Mirza sahib's, my brothers. So if I have to tell the story of my life, I have to talk about many other people. Bombay made me learn about all these people. I knew all the characters in my stories; not just knew—I had actually lived with them, they were companions of my soul. Whatever I wrote, all … all of it was personal, all of it about things that I had seen and heard and known for myself. I was not inspired by any particular kind of politics. Which was why terms like progressive and reactionary were fired at me at different points of time. There has never been a literature more hideous and dishonest than the stories and novels published on thousands of tons of paper under the label of progressive literature in the Soviet Union. It cannot be called literature. I never looked at the world through a political or philosophical filter, my brothers. I tried to understand it in my own way—even when I heard a story about someone I had never seen, I tried to understand what life had brought for us. Let me tell you Pairan's story then. I had never seen Pairan, I had only heard about her from Brijmohan, but still she is the principal character in this story. Pairan was Bombay's soul, as it were.

I used to live in the kholi that I've told you about. Brijmohan lived in the room next to mine. Every Sunday he would go to Bandra to meet his girlfriend Pairan. Pairan was a Parsi girl. I couldn't quite make out what Brijmohan's real relationship with her was. Why did he actually go to Bandra every Sunday? Pairan was like a powerful addiction in his life. I had to lend him eight annas every time for the journey. He would spend several hours with her before returning. 'What do you do with her?' I had asked him. 'Do you go out, or do you stay at home and kiss her?'

— Oh no! Brijmohan laughed. 'I solve crossword puzzles for Pairan.'

— Crossword puzzles?

— They're published in the *Illustrated Weekly*. Pairan sends entries. She's won many prizes.

Brijmohan had no work. He would sit in his shack and solve crossword puzzles for Pairan. One day I asked, 'Pairan wins the prizes. What do you get?'

— Nothing.

— Doesn't she share the prize money with you?

— No.

— Why? You're the one who solves them, after all.

— So what? Pairan sends the entries with her own name. She wins the prizes. Why should she share the money with me?

— You're a total idiot.

Brijmohan would laugh, displaying yellow teeth.

He used to take photographs. He showed me many photographs of Pairan's. In different poses and outfits. In a shalwar kameez, in a sari, in a shirt and slacks, even in a swimming costume. She didn't appear remotely pretty in the photographs. But I never told Brijmohan this, Mirza sahib. Beauty lies in the eye of the beholder. As they say, it's my senses that make the emerald green. I never asked Brijmohan questions about Pairan. He didn't tell me anything of his own accord either. All I knew was that every Sunday Brijmohan would ask me for eight annas after breakfast, and I would have to give him the money. He always returned by lunchtime. One Sunday, when he came back Brijmohan said, 'I've ended it all.'

— Meaning?

— I never told you this before, Manto bhai. Pairan is actually the angel of death in my life. Whenever I meet her, I lose my job. I told her this today.

— What did she have to say to that?

— Then don't meet me anymore, she said. Look for a job instead. Maybe you think you're not getting a job because of me, but the fault is actually yours. You don't really want to work.

— What did you say?

— Never mind all that, Manto bhai. I'm positively going to get a job tomorrow. Just give me four annas in the morning. I'm going to meet Seth Nanubhai.

Seth Nanubhai was a film director. He had refused Brijmohan a job many times in the past. But still I gave Brijmohan money for his bus fare the next day. At night, I heard that Nanubhai had given him a job. With a monthly salary of two hundred and fifty rupees to boot. Pulling a hundred rupee note out of his pocket, Brijmohan said, 'Here's the advance. I had a strong urge to go to Bandra and let Pairan know. Then I realized that if I did that, I would lose the job the very next day. This is how it has always been, Manto bhai. I get a job, inform Pairan, and I'm sacked. God alone knows what star she was born under. But I'm sure it was an evil star. Listen, Manto bhai, I'm going to spend at least a year away from

her. I have to. Have you seen the state of my clothes? If I can keep my job for a year, I will at least be able to get myself some decent clothes.

Brijmohan didn't visit Pairan in the next six months, Mirza sahib. He worked to his heart's content, and bought himself new clothes. He was very fond of handkerchiefs. He bought many beautifully embroidered handkerchiefs. Suddenly a letter arrived for him. Reading it, Brijmohan exclaimed, 'It's all over, Manto bhai.'

— Why, what's the matter?

— Pairan's written.

— What's she saying?

— She's asked me to visit her on Sunday. Apparently she has a lot to tell me. It's Saturday, isn't it?

— Yes. So what?

— That means Seth Nanubhai will kick me out on Monday.

— Then don't go to Pairan.

— Impossible, Manto bhai. I have to go if she wants me to.

— Why?

Brijmohan was silent for some time. Then he looked at me and chuckled. 'I'm tired of working too, Manto bhai. It's been six months, after all.'

Brijmohan went to Bandra the next day. He didn't tell me anything about Pairan when he returned. 'Let's see what happens tomorrow,' was all he said during dinner at Haji's restaurant.

Brijmohan burst into laughter when he came back from office on Monday. —I knew it, Manto bhai, I knew it. Pairan has done what she had to.

— What's the matter?

— The studio's closed down, Manto bhai. I did it. If I hadn't been to see Pairan yesterday …

Brijmohan went out with his camera slung around his neck. Where was he going with his camera at this hour of the night?

Brijmohan was jobless again. He ran out of his savings. The old system was resumed. Every Sunday he borrowed eight annas from me after breakfast, spent a few hours with Pairan, and returned.

One day I asked Brijmohan, 'Does Pairan love you?'

— No.

— Then why do you visit her every Sunday?

— I can't stay without going, Manto bhai.

— Does Pairan …

'Yes, Pairan loves someone else,' Brijmohan snarled. 'But what's wrong with that?'

— Nothing at all. But why does she send for you?

— She's very lonely.

— Why?

— I don't know. She hasn't told me.

Flopping down on his bed and staring at the ceiling, Brijmohan continued, 'Perhaps she finds me amusing. You need people who can amuse you, Manto bhai. Maybe because I take photographs of her. She looks much prettier in the photos, you see. Or, who knows, maybe it's because I solve crossword puzzles for her. You'll never understand these women, Manto bhai.

— Why not?

— Because you want love.

— And you?

— I don't know. But I know women like Pairan.

— What are they like?

— They love someone, but when they don't get what they want in this person, they look for it in someone else. And when they do, they coil themselves around him like a snake, but mentally. They'll never let him near their bodies.

— Then why do you go?

— Because I like it.

— What is it you like? Pairan doesn't give you anything.

Brijmohan smiled. —But she does. She makes her evil star work on me, Manto bhai. I'm just playing a game. Let me see how many dark clouds she can bring into my life. Pairan is peerless. Every time I visit her, I lose my job. I have just one wish.

— Which is?

— I want to cheat Pairan once.

— How?

Brijmohan was silent for a while. I could hear a rat gnawing away at something in the room. Getting off his bed, Brijmohan began to pace up and down. 'Have you made your plan for cheating Pairan?' I asked him again.

— Hmm …

— What is it?

— I will resign before I'm sacked. I will tell the boss directly, I know you'll sack me, but I'm resigning so that you don't have to do such a terrible thing. I'll tell him something else too. It's not you but Pairan who's sacking me. That's all I wish for, Manto bhai.

— What a strange wish.

— Yes.

Brijmohan left the room, returning after a long time. 'Where did you go?' I asked him.

— To look at the sky. I can't stay in bed for long stretches at night, Manto bhai. I feel suffocated in the kholi. So I go out for a glimpse of the sky.

— What do you see, Brijmohan?

— Nothing.

— Do you look at the stars?

— I only see a dark blue, Manto bhai, in which my strange wishes twinkle. Last Sunday I took a photo of Pairan's. Her lover will enter the photograph in a competition, under his own name. I'm sure the photo will win a prize, Manto bhai.

— Do you know the man?

— No. He's won many prizes in the past with photographs of Pairan that I shot.

— Hasn't Pairan said anything to you about him?

— No.

One Sunday, Brijmohan came back from Bandra and said, 'This time I really have ended it all, Manto bhai. I'll get a job very soon. Seth Niaz Ali is setting up a new production company. Can you get hold of his address for me?'

— Let me see.

I phoned a friend and got Seth Niaz Ali's address. Brijmohan went to meet him the next day. When he came back, he hugged me and said, 'I've got the job, Manto bhai. Two hundred rupees a month. But they'll increase it soon. You're happy, I hope.'

— I'm happy if you are.

— I'm so relieved. Brijmohan threw himself on his bed.

'Aren't you going to meet Pairan?' I asked him the next day.

Brijmohan smiled. 'I do want to. But no, Manto bhai, I'm not going to rush into anything this time. I have to buy some new clothes. Here, I've got an advance of fifty rupees, you keep twenty-five.'

— What for?

— Repaying my debt.

Times weren't too bad, Mirza sahib. I was earning about a hundred rupees a month. Brijmohan was earning twice as much, of course. We didn't particularly lack for money. You could say it was more than enough for life in a kholi.

About five months later, a letter arrived for Brijmohan. Glancing at the envelope he said, 'The queen of death.' I realized it was from Pairan.

Brijmohan opened the letter with a smile on his face. 'She wants to meet on Sunday,' he told me after reading the letter. 'It's urgent.'

— Will you go?

Brijmohan leapt up. —Of course I'll go. How could you imagine, Manto bhai, that I wouldn't go if Pairan called me?

Whistling a recent Hindi film song, Brijmohan sat on his bed, swinging his legs. I was silent for some time. Then I said, 'There's no need to go to Pairan, Brijmohan. You can't imagine how difficult it is to give you eight annas every Sunday after you've been to see her.'

Brijmohan burst into laughter. —I know. Those days are coming back, Manto bhai. I have no idea where you will get eight annas to lend me every Sunday.

Brijmohan went to meet Pairan the very next morning. At night I asked him, 'What did Pairan say?'

— Nothing.

— She said it was urgent.

— That's her usual practice. She's probably frightened all the time.

— Why?

— No one knows. But I told her, this is the twelfth time I'm going to be sacked because of you. May Zarathustra save you.

— What did Pairan say?

— You're an idiot.

— She's right. I smiled at her.

— Absolutely right. Brijmohan laughed. I'll resign first thing tomorrow.

— Why?

— So that they can't sack me. I wrote the resignation letter in Pairan's room.

He handed me the letter.

Brijmohan left early the next morning. When I returned at night, I found him in bed, staring at the ceiling. 'Whom will you go to for a job now?' I asked him.

— Why? Brijmohan sat up in bed.

— Didn't anything happen by Pairan's grace?

Brijmohan stared at me without speaking. I saw tears trembling in his eyes. 'I gave Seth Niaz Ali my resignation letter, Manto bhai,' he rasped. 'The seth handed me a letter a little later. My salary had been raised from two hundred rupees to three hundred.'

Brijmohan lost all interest in Pairan from that day onwards. Later he told me, 'If Pairan's curse doesn't exist anymore, nor does Pairan. My life has lost all its excitement. Whom will I resign for now, Manto bhai?'

I saw Pairan for the first time that day. She had fallen asleep on the beach by the Arabian Sea. A dark ship rose and fell nearby on the waves. Bombay is a city of just such imaginary people, Mirza sahib.

29

رہ گزرسیلِ حوادث ہے بے بنیاد دہر
اس خرابے میں نہ کرنا فکر تم تعمیر کا

This baseless world is only a succession of haphazard events
Don't harbour thoughts of building amidst these ruins

After my return from Calcutta, seventeen years passed in one form of prison or another, Manto bhai. I was reminded of Mir sahib all the time. There he was, locked in a dark cell, his hands and feet trussed. And Mir sahib kept muttering:

پتہ پتہ بوٹا بوٹا حال ہما را جانے ہے
جانے نہ جانے،گل ہی نہ جانے،باغ تو سارا جانے ہے

Every leaf, every shrub, here knows my plight
The entire garden knows, but not the rose

Yes, Manto bhai, flowers are very cruel, they do not care for anyone else. They're drunk on their own fragrance. Have you any idea why? Is it because their lives are so short-lived? Or because they fall to the ground so soon? We fall to the ground too, maybe we spend some more time on earth than flowers do, but we still go up to them, we caress them. But flowers don't even spare a glance for us. Don't you wish you could be born as a flower, Manto bhai? Bloom and spread your scent all night, and then fall to the earth at dawn. What an exquisite creation of the lord's … this life as a flower … like a note that comes to life and instantly loses itself in another one. Do you know what life as a flower is like? Like a grain of melody cascading from mian Tansen's throat … birth and death are fused within that grain, but you will not be able to forget it all your life. When I grew old and looked back on my life, Begum Falak Ara from Chaharbagh seemed to be just such a grain of melody; perhaps it had rolled out of a tawaif's throat somewhere and then been lost, with only its light still being visible, like a dead star. And I became an old man, gazing at the lives of flowers.

ہوش و صبرو خردو دیں ودل وتاب
اُس کے اک آنے میں کیا کیا نہ گیا مت پوچھو

It came but once, Manto bhai. Don't ask for a list of all I lost in that single coming. Peace and patience, strength and health, youth and enterprise, and so much more … I lost them all. And what did

it leave me in return? Only pain. A cry for help that split the night open before dying. See, there goes that cry, carrying an orphaned sher of Mirza Ghalib's:

عشق سے طبیعت نے زیست کا مزہ پایا
درد کی دوا پائی ، د ردِ لاد وا پایا

Yes, my brothers, love brought many of the pleasures of life, I found in it the cure to many agonies, but the pain that it left for me, oh lord, was one that even you don't have a cure for. Why don't you? The lord himself is agony. The older I grew, Manto bhai, the more I felt that Allah is the original agony. Ash-Shahid. What else but agony can be the witness to our lives?

No, don't be restless, my brothers, I do remember that I have to tell you the details of Frazer sahib's murder. You know what, I no longer care to tell stories from my own life. The more of myself I can erase, the more peaceful it is. I stopped writing ghazals for some time—but not because of the pressures of poverty and deprivation, nor because I felt that no one would read my work. I thought it was time to talk to myself; yes, believe me, Manto bhai, I killed my art with my own hands simply in order to genuflect at the feet of agony. I believe that an artist must identify that moment in life when he must assassinate his own art. Why has he really been born in this world? Not to create something, no. After Allah, no one can create anything. At best, we can copy his creations. All we can do is touch life. This gift of the lord's is incomparable, Manto bhai. On a rainy day on my way back from Calcutta, I spotted a lonely hillock. It stood in the middle of a green stretch of land, and at its feet were several mossy graves. I wept. Life was so lonely, so beautiful, bathed in monsoon caresses. Late one night, a Sufi saint had said, weeping, 'We live in the covered coffin of this world amidst such mistakes and ignorance. Can you hear them? When death will arrive to open the lid of the coffin, those of us with wings will fly off towards eternity, while those without wings will remain imprisoned. Do something before the lid is opened, friend, that can turn you into a bird and let you grow wings. Convert your arms into wings as soon as you can.' I knew all this, Manto bhai, but I did not grow wings. And one day I crumpled to the ground, dead, my face buried in the ruins of Shahjahanabad.

Don't be impatient, my brothers. Let this old man ramble on in his own way. I promise not to leave out any of the stories. So, Fraser sahib was murdered one night. He was shot dead near Kashmiri Gate. I turned to stone when I heard. Fraser sahib may have been the Resident of Delhi, but you could say our relationship was one between friends. He was different from the rest of the Englishmen. He thoroughly disliked his colleagues. He wanted to get to know our country, and didn't care a hoot for rules and regulations. I borrowed hundreds of books from his library. We talked about a variety of things. He was the first one to tell me an extraordinary story about the Sufi saint Jami. Should I tell you the story, my brothers? Who is man? Jami had asked. A reflection of light. And this world? A wave in the infinite ocean. Can the light be separated from its reflection? Can the wave be separated from the ocean? Remember, this reflection and this wave are nothing but the light and the ocean. There was another factor behind my friendship with Fraser sahib. He used to assist Shamsuddin's stepbrothers Aminuddin and Ziauddin in their litigation over property. And Shamsuddin, of course, couldn't stand me.

Karim Khan was arrested on the charge of murdering Fraser sahib. He was an employee of Shamsuddin's. The magistrate of Dilli was a friend of mine. Given the mountain of debt on my head, I couldn't leave my house by daylight. Afraid of being arrested, I could only fly like an owl in the silence of the night to the magistrate sahib's home. We discussed Fraser sahib's murder. I never said anything about Shamsuddin. But the investigations revealed that it was he who had engaged Karim Khan to

murder Fraser sahib. Both of them were hanged in public on a Shahjahanabad street. I didn't watch the hanging, but I heard that the crowds spilled over to see it. There is no limit to man's cruelty, Manto bhai. For the first time I realized that the English were just as barbaric. Who knows, maybe the history of civilization is nothing but the history of barbarity from another perspective.

Canards about me began to fly in Shahjahanabad soon after this. Apparently I was the one responsible for Shamsuddin's hanging. As you sow, so you shall reap, but no one realized this. Even Umrao Begum asked me one day, 'Did you tell the magistrate about Shamsuddin bhai, Mirza sahib?'

— Do you believe I did, Begum?

— Everyone says so.

— And that makes it true?

— I know …

— What do you know?

— That you cannot do such a thing.

— But still you asked.

— Forgive me.

— However great an enemy Shamsuddin might be, could I wish for his death?

— I made a mistake, Mirza sahib.

— What a group of people say can never be true, Begum. The truth can only be spoken by individuals. Collective opinion is inevitably a lie.

— Forgive me, Mirza sahib.

I sat there holding Umrao Begum's hand. This was a new love. Die within it, Asad. Your path lies elsewhere. Be the sky, raze the prison walls with your axe. Flee. Be born in colour—right now. Die, and be silent. Silence means you're dead. Your whole life you only ran away from silence. Look, the silent moon has risen in the sky now.

The label of Shamsuddin's killer was stuck on me, my friends. For several years, his grave became a pilgrimage spot for the people of Dilli. And although many Englishmen's graves were allowed to remain intact during the Sepoy Mutiny, Frazer sahib's grave was demolished. People never judge a person by their individuality but only by their creed.

The British, too, viewed us Muslims suspiciously, and Hindus in a different way. Do you know why? Because it was the Hindus who had raised the flag of the renaissance—Bengali Hindus from Calcutta. Most of them were nothing but traders and moneylenders, Manto bhai. Sirajuddin sahib wrote several letters to me from Calcutta, and I replied. When I read his letters I realized that Calcutta was actually a two-faced city; it was the capital, after all, so there was a strong current of education and culture and everything else, but the soul that Nidhu-babu's songs referred to no longer existed.

Shahjahanabad had no soul either. The royal court limped along. The British were gobbling up everything. They ate like sharks, Manto bhai. One day Kallu appeared in the diwankhana with a fakir. Fakir sahib gazed at me for a long time.

— What are you looking at? I asked.

— Bad times are coming, mian.

— How much worse can my life get?

— I'm not talking about you.

— About whom, then?

— Shahjahanabad will become a Karbala, mian.

'Do you see the same Karbala in me by any chance?' I smiled.

— Precisely. I see all of Shahjahanabad in you, mian. All the old houses and mosques in this city in ruins. People lynched on the streets. Women wandering about in rags. Snakes being born from goats' wombs.

I burst into laughter. —When will all this take place, fakir sahib?

— All in good time. You'll see it happening, mian, before you die.

— And what will happen to me?

— You will be the perfect being. Insaan-e-Kamil.

— Don't make me laugh, fakir sahib. I have no insaaniyat. There's nothing humane about me.

— No one is born humane, mian. You'll attain perfect knowledge only after you've been burnt in the fire. Let me tell you a story.

Kallu leapt up. —Yes, let's have a story, baba. Kallu nestled close to the fakir.

— Sal Abdullah went into a trance one day while telling his disciples about the Din. His eyes were red, he kept nodding his head, and his body twitched all the time. Ibn Salim asked him afterwards, 'What was wrong with you, murshid sahib?' Smiling, Abdullah said, 'It's not what you think. It wasn't as though some power had possessed me. On the contrary, it was my weakness.' Another disciple asked, 'If this was weakness, what is power?' After a short silence Abdullah answered, 'When you are possessed by power, both your body and your heart turn calm.' Get it, mian? Such a man is the perfect being.

— Baba …! Kallu gripped fakir sahib's feet.

— Yes, my son?

— One more story, baba.

Kallu became absorbed in fakir sahib's story; I went into my cell, the devil's room. But you know what, during that period of voluntary imprisonment I succeeded in doing some work for myself. I rearranged my Urdu ghazal collection. I left out many of them. When I read them afresh, I realized that many of the ghazals could not be retained in the collection. Fazl-e-Haq was right, many of the ghazals had Farsi influences, although it wasn't obvious at first. And by then I had understood that any ghazal that could not pierce your heart completely and instantly, like an arrow, had no value as a work of art. You know what, Manto bhai, we're attracted by ornaments and ornate clothing when we're young; we dress gaudily to show ourselves off. But there's no contentment until beauty blooms within. I succeeded in compiling my Farsi essays as well. An anthology of five volumes was prepared. In the fifth volume I put in my letters to my friends. I named the collection *The Melody Quintet*. You'd have been vastly entertained by those letters. And you know what else? I was pleasantly surprised by my own Farsi prose; patting myself on the back, I'd say, mashallah, how well you've written mian, excellent. Why are you laughing, Manto bhai? Haven't you ever patted yourself on the back? Haven't you felt, after writing a story, oh my God, do I really have such talent within me? Have I been carrying it around all this time? What's wrong with that, Manto bhai? Can an artist not give himself this small praise? You have to preserve this gentle fascination with yourself all your life.

Let me tell you about my letters to Alif Beg, my brothers, you'll find them interesting. Alif sahib had a son in old age. He wrote to me saying, choose a name for my son, mian. I wrote back, I didn't have to ponder in the slightest over a name for your son—it didn't even take a minute. As soon as the name flashed in my head I wrote a poem:

In his old age Alif
Has had a beautiful son
I name him Hamza

As everyone knows
All Alifs grow up to be Hamzas

Isn't that right, my brothers? Alif is a straight line and Hamza is a twisted one. Everyone's body twists into a Hamza in old age.

I passed my days in my devil's chamber, writing letters and making fun of people. Suddenly an English creditor named McPherson extracted an order from the court for me to pay back two hundred and fifty rupees. As luck would have it, I happened to have gone out that same day, and a British policeman arrested me at once. I was forced to go to jail. My friend Aminuddin bhai, the nawab of Loharu, saved me. Paying four hundred rupees on my behalf, he settled the case. Can this be called the life of a human being, my brothers? How long can you stay cooped up in a cell? If you go out, prison awaits you. Still I told myself with a smile:

رنج سے خو گر ہوا انساں تو مٹ جاتا ہے رنج
مشکلیں اتنی پڑیں مجھ پر کہ آساں ہو گئیں

Misery vanishes when you get used to misery
I suffered so much that it became easy

After Shamsuddin was hanged, the nawab's rights to the kingdom of Ferozepur-Jhirkar were taken away. I used to get my pension from the British Raj. The same sixty-two rupees and eight annas. Those eight annas never stopped chasing me, Manto bhai. Everything in my destiny was fixed at half a rupee; I never received a full rupee's worth. But despite the plight I was in, the company of certain people helped me survive. When Fazl-e-Haq sahib left Dilli, it was like a piece of my heart being destroyed. How many noble souls like him did Shahjahanabad have? The depth and extent of his leaning was matched by his sensitivity. The post he occupied was not meant for someone as qualified as him. Still he continued with the job. But the British would never let an opportunity for humiliation pass. They didn't need opportunities; they always looked down at us from a height, as though surveying ants or worms. So they did not hesitate a moment before trampling us underfoot. Fazl-e-Haq was humiliated in precisely this manner. Being a man of integrity, he resigned. But he wasn't a man to stay idle. Nawab Faiz Muhammad Khan took him to his own state with a monthly stipend of five hundred rupees. I remained in Dilli with a broken heart. I knew that Fazl-e-Haq sahib also bid goodbye to Dilli with a heart brimming over with tears. Even Emperor Bahadur Shah took off his shawl and put it around Fazl-e-Haq sahib's shoulders, wiping his eyes as he said, 'I know there is nothing I can do when you say goodbye. But when I have to wish you Godspeed, Khudahafiz, only God will know how painful it is for me to say those words.' My closest friend, a true connoisseur of my ghazals, departed from Shahjahanabad carrying a burden of humiliation.

But another man came into my life. Could the lord abandon me entirely? I found a friend in Nawab Mustafa Khan Shaifta. Nine years younger than me, he belonged to Shahjahanabad. His ancestors came from Afghanistan. Very well-versed in Arabic and Farsi, he also wrote excellent ghazals. At one time, wine and women were the two arms of spring in Shaifta sahib's life. He had an amorous relationship with the courtesan Ramzu. She was no run-of-the-mill courtesan, for she was as wealthy as she was well-educated.

I lost count of the number of ways in which Shaifta sahib helped me, my brothers. He was the only one to stand by me during the darkest hours of my life. I swear by the lord, he really did seem to be the

soul of poetry, untarnished by calumny. Meanwhile, my mother died in Agra and my brother Yusuf was completely insane. I could not cope anymore. So I staked my own life once more. I set up a gambling den in my devil's chamber. I had gambled earlier too; I had even had to pay a fine of five hundred rupees for it once. But this time I was determined to change my fortune with my winnings. Gambling was strictly prohibited in Dilli at the time. But since I counted important Englishmen among my friends, I thought no one could do anything to me. This presumption did me in, Manto bhai. The gambling became more frenetic by the day. I even made some money now and then. I told myself:

ہمکو معلوم ہے جنت کی حقیقت لیکن
دل کے خوش رکھنے کو غالب یہ خیال ا چھا ہے

I know what goes on in heaven, but
Such fancies, Ghalib, are not bad for happiness

30

تماشائے گلشن، تمنائے چیدن
بہر آفرین نہ، گنہگار ہیں ہم

I want to see the beauty of the garden,
pluck the flowers too …
My heart is sinful, O Creator of spring

I may not have been earning much money, Mirza sahib, but I began to enjoy life with Shafia. She used to love me with all her heart. And the most important thing was that she wanted to understand me. So despite her initial objection to my drinking, she accepted it eventually. But she kept a strict watch all the time to ensure I didn't overdo it. You cannot imagine the attention I paid to our home, my brothers. I used to sweep the floor myself, and dust and clean everything. I helped with the cooking too sometimes. I used to enjoy cooking a lot, particularly kebabs. The aroma of spices and roasting meat was intoxicating. I was getting more and more involved with the world of cinema in Bombay; once in this world, I felt like Amir Hamza, with a thousand adventures awaiting me. After I went to Pakistan, I wrote *Ganjay Farishtay—The Bald Angels*—about all those colourful people from Bombay's film world. I wanted to see their real selves, without costumes or cosmetics. Some people had objected to this. But to hell with a society that launders a man's exploits after his death to hold them up as clean and honourable. I remember Ismat's story 'Dozakhi' being published in *Saki*. She had stripped her dead brother Azim Beg Chughtai naked in it. After reading the story, my sister Iqbal had said, 'What a strange girl Ismat is. She hasn't even spared her own dead brother. Is it right to put such things into a story?'

I had told her, 'If you can write a story like this after my death, Iqbal, I swear on the lord, I'm ready to die right now.'

— Me write about you? Write what?

— That your Saadat is the lowest worm in hell.

— You're mad, Saadat. Does anyone like thinking of their favourite people this way?

— Only your favourite person can be depicted this way, Iqbal. You know every one of his sins and good deeds. You can never be unfair to him. Can a man be just a lump of good qualities, without a single flaw?

— You're a writer, you can think this way.

— No, Iqbal. You think this way too. It's just that you're scared of acknowledging the truth. I'll tell you Sitara's story one day. A woman like her is born on this earth only once every hundred years. And yet she has such a bad reputation. People think there's nothing but sex in her life.

No, my brothers, don't get excited. Sitara's story is the ace up my sleeve, to be played at the right time. Can the story of the tigress be told so early on? We have to rot in hell for a long time yet, we'll have plenty of opportunities. Sitara will make her appearance at the right time. So will Nasim Bano, so will Nargis and Noorjehan and all the rest. All you need is a little patience, my brothers. All this happened such a long time ago, I have forgotten the month and year; it feels as though I saw them in a long dream. But for now, put your aversion aside and listen to an episode or two from the swine Manto's life.

While I was working for *Musawar*, Baburao Patel had asked me to translate the screenplay of a film into Urdu. The film would be made by Prabhat Studio. This was how I made my entrance into Bombay's film industry. One day, Nazir Ludhianvi sahib—the owner of *Musawar*—introduced me to the people at the Imperial Film Company. I would have to write dialogue for films, for forty rupees a month. I thought my luck was turning finally, but Ludhianvi sahib reduced my salary from forty rupees to twenty. Get it? He gave with one hand and took away with the other. My monthly income now amounted to sixty rupees. But given the state of the Imperial Film Company at the time, monthly payments were uncertain. I took advance payments sometimes. The job didn't last long. Thanks to Ludhianvi sahib's efforts, I then got a job with Film City at a hundred rupees a month. I worked for several film companies at the time for the sake of money. But I didn't quit my job at *Musawar*. It was *Musawar* that had brought me to Bombay. Eventually it was Ludhianvi sahib himself who kicked me out. I was sacked without being given a reason. The earth shook beneath my feet, my brothers. All jobs with film companies could be here today, gone tomorrow. I met Baburao Patel directly, brandishing my dismissal letter. He even agreed to appoint me editor of his *Caravan* magazine. He sent for his secretary Rita Carlyle. I had heard that Rita was his secretary, stenographer, and lover rolled into one. When she entered, Baburaoji said, 'Come closer.'

When she went up to him, he slapped her bottom and said, 'Get some paper and pencil.'

When Rita went out, Baburaoji said with a smile, 'I've never seen such tight buttocks, Manto.'

— Do you keep slapping them?

— You bet I do. And feeling them is such a joy. Like running my fingers through Poulson butter.

Rita returned with her shorthand notebook and pencil. As he was dictating my appointment letter, Baburaoji turned to me. 'How much do you want, Manto?' he asked. Pausing, he answered himself, 'Will a hundred do?'

— No.

— I can't give you more, Manto.

— I'll take only sixty. No more, no less.

Baburaoji jumped out of his chair. 'You're a complete ass.'

— Precisely.

— Meaning?

— I won't take more than sixty. But I can't follow a routine. I'll come to work and leave as I please. All you want is that the magazine should be published on time, right?

I got the job all right, but it didn't last beyond seven months. There wasn't any work to be had in Bombay. In 1941 I went to Delhi with a job at the radio station. The salary was a hundred and fifty rupees a month. But I couldn't survive more than a year and a half. Government jobs weren't for me, Mirza sahib. The people around me were most annoying. And besides, I had fallen in love with Bombay's film world. No one there cared whether you were rich or poor, or raised questions over your

abilities and shortcomings. Just live, stay alive, enjoy the pleasures of life with every cell in your body. Just like my friend Shyam used to say, 'Life is my lover, Manto. Tell me Manto, what would you prefer? Long live life, let all else go to hell—isn't this what you want, tell me?' I must tell you about Shyam, my brothers. I heard of his death when I was in a mental hospital in Pakistan to be cured of my alcoholism. 'The taste of death really is unique, Manto,' he seemed to be whispering in my ear. 'I had never imagined anything like this.'

One day, I quit my radio job in Delhi, my brothers. A man named Advani was the chief of Delhi Radio. He told me that a few words in one of my radio plays would have to be changed. Bukhari sahib was the Director General of Radio; Advani was a favourite of his. No one dared cross swords with him. I declared bluntly that Advaniji did not know Urdu, did not understand Urdu, could not even read Urdu. He wasn't capable of finding flaws in my play. So I had to quit. And as for Bukhari sahib, he had never been able to stand me. He became the Director General of Radio Pakistan after the Partition, but he never invited me to a single radio programme. I couldn't care less, Mirza sahib. Radio Pakistan did have to broadcast a half-hour programme after my death. Bukhari sahib was the all-in-all at the time. These people forget, Mirza sahib, that no matter how important your position, you're nothing but a government servant. No one will spare you even a glance once you've lost your job.

After a year and a half in Delhi, I returned to Bombay, Mirza sahib. *Musawar* offered me a job once more, and besides, Bombay's lure was irresistible. Money simply floated in the air here—it was just a matter of getting hold of it. Krishan Chander, Rajinder Singh Bedi, Upendranath Ashk, Ismat and I all made a beeline for Bombay's film world strictly for the money. So that we could live well. So as to get my bottle of Johnny Walker every day, so as to keep a packet of Cavern cigarettes in my pocket all the time. There was no relationship between literature and stories for cinema, after all. Krishan was a simple man, who didn't get it at first. He was under the impression that he was creating great art by writing for films. Once, we wrote a story for a film together, titled *The Gypsy*. We took the story to Seth Jagat Narayan, owner of Jagat Talkies, to see if he'd buy it. After hearing the story, the seth said, 'Excellent. I'll buy the story. But Manto sahib. You've made the factory manager a very evil man. Can't he be a little nicer? Factory workers won't take it well. You know what I mean.'

— Certainly. It won't take us long to make the factory manager a decent man, Sethji.

— Meaning?

— Just a matter of sitting down with paper and pen, that's all.

— That's true. The seth began to laugh.

Krishan stared at me open-mouthed. He tried to speak, but I cut him short.

— May I say something more, Manto sahib?

— Of course.

— Why did you have to introduce the manager's wife? Make her his sister.

— Why?

— It will help.

— How will it help? Krishan practically snarled.

— Be quiet, Krishan. Sethji is buying the story. If he wants …

— Exactly. Please look at it from my perspective. Listen, Manto sahib, the sister had better not be married. Make her something of a vamp. Who flirts with the hero. It'll be exciting, won't it?

— Wonderful! Nothing could be better, Sethji.

Krishan couldn't believe his ears. Was I the Manto he knew, who had refused to change even a

word of his radio play? Disbelief and hatred showed plainly in his eyes.

As soon as we left the seth's house, Krishan began to rant at me. —You call yourself a writer, Manto? How could you sell yourself like this? And to think I trusted you.

— Have I betrayed your trust?

— Would you allow your stories to be published if even a single word had to be changed?

— No.

— But you accepted Sethji's proposals.

— I did, Krishan bhai. We didn't go to him for the sake of literature. Do you really think this story has any literary value? We made the story up for a film. A mother can become a sister; a sister can become a vamp and behave as she likes with the hero. How does it matter to you and me? We're writing for the films to make some money. Don't think of literature here, Krishan. Do you get what I'm saying?

— Hmm.

— Then the story can be changed, right?

Krishan nodded.

I knew whom to lay down my life for, Mirza sahib, and whom to play games with. The world of cinema was for these games. So many people were in the queue for films to be made from their stories. Would you call them writers, Mirza sahib? When I sat down with my paper and pen, I would tell myself that no one in the world would be able to make a film from this story I was about to write. Every truth of literature is concealed in its words and sentences and paragraphs, no image can express it, just as we cannot explain an image with words. And would Bombay's world of films ever be able to touch Krishan Chander's or Ismat's or Manto's stories? One day I said to Ismat in the tram on our way back from Bombay Talkies, 'I notice a couple of elements in Krishan's stories quite frequently these days.'

— What are they?

— Rapes and rainbows.

— Absolutely right, Manto bhai.

— I'm thinking of writing an essay about him with the same title. Zina-bil-Jabr aur Qaus-Qaza. But I simply cannot understand the relationship between the rapes and the rainbows in his stories.

Ismat was quiet for a while. Then she said, 'How beautiful the colours of the rainbow are. But you're looking at it from a different angle, Manto bhai.'

— Yes. Fire and blood are both red in colour. This colour is closely connected to Mars, Ismat. And the same colour can be seen in rapes and rainbows.

— Perhaps. Write your essay, then.

— There's more, Ismat. Red is the symbol of God's love in Christian art. It's connected with the crucifixion. The Virgin Mary is also dressed in red. The colour of purity. As I spoke, I noticed that Ismat was dressed entirely in white.

Smiling, Ismat said, 'Write it, Manto bhai. But don't use the word "forcibly" in your title.'

— But Krishan will object. He hates rape because it's forcible. Jabr.

— This objection won't be sustained, Manto bhai.

— Why not?

— How would Krishan know whether his heroine had come to love the violence or not?

Yes, this was Ismat. Reckless. She couldn't have written a story like 'Lihaaf'–'The Quilt'—otherwise. It came as an explosion in Urdu literature, Mirza sahib. That too, written by a woman. I had brought the story up the very first day I met Ismat. I think it was in the August of 1942. I was working at

Musawar's office at Adelphi Chambers on Clare Road. Mahatma Gandhi and other Congress leaders had been arrested. There were protests all over the city. Shahid Latif came one day with his wife Ismat. I'd known Shahid since our days together at the Aligarh Muslim University. I noticed that Ismat was shy and, at the same time, ready to meet your eye when talking to you. After discussing the freedom movement for some time, we turned to poetry and fiction.

'I read your story "The Quilt" in *Adab-e-Latif*,' I told Ismat.

— Were you in Delhi at that time?

— Yes. It was good, very good. But that last sentence—I'd have deleted it if I'd been the editor instead of Ahmed Nadim Qasimi.

— Why?

— Do you remember what you wrote?

— Hmm.

— Not even for a lakh of rupees shall I reveal what I saw when the quilt parted an inch. Something like that, wasn't it?

— Yes.

— Was it necessary?

— What's wrong with the line?

I was about to reply. But when I looked at Ismat, I couldn't. She looked as though it was sinful for her to have heard what I had told her. Ismat was like that; she might suddenly say something to enrage you, but the very next moment she would be a shy, demure maiden.

I cannot tell you about Ismat in brief, my brothers. Someone wrote me a letter from Hyderabad. 'How is it that Ismat Chughtai and you are not married yet? How wonderful it would have been if Manto and Ismat were to be united. It is a matter of great regret, Manto sahib, that Ismat married Shahid Latif instead of you.'

There was a conference of progressive writers in Hyderabad. Apparently several women there had asked Ismat, why didn't you marry Manto sahib? I don't know how true these stories are. But when Ismat returned to Bombay she told Shafia that a girl in Hyderabad had apparently asked her, 'Is Manto sahib unmarried?' Her balloon had been pricked by Ismat's reply, 'No.'

I thought about it afterwards, Mirza sahib. What would it have been like had Ismat and I been married? You'd have had a harrowing time answering this question of 'what if'? For instance, how would you answer this question: had Cleopatra's nose been one-eighteenth of an inch longer, what would it have meant for the Nile? The question of Ismat and Manto being married is just as absurd. All that can be said is that had this marriage taken place, there would have been a nuclear explosion in the history of Urdu literature. The signatures on the marriage deed could well have been the last thing either of them wrote. And I would imagine the conversation between Ismat and me at the wedding ceremony in the presence of the qazi:

— Isn't the qazi sahib's forehead as broad as the slates we wrote on, Ismat?

— What did you say?

— Has your hearing gone to pieces?

— My hearing's just fine. Have you swallowed a frog?

— God forbid! I was saying that the qazi sahib's forehead is as broad as the slates we wrote on.

— But it's very smooth.

— You have no idea what smooth is.

— Oh, I see, I don't know. And you do.

— You know nothing.

— I do know that the qazi sahib's head is beautifully shaped. You're chattering too much, Manto.

— You're the one chattering.

— No. Not me, you.

— You … you … you're spraying words like a hosepipe.

— Oh my God, you're already acting like a husband.

Turning to the qazi, I yelled, 'I refuse to marry this woman. If your daughter's head is shaped just like yours, let me marry her instead.'

Ismat yelled too. 'I won't marry this man either, Qazi sahib. If you haven't got four wives already, marry me. It's you I like, Qazi sahib.'

Life in Bombay was just like such stories, Mirza sahib, where truth and fiction merged into one. Was there no truth in Ismat's silence when she did not answer a single one of my letters after I shifted to Pakistan, Mirza sahib? She had once taken my hand and said, 'You haven't been able to say a single thing openly in your entire life, Manto sahib.' I had told Ismat one of your shers, Mirza sahib.

آہی جاتا وہ راہ پر غالب
کوئی دن اور بھی جئے ہوتے

I would have taken this road after all,
Ghalib, had I lived in another time

31

خرابی دل کی اس حد ہے کہ اسے سمجھا نہیں جاتا
کہ آبادی بھی یہاں تھی یاکہ بیڑا تھا مدت کا

My heart is so bereft now that I cannot tell
Didn't anyone ever live here? Or has it been deserted
for a long time now?

The gambling session was in full swing in my devil's chamber that day. We used to gamble with dice. Several rich businessmen were present. Luck was running my way, Manto bhai—I had won a number of games. One of Mir sahib's shers was buzzing around in my head like a bee.

عشق معشوق،عشق عاشق ہے
یعنی اپنا ہی مبتلا ہے عشق

Love is both the lover and the beloved
So love is its own affliction

Suddenly Kallu appeared to tell me that a palanquin had arrived. Several women were sitting in it. 'Why are you telling me?' I scolded him. 'They must be here to visit Begum sahiba. Show them to the mahalsarai.'

A few minutes after Kallu left, several women dressed in burqas entered my chamber. We were taken aback. Who were they? When they took off their burqas, we discovered police chief Faizul Hasan, along with his troops. 'Handcuff them all,' roared Faizul Hasan.

Quietly I said, 'Take a seat kotwal sahib. I am Mirza Ghalib. You know me, of course. These are my friends, all honest people of Shahjahanabad.'

— Which is why they gamble?

Smiling, I said, 'When did you see us gambling? Is it a crime to play a game of dice?'

— I know there's gambling behind these games, Mirza. You were arrested earlier as well. You have to come to the police station.

Gripping Faizul Hasan's arm, Malik Ram said, 'Do you believe that a poet like Mirza Ghalib will stoop to gambling?'

Faizul Hasan burst out laughing. 'Do you think anyone will believe it if they're told Mirza doesn't gamble?'

— I do gamble, kotwal sahib. I said with a smile.

— There, you heard for yourself.

— But with life. Zindagi ke saath.

— You can't get away with philosophical statements, Mirza. Turning to his troops, Faizul Hasan told them, 'Handcuff them all.'

Now I became furious. Clenching my teeth, I said, 'Don't forget, kotwal sahib, that the British are my friends.'

— You can say all that in court.

I couldn't believe it, Manto bhai. We were actually handcuffed and led through the streets of Shahjahanabad to the police station. Was this humiliation also due to me? Those who had been arrested along with me secured their freedom using either money or influence. I spent the night in custody.

The next day, Shaifta sahib came to meet me when he heard. Taking both my hands in his, he said, 'Don't worry, Mirza sahib. I will definitely have you released.'

— How?

— Let me see what I can do. I'll try my best.

Shaifta sahib's efforts did not help. I was taken to court. I could not fathom why police chief Faizul Hasan was suddenly angry with me. The new magistrate pretended ignorance. The magistrate was senior to the police chief, but during the trial he behaved as though the police chief was the last word. The sessions judge was a friend of mine; he used to share my company openly—but even he could not recognize me now. The sentence was a fine of two hundred rupees and jail with hard labour for six months. If I couldn't pay the fine, the jail term would be increased. If I could pay another fifty rupees, I would not have to perform hard labour. The Dilli newspapers were full of this incident. Shaifta sahib appealed to the High Court. But the verdict and sentence were upheld. Shaifta sahib told me that there was uproar in Shahjahanabad over the case. The newspapers even said that an aristocratic, talented individual like me should not have been punished thus for a trivial transgression. Most important, Emperor Bahadur Shah— who did not like me, remember—sent a written request to the British to free me. His appeal was also rejected, Manto bhai.

I was preparing myself mentally. I had already been imprisoned in my own room year after year. What new punishment could the prison mete out to me now? But my heart was breaking in other ways. How could my family distance themselves this way when they heard I would have to go to jail? But then again, why not? After all, Mir sahib had been locked in his unlit cell by his own family. It was the behaviour of Aminuddin sahib, the nawab of Loharu, which surprised me the most. How friendly we used to be. And now he disowned me completely. His brother Ziauddin also moved away.

رونے سے اے ندیم سلامت نہ کر مجھے
آخر کبھی تو عقدۂ دل وا کرے کوئی

Allow me to weep a little, don't chide me, my friend
A man must lighten the load in his heart sometimes

Shaifta sahib was the only one to stand by me. He shielded me like an angel. He paid the fine and all the expenses for the trial. He would visit me in prison virtually every day.

One day I asked him, 'You've been on the Haj, you don't drink anymore either. Why then do you

visit an infidel like me?'

— God forbid! What are you saying, Mirza sahib?

— Everyone else has deserted me. Why do you still keep visiting?

— Mirza sahib, I have never considered how correct your ways are, or how closely you follow our Shariyat. To me you're the only poet whom I can place on a pedestal next to Amir Khusrau. Mian Tansen's notes and your ghazals mingle and become one for me.

— What are you saying! Mian Tansen is the light of the lord. Who am I in comparison? Do you remember the time he made it rain by singing at the fort? I picture that scene every night in bed in my devil's chamber. All that was such a long time ago. Will those days ever return to this world?

— They do return.

— Where?

— That sher of yours …

ہے خبر گرم اُن کے آنے کی
آج ہی گھر میں بوریا نہ ہوا

I hear there's a strong rumour of his arrival, Al-Musabbir. And yet, today of all days I don't have a mat in my room.

— Don't embarrass me so, Shaifta sahib.

— Do you suppose we don't know that you drink and gamble, Mirza sahib? But shall I forsake you just because you're in prison? You're a poet—you can still do as you please with words—nothing is more important as far as I'm concerned.

Smiling, I said, 'You've been on the Haj. The followers of the Shariyat will stone you to death if they hear you.'

— I will tell them, Muhammad went on a mi'iraj. During this ascension he visited both heaven and hell. Follow him, my brothers.

— You will have to be the lightning that illuminates the way for these people, Shaifta sahib.

— So be it. I can only take the path that Allah has decreed.

I realized that being in jail was not much worse than the prison of daily life, Manto bhai. Thieves, robbers, murderers, mad men—I got a chance to mingle with a variety of people. Each of them had a unique story and a unique way of speaking. Life in prison was like the rise and fall of notes on the piano and violin that I had heard in the Englishmen's homes. Yes, I remember the word, harmony, I heard it from Fraser sahib for the first time. It was this harmony that I heard in prison. I wrote a nazm titled 'Habsia' while in jail. You can hear the harmony in it, Manto bhai.

Imprisoned here, I play on the strings of my poetry
The sad currents in my heart turn to music
I squeeze out song from my blood—I'm a prisoner
I throw open the invisible window
I make an inn for birds
Load me with labour as you please
The gift of your prison sentence,
But can you chain my voice
When lament turns into a cascade?
Don't come here, old friends
Don't ever knock on my door

I won't be as easy to talk to now
Thieves are my companions
They acknowledge me as their lord
'Don't go outside,' I tell them,
'There's no loyalty there.'
They come, the warden and guard
Since I'm here.
They open the door,
They know it's me.
Raise cheers, my prison friends.
For I am here.
You will find your home in the poet's words
Look, it's me.
Friends have turned away
The family has withdrawn,
I reach out to you,
O stranger, imprisoned soul.

I was in prison for three months, my brothers; I grew friendly with all the convicts. Many of them wanted to listen to my shers. Only when I went to jail did I realize that virtually everyone loved ghazals. But their daily routine left them with no time. After sunset everyone used to gather around me; it was like a mushaira. Of course, I was the only poet present. One evening I composed a new sher for them:

دائم الحبس اس میں ہیں لاکھوں تمنائیں ،اسد
جانتے ہیں سینۂ پر خوں کو زنداں خانہ ہم

A million desires are imprisoned for life here, Asad
This bleeding breast is nothing but a prison

— Mian … A low voice was heard. The chap who spent most of his time wrapped in a blanket was sitting up.

— Awake at last, Iqbal bhai? Someone asked.

— I never sleep, bhaijaan. I lie in utter darkness under my blanket, but still I cannot sleep. But mian —he looked at me directly—must your heart turn into a prison just because you are in jail?

The story of Iqbal's imprisonment was a strange one, my brothers. He and his wife had no children though they had been married for several years. Then his wife became pregnant suddenly. Iqbal had a son. Two years after the boy was born, Iqbal learnt that the father was not him, but someone else in the family. Iqbal killed the boy and buried him. He could not sleep after this. One day he appeared at the police station on his own, confessed everything, and went to jail.

I saw Iqbal's face for the first time. It was like a flower that had fallen to earth, with a few dried petals still in place. Suddenly he began to speak:

بھلا گردش فلک کی چین دیتی ہے کسے، انشاء
غنیمت ہے کہ ہم صورت یہاں دوچار بیٹھے ہیں

Oh, how long it had been since I'd heard a sher of Inshallah Khan Insha's. There wasn't another poet like Insha in Awadh. Consider the words, Manto bhai. The tornado of time spares no one, Godspeed, at least a few of us friends can still sit here chatting. What more can you ask for from life?

'I had trusted some friends like these, Iqbal bhai,' I said. 'But they distanced themselves as soon as they heard about my imprisonment.'

— Why did you trust them? Can you possibly trust anyone but the lord? Listen to a story then, mian.

I thought of Kallu at once. The other inmates said in unison, 'Let's hear your story, Iqbal … tonight's the night for famous tales.' A wave of laughter erupted.

— Sikandar had a big secret in his life. One that he never disclosed to anyone.

— Sikandar? A combined cry rose in the air. 'Fabulous, Iqbal bhai!'

'A story about Sikandar in prison!' one of the listeners exclaimed. 'You can't beat that, Iqbal bhai.'

'Can anyone but Sikandar be in prison?' I laughed.

— Excellent.

— So what was the secret, Iqbal bhai? I asked.

— Sikandar's ears were enormous, like an elephant's. No one knew this. He kept them hidden under a cap for fear that people would laugh. Only his ancient barber knew about his ears. Once, this barber became too ill to work. Someone who would not disclose the secret to anyone had to be found for the job. A young boy named Bilal used to work at the emperor's court. The aged barber knew him; he picked Bilal to replace himself. Sikandar didn't agree at first, but eventually he accepted the old barber's suggestion. Bilal was appointed.

— And then? The listeners drew closer to Iqbal.

— The first time he had to cut Sikandar's hair, Bilal almost fainted. Such enormous ears on a human being? The scissors slipped from his fingers in fear and surprise. Sikandar understood. Grimly, he said, 'Keep what you're seeing to yourself. If anyone else comes to know, I'll rip your tongue out, and, needless to add, you will be beheaded.' Bilal froze with fear at this. He constantly imagined his severed head rolling in the dust. What if the thing about the emperor's ears slipped out somehow? He also knew that he would have no peace till he had told someone. He would be relieved only when the secret had been expelled from his mind. But he knew that if he told anyone he knew, it would be all over the city, and his severed head would soon be rolling in the dust.

— What did Bilal do?

— One day he stole out of the palace and went into a forest some distance away. There was a lake in the forest, where shepherds would bring their flocks for a drink. They would rest a little on its banks while the sheep drank. Spotting not a soul anywhere, Bilal told the lake loudly, 'Oh my God, how big Emperor Sikandar's ears are.' He felt lighter at once, as though a boulder lodged in his heart for a long time had rolled off.

— Lies, all lies. Someone yelled.

— Idiot! Iqbal exclaimed. —When have stories ever been anything but lies? Our lives themselves are full of lies, and we ourselves created our stories.

— Ignore the bastard and tell us the story, Iqbal bhai. Someone else spoke loudly.

— Several months went by. Bilal wasn't afraid anymore; Sikandar, too, was happy with his new barber. But something strange had taken place in the meantime. Some reeds had sprung up by the lake in the forest. One day a shepherd plucked a reed out of the soil, made a hole in it, and began to play it like a pipe. But he was flabbergasted by the sound that emerged. A voice seemed to be saying, 'Oh my God, how big Emperor Sikandar's ears are.'

— And then?

— As he was passing through the forest one day, Sikandar heard the sound from the pipe. Following the sound, he arrived at the shepherds' camp, had the musician arrested and brought him to his court. When interrogated, the shepherd explained everything. 'Impossible!' roared the emperor. Now Sikandar sent for Bilal. Shaking with fear, Bilal said, 'I didn't tell anyone, huzoor. I only told the lake.'

— The lake? The emperor's eyebrows shot up into his hair.

— I couldn't keep it to myself, huzoor. Since I wasn't allowed to tell anyone, I told the lake.

— And then?

— Sikandar ordered another reed to be plucked from the bank of the lake. The shepherd made a pipe with it. The same sound was heard, 'Oh my God, how big Emperor Sikandar's ears are.' Sikandar was silent for some time. Then he told his soldiers, 'Let the shepherd go.' To Bilal he said in a disappointed tone, 'You may still be my barber if you wish.'

— And then?

— Sikandar sent for the best calligraphist in town. He was ordered to write a few words in golden ink; Sikandar framed the words and put them up in his bedroom, so that he could read them first thing in the morning when he woke up every day.

— What were the words?

— Don't trust anyone but yourself. Even lakes can be treacherous.

The listeners burst into laughter.

Looking at me, Iqbal asked, 'What do you make of it, mian?'

— I've understood what you're getting at. But this story has a hidden meaning too.

— What is it, mian?

— Even an emperor's secrets cannot be kept. The lord discloses everything one day or another. All power becomes the object of laughter eventually, doesn't it, Iqbal bhai?

— It does. I hadn't thought of it this way.

— Everyone thinks according to their own proclivities. That's why the game of life survives.

By the grace of the lord, I succeeded in converting the prison into a playground, Manto bhai. And after I got out of jail, fortune smiled on me for the first time. Only for a few years. But then that too was the bounty of life. You know what the bounty implies, Manto bhai? The lord gave as much as he wanted to, and I grabbed what I could with a roll of the dice. Only, the image of imminent death had already appeared in the mirror.

32

یہ نہ تھی ہماری قسمت کہ وصالِ یار ہوتا
اگر اور جیتے رہتے یہی انتظا ر ہوتا

Here in dozakh today I admit to all of you, Mirza sahib, that I loved Ismat. It had never been necessary to tell her, for both of us knew. I had never contemplated married life with Ismat; marriage transforms the relationship between a man and a woman into a set of habits, and then the relationship begins to fade and finally turns utterly grey. I viewed Ismat like a picture gallery; as I wandered around this gallery, ever new images appeared, ever new scenes were born. Ismat was not particularly beautiful, but her features were both gentle and sharp at the same time. Behind her glasses, her eyes seemed perpetually eager for a surprise. When a dimple appeared in her cheek, it really was hard to tear your eyes away. And it was so amusing to watch her eating ice cream; if you gave her ice cream Ismat turned into a little girl.

My eyes apparently reminded her of a peacock's tail. 'Why does it feel that way, Ismat?' I asked her one day.

— I don't know. It seems that way.

— Writing stories has certainly taught you how to make things up.

— I don't lie, Manto bhai.

— Why don't you? There's no colour to life without lying.

— You tell enough lies. I steal my colours from you.

— Wonderful!

— And one more thing, Manto bhai. When I look into your eyes my heart misses a beat.

— My goodness! I have to tell Shafia this. I've never heard of it happening to her.

— You love to hear good things about yourself, don't you?

— Who doesn't?

— You do more than anyone else. I haven't seen another Narcissus like you.

Our relationship grew like a game. We'd argue about everything. Ismat wasn't one to let anyone off the hook easily. My job was to annoy her. No one knows better than me, Mirza sahib, how primal the beauty of an angry Ismat was. Sometimes our quarrels would reach a point where it appeared we would never see each other again. One day in the course of such a quarrel I blurted out, 'If you hadn't been a woman I would have said something to shut you up good and proper.'

— Say whatever you please. There's no need to spare me. Ismat answered grimly.

— Really? If you'd been a man …

— Come on, say it. What abuse would you heap on me? What would you have done?

— You'll be embarrassed, Ismat.

— Not at all.

— Then you're not a woman. I spoke agitatedly.

— Why? Why must I display embarrassment even if I'm not embarrassed, just because I'm a woman? So you too view men and women differently, Manto bhai? I had thought you different from the common man.

Ismat's tongue turned into a dagger when she spoke this way.

'Not at all,' I stammered, 'I don't see men and women differently at all.'

— Then why don't you say what you want to?

I was silent. Now Ismat began to bait me. 'Say it Manto bhai, let me hear it. If you like I'll run away shyly after that.' She began to provoke me like a little girl. I laughed. 'No, Ismat, my temper's cooled down now.'

This was how I inevitably lost to Ismat every time. She had created her own world all by herself—without help from anyone. Her father Kasim Beg Chughtai was a magistrate; because he was transferred frequently, they had had to live in many different places. When Ismat was studying in class nine in Aligarh, her father was transferred to Sambar in Rajasthan. Ismat had wanted to stay in the school hostel and continue with her studies, but her parents weren't willing. Ismat felt asphyxiated in Sambar. There was no opportunity whatsoever for studies there. One morning, her father was reading the newspaper after breakfast, while her mother sat on a stool slicing betelnuts. Entering the room, Ismat took a seat next to her mother. Then she said very calmly that she wanted to go to Aligarh to study. Ismat's mother stared at her with wide eyes. Kasim Beg Chughtai discovered his daughter looking him in the eye. No child of his had ever done this before.

Ismat repeated, speaking directly, 'I want to go to Aligarh to study.'

— But you're already studying here with your grandfather.

— I want to take the matric examination.

— What for? Jugnu's got two years to go in school. Then both of you will be married.

— I shall take the examination.

— There's absolutely no need.

— Then I'll run away.

— Run away? Run away where?

— Wherever I like.

Ismat's mother was furious. But Kasim Beg Chughtai may have drawn his own conclusions from his daughter's fearless response. He did send Ismat to Aligarh. This was the first victory in Ismat's life. Unlike her sisters, she had not played with dolls as a child; she had competed head-on with boys. Ismat had never wanted to be married by the time she was twenty, as her sisters had been.

My six-year-long relationship with Ismat was like a watercolour. I no longer remembered when the painting was started or when it was completed. Moreover, with all the drinking, you can well understand, my brothers, my brain was in a bad way, I could not remember the sequence of events any more. I recall an interesting night, my brothers. Shahid and Ismat lived in Malad then. We invaded their house after midnight. Shafia and I, along with Nandaji and Khurshid Anwar. As soon as the door opened Shafia grabbed Ismat's arm and began to tell her, 'I told him hundreds of times not to disturb you. But your Manto bhai was determined to come.'

— You think you can stop me, Shafia? I'll go where I please, when I please.

Shahid appeared and put his arm around my shoulder. 'It's going to be a terrific night, Manto, come

…'

We were starving. But all the restaurants were closed. I said, 'We'll cook for ourselves tonight, Ismat. All I need is flour, dal and potatoes.'

Shafia refused to let us into the kitchen. How could men possibly cook for themselves? But we settled down in the kitchen with our bottle and glasses. I kneaded the dough, Nandaji set up the stove, and Khurshid peeled the potatoes. At one point Khurshid exclaimed, 'I'm not capable of peeling these fucking potatoes. Can't you eat them raw, Manto bhai?' I made chapatis, though they were half burnt, and a mint chutney. After we had eaten, we went to sleep in that very kitchen. Ismat and Shahid had endured such unreasonable behaviour hundreds of times. The more I drank, the more I tried to convince Ismat, 'I swear by Allah, Ismat, I'm not drunk. You want to see? Take a bet. I'll give up drinking tomorrow. It's simple enough for me.'

— Don't bet, Manto bhai, you'll lose. You're drunk now.

It's funny, very funny, Mirza sahib, how the label of drunkard was slapped on both of us. If you were indeed drunk all the time, when did you write all your ghazals? How could you have written all those letters? How did I manage to write all these stories, for that matter? Mine was a haphazard life, a vagabond's existence, I was up to a hundred dirty tricks from dawn to dusk just to get two square meals a day. Without a drink or two I couldn't focus or find the space to write. But after a drink, the words walked around the room, they took wing, they hummed, they writhed in pain. It was in those words that I discovered all the secret tears, chuckles, laughter and profanity of the working class, their shattered dreams and heartbroken sighs. Words contained a blue glow with the red flame of desire within it. I had never wanted to write about myself, Mirza sahib. Does any writer really write about his daily existence, his joys and sorrows, his likes and dislikes? Within his words he actually searches for the images of familiar and unfamiliar people which the words are forced to hide, whose memories can take those words down the path to perdition. A woman who toiled all day and slept peacefully at night could never be the heroine of my stories, my brothers. I was concerned only with the woman who stayed up all night with her lamp lit, waiting for customers, and then went to sleep in the daytime, waking up abruptly from a nightmare. What did she dream of? That her own aged self, with sagging skin, was knocking at her door.

Ismat always said that all the stories I wrote about brothels and whores were all made up. She didn't believe any of the things I wrote about my friends either. Take Rafiq Ghaznavi. He was a good-for-nothing, a total scoundrel. He married four sisters from the same family, one after the other; there was no woman in any of Lahore's brothels whom he didn't sleep with. I really used to like Rafiq. Life was like a game for him. One day I told Ismat, 'Come, let me introduce you to Rafiq bhai.'

— How will that help me? You keep saying he's a scoundrel.

— That's exactly why you should meet him. Who told you a scoundrel has to be a bad person? There are very few people as courteous as Rafiq.

— I don't understand what you're saying, Manto bhai. Perhaps I'm not intelligent enough.

— Stop putting up an act. Why not meet him? Rafiq bhai is very entertaining. There isn't a girl who hasn't fallen in love with him after seeing him, you know.

— I'm a girl too.

— But you're my Ismat behen.

— Behen indeed. I don't care for your tomfoolery, Manto bhai. Ismat dug her nails into my shoulder.

— I don't address anyone else as behen this way, Ismat. Not even Iqbal.

— Why don't you?

There was no answer to this, Mirza sahib. It was Ismat who had said one day, 'Isn't there a single thing in life that you've said openly?' Ismat knew that even a devil like Manto needed a mask.

I did introduce Ismat to Rafiq bhai. Ismat admitted that he really was a courteous man. 'How is this possible, Manto bhai?' she asked me.

— I don't know. I have never tried to understand Rafiq bhai. I have accepted him the way he is.

— Manto bhai …

— Your wish is my command.

— How do you dig out these pearls from the muck?

— Thank the lord.

— And the tales from the brothels? Are they true too? I don't believe it. No one can match you when it comes to lying.

— Why should I lie? Anyone can visit a brothel if he has money in his pocket.

— The frauds who pretend to be your friends don't have so much courage, Manto bhai. Sure, they might visit a brothel for the dance and music, but they dare not go any further.

— Oh but I've been too.

— For the dance and music? Ismat had smiled meaningfully.

— Why? Why should I go only for the dance and music? I went for exactly what people spend money on at a brothel.

— Shut up. So brazen! Ismat had screamed. There's a limit to lies.

— Why, what's the problem?

— Impossible. You have deliberately created this image of yourself.

— I swear on the lord, Ismat, I've been to brothels.

— Don't you bring the lord into this. Do you even believe in the lord?

— I swear on my dead son.

— Manto bhai! She clutched my hair with both her hands. Are you a human being? How can you swear on your son?

I saw Ismat's eyes were brimming over. I began to laugh.

— Why can't you believe that I'm an expert at wooing girls, Ismat behen?

— This is our last meeting, Manto bhai, I'm warning you. Ismat was seething. Dimples had appeared on both her cheeks. I wanted to stoke her anger further. 'Wait, let me call Shafia,' I said. 'Listen to what she has to say.'

Ismat exploded as soon as Shafia appeared. 'Has Manto bhai told you that he's visited the women at the brothels?'

— He's told me many times.

— Impossible. Ismat fumed in rage as she paced up and down. Very well, maybe he's been to them, and if he has, all he's done is to have a conversation or two with them. Right, Shafia?

— No idea. Only Manto sahib can say.

I burst out in laughter. And Ismat screamed all the louder, 'It isn't possible, it simply isn't possible. Even if Manto bhai swears on the Quran I won't believe it.'

Such childlike trust. It's hard to imagine the same Ismat writing a story like 'Dozakhi' about her dead brother Azim Beg. The story said that every incident ever recounted by Azim Beg was a lie. Whenever he began a story, their father would apparently say, 'There you go building castles in the air

again.' 'Whatever colour there is in life comes from lies, Abbajaan,' Azim Beg would reply. 'The truth doesn't sound entertaining unless lies are added to it.' The same mad streak ran through Ismat as well. She used to have strange whims. One day she said she would write a story about love between hens and cocks. Another time she declared she would give up writing and join the armed forces to fly aeroplanes. She was the kind of girl, Mirza sahib, who might be head over heels in love with you, but would still attack you mercilessly or just not talk to you. Maybe she was dying to kiss you, but instead she would prick you with a needle and make fun of you. Shafia had fallen in love with Ismat too. When she said as much one day, Ismat told her, 'High hopes! Men with daughters of your age are in love with me, and you think you can …' One particular writer was madly in love with Ismat, writing her a succession of letters. Ismat would write back too. Finally, she jilted him so ruthlessly, my brothers, that the writer didn't know where to hide. That was the way Ismat was, like a floating cloud. When she didn't write, months would pass but she couldn't be forced to put pen to paper. And when she did write, she would write page after page, forgetting to eat or sleep or drink. All she needed was a supply of ice cream.

Tell me, Mirza sahib, I've told you so much about Ismat—can you recognize her? Think of gulal of different colours—green, red, yellow, pink—in the courtyard when a breeze springs up. The colours mix with one another till they cannot be told apart anymore. Wasn't she just like that? I remember a portion of

'Dozakhi'. Early one morning, Shamim came to Ismat to wake her. 'Get dressed, Azim bhai is dying.' Ismat replied, 'Azim bhai will never die. Why did you wake me up unnecessarily?'

Shamim began to prod her. 'Wake up, Ismat. Azim bhai is looking for you.'

— Tell him I will see him on Judgement Day. Haven't I told you Azim bhai cannot die?

Ismat had written, wherever Munna bhai might be, in heaven or in hell, in jannat or jahannum, I want to see him. I know that he's still smiling. Worms are gnawing at his flesh, his bones have turned to dust, and his neck has been snapped by the fatwa of the mullahs. But still he's smiling. His mischievous eyes are dancing. His poisoned lips have turned blue, but still no one shall see a tear in his eye. In fact, he has only been transferred from one dozakh to another.

After Azim Beg, Ismat had discovered in me another inhabitant of hell. We may have meant to meet for five minutes, but five hours would pass without our knowing it. Arguments, and more arguments. She was determined to defeat me. Did she want to take revenge through me on the Munna bhai she had lost? I used to get coughing fits when drinking. I had had a cough problem since childhood, after all. Ismat couldn't stand my coughing. One day she asked, 'You have such a bad cough, why don't you get it treated, Manto bhai?'

— Treatment! Doctors are asses. A few years ago they had predicted I would die of tuberculosis within the year. You can see how hale and hearty I am. Magicians are better than doctors.

— I heard someone else say the same thing.

— Who's this angel?

— My elder brother Azim Beg. He's snoring in his grave now.

Yes, Mirza sahib, on the one hand I was her Manto bhai, sometimes Manto sahib, and on the other I was also her Munna bhai—Azim Beg Chughtai. She had made me the target of the game she couldn't play with her brother. And her husband Shahid used to enjoy this game enormously; he knew that Ismat would calm down only if she could tear Manto apart, that all of Ismat's 'darazdasti' capers would be accepted by a clown named Manto.

It was over this term 'darazdasti' that Ismat and I had a bitter argument once. Shahid and Ismat had invited us to dinner at their house in Malad. Over the meal, Shahid said, 'Why is your Urdu not

flawless yet, Manto?'

— Don't talk rot.

Accusations and counter accusations flew fast and furious. It was past one-thirty in the morning. Tired, Shahid said, 'Let it go now, I'm sleepy.'

Ismat refused to relent. She kept arguing. In some context or the other, she used the word 'dastdarazi'. I saw my chance. 'You've been holding forth so grandly all this time. But there's no such word as "dastdarazi", Ismat. It should be "darazdasti".'

— Of course not.

— Check the dictionary.

— No need to. I'm telling you it's 'dastdarazi'.

— Don't argue without reason.

— Who do you think you are, Manto bhai, the king emperor of Urdu literature?

Eventually Shahid fetched the dictionary from the next room. There really was no such word as 'dastdarazi'; it was indeed 'darazdasti'. 'You've lost, Ismat,' said Shahid, 'you must accept it.'

But Ismat refused to do any such thing. Now husband and wife began to argue. I sat back chuckling. It was dawn by then, the cocks had begun to crow. Flinging the dictionary away, Ismat declared, 'When I compile a dictionary, I will have the word "dastdarazi". "Darazdasti" my foot!'

Ismat was a crazy woman—really crazy. Let's say someone were to ask us, the two of you are so close —what is it about Ismat that you like so much, Manto? And what about Manto attracts you, Ismat? I know both of us would have been in the dark. In that darkness Ismat and I would have looked at each other in wonder. A single lifetime isn't enough for anyone, Mirza sahib.

33

موزوں کرو کچھ اور بھی ،شاید کہ میر جی
رہ جائے کوئی بات کسو کی زبان پر

Compose some more poetry, Mir sahib
Your words may survive on someone's lips

I am reminded of a Sufi tale, my brothers. A starving beggar was wandering from house to house in the city. Spotting him through their windows, people refused to open their doors to him. Eventually one door did open. The owner asked, 'What … what is it … why do you keep banging on the door?'

— Some food, huzoor. I haven't eaten in three days.

— So what can I do? No one's home now.

— I don't need anyone huzoor. Just some food. Nothing else.

Just like this beggar, I was wandering about from door to door. After I was released from jail, the lord arranged for my livelihood for some time. Mian Nasiruddin sahib drew me to his bosom. Everyone called him mian Kale Shah. Jahanpanah Bahadur Shah had accepted him as his teacher. So after my release, I moved into a part of mian Kale Shah's house at Lal Kuan. I could not afford to pay him a rent; Kale sahib didn't bring it up either. I was sitting with him in his drawing room when someone came up to me and said, 'Congratulations, Mirza sahib.'

— For what?

— For your release from prison.

I was perpetually up to mischief, Manto bhai. Smiling at Kale sahib, I said, 'Released? What do you mean, mian! At best you can say I've moved from the British jail to Kale sahib's jail.'

Kale sahib, who had a sense of humour, burst into laughter. Then he said, 'I have no idea why the emperor doesn't call you to his court. If even a few drops of your sense of humour were to splash on him, his life would not be such an accursed one.'

— Why should Jahanpanah call me, mian sahib? I'm the lord's dog.

— Mashallah! This is the Mirza Ghalib we know.

— Did I say something wrong?

— Haven't you heard the story? Maula Darvish, the guide of the Naqshbandi order of the Sufis, used to call himself a dog.

— Tell me the story, janab. But let me send for Kallu first.

— Why?

— He cannot go to sleep without a story. Just like my addiction to alcohol, he's addicted to stories.

— You have a very strange servant, Mirza.

I sent for Kallu. His eyes shone at the prospect of a new story; sitting down at Kale sahib's feet, he began to massage them. I ought to have written a nazm about Kallu, Manto bhai; I never saw another person so addicted to stories.

Kale sahib started his story. —Maula Darvish was reciting the sayings of Maula Rumi to initiates at the dargah. You know what Maula Rumi said, don't you? Man has to pass through three phases in his life. In the first, he worships something or the other—men, women, money, children, this world, a rock … anything. In the next, he reads the namaz for Allah. And in the last phase, what he says is neither 'Allah is all I have' nor 'There's no such thing as Allah'. Suddenly a mullah marched into the dargah, growling in rage. 'You dog!' he swore at the Maula. 'While you chat with the initiates here, no one pays any attention to me when I try to turn them towards the lord.'

— And then? Kallu grew agitated. —He thrashed the mullah within an inch of life …?

— Patience, Kallu. Kale Shah laughed. Does a thrashing solve everything? Of course, the initiates did jump to their feet and were about to beat the mullah up.

— He should definitely have been beaten up. Kallu grew agitated again. If I'd been there, I'd have torn the mullah's beard off and …

— Let mian tell the story, Kallu. If you'd been there we'd never have had the chance to listen to the story. And you would have wandered about the streets, pulling the mullah by his beard. I laughed.

— Maula managed to stop the initiates. Laughing, he told them, 'What do you think you're doing? What's so bad about the word "dog"? I quite like the idea. Of course I'm a dog. I follow my master's instructions. I bark when I see my master in danger; I wag my tail joyfully when he's happy. Barking, wagging his tail, loving his master—this is the way of the dog. I see nothing insulting here.' So Mirza, if you're a dog of the lord, what could be more honourable?

That was mian Kale Shah for you. As interested in the finer things of life as he was compassionate. He used to talk to the emperor regularly about me. He wanted wholeheartedly that I should find a place in the royal court. 'Always remember, Mirza, that the lord settles all accounts in this very world,' he used to tell me. 'On Judgement Day you only have to be with the lord. There are no gains to be made there. You will surely be rewarded for the beauty that you have created for the lord, Mirza.'

— The lord is the creator of all beauty, mian sahib. What can we possibly create for him?

— Why did he bring us into this world then, Mirza? He gives us truth, and we give him illusion.

Kale sahib was right. The ghazal is in fact an illusion. Do you know what's hidden inside the word 'ghazal'? A conversation with your lover. About love. Just as spring appears and then vanishes, so too does love arrive suddenly and depart the same way. Don't you feel a chill when you think about it, Manto bhai? The seed of death sprouts within the desire for union. The body will decay, so will the heart, desire will approach its death. We only wander about briefly in the picture gallery of illusion. But never mind all these clichés. Man doesn't survive on a diet of illusions. What I needed was bread and meat and wine.

At the age of fifty-two, I found a place in the royal court, the durbar. When I went to Shahjahanabad from Agra, the emperor's court was the world of my dreams. Those dreams had died and rotted long ago, Manto bhai. I wanted nothing more as a poet, either. I knew that conversation had forsaken me too. I needed a place at the royal court only for my material needs. The court cannot bring the spring of creativity to an artist's life. If only I had found a place at the durbar when I was still capable of writing, I would not have had to resort to dirty tricks to survive, I would have had the respite

to make love more passionately with language.

Kale sahib stood by me, of course, and Ahsanullah Khan, the emperor's doctor, also held out his hand in support. He was extremely fond of my Farsi compositions. Telling the emperor of my Farsi diwans and my *Melody Quintet*, he got me a job at the court. What else was it but a job? Look, you may be a poet, or you may be a brilliant writer in Farsi, but you must remember that you're nothing but a servant of the court. To the emperor we were all eunuchs, Manto bhai. If not, could he have asked a composer of ghazals to write a history of the Mughal Empire? I would be paid six hundred rupees a year.

All humiliation is ceremonial. So I was given a title along with suitable garments for the royal court. Nazm-ud-Daulah, Davir-ul-Mulk, Nizam-Jang. Was this a title for a poet? But so the emperor desired. In other words, you're not a poet anymore; you are the jewel of the kingdom, composer to the nation, and war hero. For heaven's sake, was I capable of fighting in a war? How could someone who had been defeated in the war for survival possibly be a war hero? I had a big laugh when I went back home. Me, a historian? I had not read the stories about Sikandar and Dara; half my life had been spent on stories of love and death. But since Jahanpanah had so willed it, even I would have to become a historian. Six hundred rupees a year, after all. He could have turned me into a eunuch guarding his harem if he so wished.

Umrao Begum came to me that evening. Perhaps Kallu had told her I was laughing incessantly, like a braying ass. I had drunk more than usual that day. When I saw Umrao I said, laughing, 'Why are you in my hell instead of your mosque, Begum?'

— It's a happy day for you, Mirza sahib.

— But of course. I am a war hero.

I began to laugh again.

— What is it, Mirza sahib?

— You won't understand, Begum.

— Do I not understand you at all?

— No, Begum. You do not understand me at all.

After a long, long time, I drew Umrao Begum to my breast. —I don't have a dream anymore, Begum. Poetry has abandoned me. I can be a servant to anyone who will ask me to be one, so that I can earn a livelihood. I was not just Asadullah Khan, I was also Ghalib—these are two different individuals, Begum. Asadullah Khan likes his drink, enjoys his kebab and paratha; and Ghalib savours only words—words hung on rainbows. The emperor can buy Asadullah Khan, but he doesn't have enough money in his treasury to purchase Ghalib. Go ahead, buy my compromise as you will.

— Mirza sahib …

— Yes.

— Give up the job then.

— No, Begum.

— Why not?

— There's nothing coming in the way now, Begum. Once the ghazal has forsaken someone, he can do as he pleases. He can massage the emperor's feet, he can play political games too. Why don't you make some keema pulao tomorrow? I want a comfortable life now, Begum.

I could make out that the emperor did not like me at all. He had accepted me only for Kale sahib's and Ahsanullah Khan's sake. I didn't enjoy the ways of the royal court either. I had to compose poems commemorating Eid to make the emperor happy; there were a hundred other celebrations—I had to

write poems for each of them. I couldn't do all this. I would simply recite a sher or two, without bothering to write them down. Could such stuff ever amount to poetry? Jahanpanah had to be paid a royalty during celebrations; I had to write something or the other to save money. It was shit and dung, Manto bhai, that I flung in Jahanpanah's face; do you suppose the emperor was capable of understanding the artist's devious ways, his haramigiri? All he wanted was flattery. The court poet Zauq sahib's continuous sycophancy had convinced him to the core that all poetry in the world was actually in praise of Emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar. All rulers think this way. If you oppose this line of thought, you will be at the receiving end of abuse all your life. Think of all the praise Jahanpanah Akbar commanded in history. But how could he have Anarkali killed the way he did? Her real name was Nadia Begum. Some called her Sharafunnisa Begum. The ravishingly beautiful daughter of a slave in Akbar's harem. One day in the Chamber of Mirrors, Emperor Akbar discovered Anarkali smiling at prince Salim. This smile was all it took for the seeds of Anarkali's death to be sown. The living Anarkali disappeared into the depths of the palace walls. All … all empires gobble up human beings this way.

Empire and history consume everything, Manto bhai. On Jahanpanah's orders, I began to write history. I planned a two-volume work on the Mughal Empire. The first would cover the period from Timur Lang to Humayun, and the second, from Akbar to Bahadur Shah. I titled the first volume *Mihar-e-Nimroz–The Midday Sun*. And the second, *Mah-e-Nimmah–The Midmonth Moon*. The two volumes together would be titled *Partabisthan–The Kingdom of Light*.

Since it was a matter of my livelihood, I began to write quickly. I was supposed to be paid every six months. In the first six months, I completed the history of Emperor Babar's life. But how could I accept payment only once in six months for such tedious work? I composed a poem requesting monthly payments and sent it to the emperor.

آپ کا بندہ اور پھروں ننگا
آپ کا نوکر اور کھاؤں اُدھار
میری تنخواہ کیجئے ماہ بہ ماہ
تا نہ ہو مجھ کو زندگی دشوار

Your slave and a pauper?
Your servant and always in debt?
Let my salary be paid every month
Let my life not be full of hardships

I was unable to complete the history, my brothers. Only the first volume, *The Midday Sun*, was published. I couldn't proceed with the work on *The Midmonth Moon*. I told hakim Ahsanullah Khan sahib that someone like me couldn't go scouring in the jungle of history for accurate information; all I can do is write poetry by the light of the heart, hakim sahib; so it would be helpful if the facts that needed to be included in the history could be selected and sent to me. Do you know what he did? He wrote down all kinds of facts, starting with the birth of Adam and going on to Chenghez Khan, and sent them to me. But I had begun the history of the empire with Timur Lang. What was I to do? I prefixed all that I had written with this new material. But no information arrived for the second volume. I had written about sixty-four pages. I sent word several times, asking for more information. Once, the response was, 'It's Ramzan'. The next time I was told, 'Everyone's busy celebrating Eid.' Damn it! Why was I obliged to write a history of the empire of the badshahs? I sent off the sixty-four

pages I had written. I wonder in which dark cell of the fort the termites got at it. History is for termites to destroy, isn't that so, Manto bhai?

Just as history is written on the whims of rulers, erasing it is also their proud prerogative. How can we keep pace? And as for the poet, all he wants is to fix a pair of iridescent butterfly wings to the body of history—let it fly, let it fly where it will, to heaven or to hell, to jannat or to jahannum, as it pleases. I have already told you that Emperor Bahadur Shah didn't care for my ghazals. When Zauq sahib recited his shers, he would exclaim, 'Hai hai!' and 'Kyabaat kyabaat!' But when it came to my shers, all he would say was, 'All right.' Once, he told me, 'You read very well, Mirza sahib.' You understand the implication? That the meaning of the ghazal amounts to nothing at all. Now he had poetic ambitions too. Earlier, Zauq sahib used to polish Jahanpanah's ghazals; after his death it was my turn. What did our emperor compose? What was he capable of composing? A coward like him—who had no mission besides living off his ancestral wealth, who was a puppet in the hands of Begum Zeenat Mahal, and a parasite all his life—was supposed to write ghazals? Conversations with lovers need plenty of stamina, Manto bhai.

Something happened at the wedding of the emperor's youngest son Mirza Jawan Bakht. Being Begum Zeenat Mahal's son, he was the probable successor to the throne. The wedding would be conducted with great pomp and ceremony. On the Begum's instructions, I had to compose a sehra—a wedding song. At the end of the sehra I wrote:

ہم سخن فہم ہیں، غالب کے طرفدار نہیں
دیکھے اس سہرے سے کہہ دے کوئی بہتر سہرا

I'd like to see someone, unbiased about Ghalib,
A connoisseur of poetry, write a better wedding song

The emperor assumed this was an insult to him and to his ustad, Ibrahim Zauq. What did this imply? That Zauq sahib, on whom he had bestowed the title of King of Poets, Malik-us-Shuara, was neither a connoisseur of poetry, nor capable of writing such verse. When I sought permission to leave, the emperor said, 'Just a minute, Mirza. Let the ustad arrive.'

— As you please, Jahanpanah.

Suddenly the emperor began to recite:

کم ہوں گے اس بساط پہ ہم جیسے بدقمار
جو چال ہم چلیں سو نہایت بُری چلے

There cannot be as many bad players at this board as I
Any move I make is a terrible one

Looking at me, he asked, 'Do you know whose sher this is?'

— No, janab.

— It's ustadji's. You reminded me of it.

Zauq sahib arrived in court. The emperor was exhilarated.

— Come, ustadji. Read the wedding song that Mirza sahib has composed.

When he had read it, Zauq sahib glanced at me. His eyes held undisguised loathing for me. As

though he was looking at a worm.

'You must write one too, ustadji,' said the emperor.

— Very well. He began writing his sehra. The last two lines were:

جس کو دعویٰ ہے سخن کا یہ سنا دے اُس کو
دیکھ اس طرح سے کہتے ہیں سخنور سہرا

Let them learn, those who claim to be poets,
That this is how poets compose wedding songs

— Wonderful! Wonderful! The emperor exploded in joy. Do you know what happened after this? Zauq sahib's wedding song rang out in the lanes and bylanes of Dilli that evening.

This was the emperor's method for humiliating me. When he went off to fly kites, he would take me along. Do you know why? To humiliate me, to humiliate me as deeply as possible. Since I pay you every month, it doesn't matter whether you're Mirza Ghalib or someone else—you're nothing but a eunuch in my harem. He would invite me to mushairas and keep me waiting, I would be called upon to read either at the end or in the middle.

To tell you the truth, Manto bhai, I did not want to hurt anyone with the last two lines of my sehra. Still I had to send a poem of apology to the emperor. What else could I have done? The poet was worse than a beggar in the eyes of society. Do you know why most people didn't like me? No matter how good or bad the poetry was at the mushairas, everyone would exclaim 'Brilliant! Wonderful!' But not me. I was unable to praise anyone until I had understood the essence of their verse. People would be furious with me. But how could I praise something unless the purity of the Goddess Saraswati was expressed in it? When I liked a ghazal, though, my praise was unstinting. Once, Munshi Ghulam Ali Khan recited a sher over a game of chess. Oh, what a sher it was! It pierced my heart like an arrow. 'Whose sher is this, Munshiji?' I asked.

— Zauq sahib's.

— Tell me again.

I would ask Munshiji to recite this sher over and over again. Zauq sahib had written—Exhausted, we seek shelter at the hands of death, but what if death does not bring peace either? I didn't enjoy mushairas. Poetry is born in solitude—just as the best pearls in the world are born in the deepest depths of the ocean.

As Mir sahib wrote:

زلف سا پیچدار ہے ہر شعر
ہے سخن میر کا عجب دھب کا

Each of my poems is like a coil of her hair
Mir's poetry is extraordinary by nature

34

کھلتا کسی پہ کیوں مرے دل کا معاملہ
شعروں کے انتخاب نے رسوا کیا مجھے

No one knew what was going on in my heart, after all
Why did I have to become a poet, all honour is lost

It's a happy day for us here in our graves, my brothers. I know your hearts have been growing heavy listening to Mirza sahib; but remember, his life was a continuous attempt to push a rock uphill. Every time he tried to reach the top, it rolled back to the bottom, and Mirza sahib continued to push it back uphill again. Can life spend itself pushing rocks uphill? Let hell be in turmoil instead. We will listen to the stories of bald angels, the *Ganjay Farishtay*. Most of them were people from Bombay's world of cinema. Life was not the way it was depicted on the screen. Reality is not as neatly organized as films, after all. Life is another name for the war for bread, women, and power. Every story in the world is about this war. Hunger is the most primal of all urges, isn't it, my brothers? No one can forget hunger. Ever since man came into this world, he has harboured greed for power and lust for women. These things never change, my brothers. Only when man develops a loathing for bread, women, and the throne does he think of Allah. He is even more mysterious and elusive than these three, he cannot be acquired through battle.

Pardon me, I've been chattering too much. I had promised to tell you Sitara's story; I'm starting my account of the bald angels with her. Sitara was the name of a tigress, my brothers; a veritable tornado seemed hidden inside her, not visible outside. Sitara used to practise her dance for an hour every morning, but I never saw her tired. She was incapable of sitting still; she'd always be doing something, or plotting what to do. She had two sisters—Tara and Alaknanda. They had come to Bombay one by one from a village in Nepal to make their fortunes. But among the three sisters, Sitara was peerless. You get one girl in a million such as her. Sometimes I thought that Sitara was actually the name of many women—how else could she have toyed with so many men? Sitara was like a five-storied building in Bombay, with many flats on different floors, some lit up, some dark. She always dressed in thin, transparent muslin saris. The view of her body left nothing to the imagination.

Sitara had been brought to Bombay by a film director. I forget his name—we used to call him Desai. They had even got married. But they could not stay together very long. 'I'm not capable of coping with this woman,' Desai used to say. Sitara used to live with someone else at the time, but she would visit Desai regularly. But he didn't let her stay with him for long stretches. They had been married according to the Hindu Marriage Act. So, although Sitara took new lovers regularly, she was known as Mrs Desai.

Mehboob sahib's star was at its zenith then. He cast Sitara in one of his films. Mehboob sahib

became her victim too. There were new scandals about them in our line of work. Once Mehboob sahib's film was over and done with, Sitara found herself a new lover. His name was P.N. Arora. He had been trained in film-making in the UK. After this Sitara flung herself on Al-Naseer. Let me tell you a story about P.N. Arora in the meantime, my brothers. I was working in Delhi at the time. One day I saw Arora on the road, limping along with the help of a stick. He didn't appear to have a drop of life left in him. Asking the tonga to stop, I went up to him.

— Oh, it's Manto. How are you?

— I'm very well. But why are you in such a state? What's the matter?

Arora sighed and then smiled. —Sitara, Manto, Sitara. It's all because of Sitara.

Al-Naseer had arrived from Dehra Dun to be a hero. He was handsome, manly. He even got the hero's role in a film, in which Sitara had acted as well. Al-Naseer found himself in the tigress's lair. Don't imagine, my brothers, that Sitara used to give up one lover before taking another. She used to have them all at once—Desai, Arora, Mehboob, Al-Naseer, and who knew how many more. Back in Bombay, I saw the state Al-Naseer was in. His complexion, which was once pink, had turned ashen. His handsome appearance was ruined, someone seemed to have sucked out all his blood. Al-Naseer said the same thing, 'Sitara, Manto, Sitara. It's all because of Sitara.'

— Why, what has she done?

— She's a vampire, Manto. She has turned me to pulp. I'll be finished if I can't get away from her.

Al-Naseer ran away to Dehra Dun. He recovered to some extent after spending three months there and then returned to Bombay.

After this, Sitara did something very strange. Didn't I tell you she was a girl in a million, my brothers? She was like the flame that moths dive into. This time Sitara snared Nazir sahib. He had taken her into his Society Film Company, and at once he was trapped in her web. Nazir sahib was a simple, large-hearted man. He would clasp the people he loved to his breast while heaping abuse on them. His relationship with Sitara lasted several years. Nazir sahib had a strong personality, which was why Sitara stayed away from other men initially. But she wasn't capable of such fidelity, my brothers, and started visiting Arora and Al-Naseer and Mehboob and Desai again. Nazir sahib could not accept this. He began to beat her up regularly. Sitara seemed to experience a certain sexual pleasure even in that violence.

Now this story takes an excitingly different turn, my brothers. Nazir sahib's nephew Asif used to live in the same flat. He may have been young, but he was well built, and handsome too. There had been no women in Asif's life yet. He was more interested in learning about film-making from his uncle. He knew what was going on between Nazir sahib and Sitara. Her screams and the sounds of wild behaviour emerging from the locked room used to drive him mad every passing day. One day he even managed to get a look at them. He told me later, 'It was like a dog and a bitch ripping each other apart, Manto bhai. How could my uncle cope with Sitara?'

— It was a dreadful game, wasn't it, Asif?

— Animals. For the first time I realized that human beings are actually animals. And do you know what love is, Manto bhai?

— What is love?

— A confrontation with death. I want to have such a damned confrontation too, at least once.

— With Sitara?

— You bet. I am going to fight a bout with her at least once, Manto bhai. But you know what, the woman scares me.

— Why? Why should you be afraid of Sitara?

— She seems possessed by a djinn.

— Sitara's much better than ice-cold women, Asif. Her wildness is full of life. Fight it out.

Asif began by just talking to Sitara. But he didn't have the nerve to touch her because he was familiar with his uncle's temper. And yet, everyone knew that Sitara would throw herself at Asif at the first signal from him. He was losing control every passing day. How long could a hungry young man restrain himself? Nazir sahib got wise to their game. One day he beat Sitara up mercilessly, and then told her to leave his flat. But still she didn't go. That night, growling with rage, Nazir sahib went to his study and fell asleep. Asif sensed his opportunity. Going into Sitara's room, he touched her wounds tenderly. Bullseye! Asif had his first encounter with death. Then he packed Sitara's belongings and took her to her own flat in Dadar. Sitara's new love affair with Asif began. That same night he told her, 'Our relationship runs very deep, Sitara. Don't go to anyone else. Be mine alone.'

— My love, it's you I have been looking for all this time. Believe me, Sitara will never look at anyone else from now on.

— If you do, I'll go mad.

— I promise.

Sitara showered kisses on Asif.

Asif went back, promising to return the next day. Then Sitara sat down at her dressing table. She did her face again, and changed her sari. Going out, she hailed a taxi and gave Arora's address to the driver. Tell me, Mirza sahib, do you think this woman was driven by sexual appetite all her life? I see a desperate helplessness in her. The same helplessness that I saw in Saugandhi. Madhu was sucking her dry. Then Saugandhi threw Madhu out one day and went to sleep with her arms around her pet pi-dog. Sitara simply could not stand me, but I wanted her to be able to sleep like Saugandhi one day.

They were strange women, all of them, my brothers. Can I ever forget Nasim Bano, queen of angels? What eyes she had! Like lotus blooms in a lake. I saw Nasim up close when writing the story for the film *Begum*. S. Mukherjee and I used to discuss the story in Nasim's home, tinkering with it continuously. We had assumed that she must live in a big house. But her home on Porbander Road was rather old-fashioned, the plaster peeling off the walls, with broken shutters on the windows. The rooms had ordinary furniture, all hired. One day I found her on the veranda, quarrelling with the milkman, who had apparently given her half a litre less than he should have. I was astonished. Nasim's fans would have willingly let loose torrents of milk for her—and here she was, actually arguing with the milkman. Was the Noorjehan of *Pukar* like this in real life? And why shouldn't she be? All of us are built on a scaffolding of straw, after all, which becomes visible every now and then.

The people in the movies like to keep this figure of straw under wraps permanently, my brothers. Nasim used to dress in pink most of the time. Pink is a dangerous colour; it dazzles the eyes. That was the effect Nasim wanted to create. But then, she had the right qualities to dazzle people with. Like pink flower petals—I don't remember seeing another person with skin like hers.

Alongside her strong attraction to jewellery and perfume, I observed another love she harboured—for her father. She used to keep a photograph of him in her vanity bag. I saw the picture secretly. I had a bad habit, Mirza sahib—peeping into women's bags in secret. I was peering into Nasim's bag one day when she came up to me.

— What are you doing, Manto sahib?

— Pardon me. This is a very bad habit that I have. But I cannot control myself.

Nasim chuckled, 'Thank goodness you're not in the habit of examining girls' hearts in secret.'

— I can see them anyway.

— Women's hearts?

— Hmm.

— Can you tell me what's in mine?

— A fluttering pink scarf.

— You're fun, Manto sahib.

— But whose photograph is it?

— Why, it's of my father, my abbajaan's. Just saying that one word, abbajaan, seemed to take her back to her dew-soaked childhood days. I noticed the strong bonding and love that her face radiated.

While writing the story for *Begum*, an argument over a scene with S. Mukherjee carried on till two in the morning. Shafia was with me too that evening. As we were about to leave, Nasim said, 'Is this any time to travel? Spend the night here.'

— No problem. There's a train at three-thirty. It'll be here before we take a turn around the platform.

But Nasim and her husband Ehsan wouldn't listen. So we had to stay back. Nasim went into the bedroom with Shafia. Ehsan and I lay down on the veranda.

The next day I got a different picture of Nasim from Shafia, my brothers. First, Nasim put a fresh bedspread on the bed. Then she gave Shafia a nightgown, saying, 'Put this on. It's absolutely fresh. Then go to sleep.'

— And you?

— I have some things to do.

Nasim changed, removed her make-up and went to bed. Looking at her in surprise, Shafia said, 'You look so different, Nasim. You're so dark. Then how …'

— All thanks to cosmetics, Shafia. I'm no better than a bad girl.

Then Nasim proceeded to massage all sorts of oils into her face. Kneeling, she began to read the Quran Sharif. 'You're much better than us, Nasim,' Shafia said artlessly. Nasim didn't answer; switching the light off, she went to sleep.

I have these fragmented memories of many people, Mirza sahib. Can I ever forget Noorjehan's voice? People used to talk of how pretty she was, but her beauty never touched me. Only her voice. To me, Noorjehan meant an invitation from the sky. Never again did I hear such a generous voice, such an exquisite kharaj, or such a sharp, well-honed pancham, Mirza sahib. Just as tightrope walkers can be poised stock-still on a rope suspended in mid-air, so too could Noorjehan's taan—she could easily hold it for an hour or so. But you know what, those whom God favours are the ones who squander their talent the most. Liquor ruins the singer's voice, and Sahgal sahib couldn't take a step without a drink. Sour and deep-fried food harm the vocal cords, and Noorjehan would consume a quart of pickles in oil at one go. Sometimes I feel that the Sahgals and Noorjehans were born for confrontations with the lord. As long as our planet survives, Mirza sahib, so will Noorjehan's voice.

There was no count of the number of people who loved Noorjehan. Never mind the gentlemen, I know many restaurant chefs who used to cook for sahibs and memsahibs with a photograph of Noorjehan's hanging near the stove, while they sang her songs tunelessly. When Rafiq introduced me to Noorjehan, he said, 'This is Noor, Noor-e-Jehan, the light of the world. By God, she has been gifted with a voice that will make even the angels of heaven descend to earth if they hear it.' I knew Noorjehan with my heart and soul even before Rafiq introduced us, simply on the strength of her

singing. One of her admirers was a barber I knew. He always talked of her and sang her songs. One day the barber's friend asked him, 'Do you really love Noorjehan?'

— I swear on the lord, Noorjehan Begum is my life.

— Can you give up your life for her?

— That's nothing.

— Can you carve out a portion of your flesh as Mahiwal did?

Pulling his razor out at once, the barber handed it to his friend, saying, 'Carve it out from any part of my body that you like.'

The barber's friend was a very strange creature. He really did cut some flesh out of the barber's arm, and then fled at the sight of the blood-covered limb. The barber had fallen unconscious. When he returned to his senses in the hospital, there was only one name he could utter, 'Noorjehan.' It was an astonishing world, my brothers. Love, murder, bloodshed—what good is life without these?

My friend Shyam used to enjoy life unapologetically. I was in Pakistan then. Shyam wrote in a letter, 'I detest human beings. This is how my life goes on. This life is my lover, whom I love with every fibre.' Shyam was a strange man. He used the term 'jokers' for people who attended meetings and conferences in a pyjama and kurta and cap, looking innocent. He would let loose a flood of invectives whenever anyone began to philosophize on life after drinking. Shyam had been through a long and hard struggle for his money and fame. When he was a pauper, he used to pick up a coin and say laughingly, 'How much longer will you torment me, my friend? You *shall* be mine one day or another.' Shyam got it all—a house, cars, renown. He never forgot me.

I was in dire straits in Pakistan at the time. Virtually no movies were being made; there was no one to write stories for. Meanwhile I had my back to the wall because of the case against me for writing 'Thanda Gosht'. The court had sentenced me to three months' rigorous imprisonment and a fine of three hundred rupees. I was sickened. I considered burning everything that I had written. I'd rather work as a clerk in an office. At least my wife and children would survive. I was drinking more and more every day. One day I got a letter from the owner of Tehsin Pictures. Come and see us immediately. There's a letter from Bombay. I was in Pakistan—who was going to write to me from Bombay? Still, I went. The letter was from Shyam. He had sent five hundred rupees. I burst into tears, Mirza sahib. How did he know that I needed money badly? I tried several times to write to him, but I tore up all my drafts. It wasn't fitting to thank Shyam. He would definitely have written back—So this is your answer, Manto?

Shyam visited Lahore once for an event. I rushed to meet him. Seeing me from the car, he waved, and asked the driver to stop. But because of the crowd of fans, the driver didn't dare. I entered the auditorium through the back door to meet him. I'll come to your hotel tonight, I told him.

At the hotel I had to sit like an outsider. I didn't have the inclination to push through the crowd of Shyam's fans to go up to him. At one point he came up to me and said, 'Everyone's going to Hira Mandi. You come too. With me.'

— No.

— Why not?

— I shan't go, you can go if you like.

— Wait for me, then. I'll be back soon.

Shyam left. I went back home. It was clear that Shyam and I had drifted apart. Just like Hindustan and Pakistan. We weren't each other's friends anymore. Just as Ismat never replied to my letters once I came away to Pakistan. How would it have helped even if she had?

35

کریں کیا کہ دل بھی تو مجبور ہے
زمیں سخت ہے آسمان دور ہے

What do I do, the heart is helpless
The ground is hard, the sky distant

Some people come into your life for a few days and leave it bereft when they go. The heart turns into a Karbala. Arif left me a pauper when he went away. For the first time, I realized how love for one's child is hidden deep within, just like many other instincts. A vital part of your life will be in perpetual darkness if you have not experienced love for your child. Arif was the flame of the candle that lit up my home, Manto bhai.

Arif was Umrao Begum's sister's son; his full name was Zainul Abedin Khan. Arif was his pseudonym. Along with his friend Ghulam Husain Khan Mahav, he visited me every day. They had a string of questions for me about ghazals. Arif had an extraordinary imagination. I felt that he was the only one worthy of being my son. I didn't enjoy going to mushairas. Those two young men would force me to go. 'Why don't you like mushairas, Mirza sahib?' Arif would ask now and then.

— I do not belong to the social circles of poetry, Arif.

— Why do you think of yourself this way?

— I have always found beauty on the wayside. These public recitals suffocate me. I have always wanted to sit by the road, but I was evicted even from there.

— Why, Mirza sahib?

— Is there anyone who isn't afraid of a mad man? As you write ghazals, you will realize one day that to get to the heart of a word you have to take to the road like a fakir. No one will accompany you. Your nearest and dearest will spit on you. And on that day you will understand what the word conversation … guftagu … means. What an exchange between lovers means. And that an infinite number of sunsets and sunrises are concealed in this word.

— Shall I succeed in writing poetry someday, Mirza sahib?

— If the lord wills it, you shall.

I would grow anxious if I didn't see Arif every day, Manto bhai. So I told him one day, why don't you stay in my house. He was ready at once. His heart was like the sky. He moved into my house with his wife and two children. Umrao Begum was beside herself with joy. Her child, daughter-in-law and grandchildren were at home. We had spent lonely lives for far too long, Manto bhai. They painted our house with colours, Manto bhai. The chirping of the two children made it seem as though the garden had come indoors. The birds sang. I began to smell the fragrance of the flowers. Why live if life isn't a

celebration? My income was not enough for the upkeep of such a large family, but even the joy of struggle while living together was exceptional. I could make out how happy Umrao was; I did not want to rob her of this happiness. Even more important, I considered Arif my own son. When I wrote his name, my fingers seemed to dance joyously with pen on paper.

Arif was not well at all. He would fall ill quite often with a cough and fever. Eventually he could no longer get out of bed. The doctor examined him and diagnosed his illness as Rooh-af. He began to bleed through the mouth constantly. We assumed his days were numbered. Meanwhile his wife was suffering from the same illness. She died before Arif, who lived for about four months more. I couldn't bear to look at him, Manto bhai. He was reduced to skin and bones. Umrao Begum was at his bedside all the time, praying to the lord. One day she began to cry like a baby, clinging to my hand. 'Why does everyone who becomes important in my life always have to die, Mirza sahib?' There can be no answer to such questions. Only the lord knows what games he will play with us shadow puppets. Arif died, leaving behind two little children. Bakir was five then, and Husain, two.

All the lights in my house went out. I would just sit by myself in my tiny room, without the inclination to go anywhere. But I had to visit the royal court. I was the emperor's servant, you see. One day Arif's death bloomed into a ghazal, Manto bhai. It is death we write, after all. Maybe composing death this way can take us along the path to eternity. I am not talking of immortality, Manto sahib; this progress towards eternity through writing death and wiping oneself out in the process is not for immortality. I never imagined that my name would remain alive in this world, that even a thousand years later people would read my ghazals. I only hoped that we could become the same dust from which Allah had made us—this would be my route to eternity.

Arif, my son, I called to him and said:

لازم تھا کہ دیکھو مرا رستہ کوئی دن اور
تنہا گئے کیوں اب رہو،تنہا کوئی دن اور
مٹ جائے گا سرگر ترا پتھر نہ گھسے گا
ہوں در پہ تیر ے ناصیہ فرساکوئی دن اور
آئے ہو کل اور آج ہی کہتے کہ جاؤں
مانا کہ ہمیشہ نہیں کوئی اچھا دن اور
جاتے ہوئے کہتے ہو قیامت کو ملیں گے
کیا خوب قیامت کا ہے گیا کوئی دن اور
ہاں آے فلکِ پیر جواں تھا ابھی عارف
کیا تیرابگڑتا جو نہ مرتا کوئی دن اور
تم ماہِ شبِ چار دہم تھے میرے گھر کے
پھر کیوں نہ رہا گھر کا وہ نقشہ کوئی دن اور
ناداں ہو جو کہتے ہو کہ کیوں جیتا ہے غالب
قسمت میں ہے مرنے کی تمنا کوئی دن اور

Our paths, will merge some day, Arif my son.
You left alone, you must remain alone a while longer.
My forehead will be bloodied from striking your tombstone,
Arif, but still I will stay by your grave till that day arrives.
You came but yesterday, and you're talking of leaving
already? I know you won't stay forever, but at least
stay a little longer.
You said when leaving, we'll meet on Judgement Day.
But your going away is my Judgement Day, Arif.
Arif was just a young man, o ancient sky.
How would it have hurt you if he had lived a little longer? You were the full moon of my house, Arif.
Could the pattern not have remained a few days more?
Fools ask why Ghalib is still alive. My destiny has decreed
that I must hope for death for some time more.

Yes, Manto bhai, I had to bear witness to it all; I had to carry all the wounds on my body. The lord did not permit me to take the path of the wandering fakir—all my prayers were ruled invalid. Only, now and then, my heart overflowed when I looked at my creations. This was my limited access to the lord. I realized a long time after I wrote the ghazal for Arif that there had never been another Urdu ghazal like this one. Do you know why? My contemporaries like Anis and Davir had written several long elegies. But the subject of those marsias was Karbala—the martyrdom of Husain and his family. No one could imagine composing an elegy on anything other than Karbala. Now, for the first time, the notes of a marsia were heard in the ghazal for Arif. I had not planned this, it just happened. And as for Karbala—should we not compose elegies to our dearest people?

But we had no time to be immersed in grief for Arif. He had died, leaving Bakir and Husain as orphans. These two living creatures had to be protected. Arif's mother took Bakir to live with her, while we adopted Husain. Such a small boy, but he stared at our faces all the time; I could tell he wanted to know about his father and mother. A son of dead parents, he fell ill every now and then. Umrao would stay up all night at his bedside. I knew that she was afraid that Husain might leave us too. Arif's mother died before a year had passed, so we brought Bakir home too. How could we have abandoned him? But my house became lively again with the laughter and conversation of two children.

Meanwhile we had moved from Kale sahib's haveli to the neighbourhood of Ballimaran. In 1854 a bit of money came my way. My annual income was now two thousand, two hundred and fifty rupees. Seven hundred and fifty rupees came from the pension, two hundred from the emperor, and four hundred from the emperor's heir Mirza Fakhruddin, who had acknowledged me as his ustad. Nawab Wajid Ali Shah of Awadh had given me an annual grant of five hundred rupees for a qaseeda I had written for him. The emperor's ustad Zauq sahib died at the end of that year. The poet Momin Khan was not alive anymore either. Listen to this sher of his, my brothers:

تم مرے پاس ہوتے ہو گویا
جب کوئی دوسرا نہیں ہوتا

It seems you are by my side
When no one else is

Superb! When I heard it I told Momin Khan, 'Give me this one sher, mian, and take my entire diwan in exchange.'

The emperor had no choice but to swallow the bitter pill. He welcomed me with the title of Poet to

the Nation, Shairul-Mulk. I knew I would not get the title of King of Poets that was bestowed on Zauq sahib. I wasn't bothered about it either. However, the emperor did not increase my emoluments. But as his ustad I was supposed to correct his ghazals too. I never cared for this task. How can poetry be corrected? What has been written is either poetry, or it is not. An ass cannot be corrected and converted into a stallion. But still, it was a question of livelihood. One day, I was chatting with Nazir Husain Mirza in the Diwan-e-Aam. Nazir sahib was the emperor's minister. A guard arrived to say that the emperor wanted to see his ghazals. 'Go get my bundle from the palanquin,' I instructed Kallu. The bundle arrived, and I extracted eight or nine sheets of paper from it, each covered with a half-written sher of the emperor's. I completed each of them and sent them with the guard.

'So quick?' Nazir sahib asked.

— This is easy enough. The emperor will be delighted.

Correcting verses or writing introductions to books were tasks I despised, Manto bhai. Was all this meant to be a poet's work? Let those who have botched everything else do all this. I had a pupil named Hargopal Tafta, who was a friend as well. He lived in Secunderabad. I had to correct countless Farsi poems of his. I even wrote the introduction to a collection of his poetry. Tafta was very angry when he read it; he felt that under the guise of praise, I had mocked his verses. What could I say? 'You are neither my enemy, nor my competitor,' I wrote to him. 'You are my friend and you consider yourself my pupil. How could I mock you under the guise of praise? Is that how low you think I am?' Sometime later, Tafta became intent on publishing another collection. A request came to me to write the introduction. This time I really was annoyed. I wrote to him directly, 'You may be able to write a collection of poems easily enough, but I cannot write an introduction as easily. If you love poetry, just keep writing, don't be in a hurry to publish. Be patient. Or else you will prepare to publish the third collection as soon as the second one comes out. I will not be able to write so many introductions. I cannot change my ways at this age. Must I write an introduction every year if you publish a collection every year? I'm not going to write such rubbish anymore.' Tafta didn't write to me for a long time after this. What did these people think, Manto bhai? Just like verse, writing prose is difficult too. At his age, I wouldn't have dreamt of compromising with anyone. Syed Ahmed had requested me to write a preface to Abul Fazl's *Ain-e-Akbari*, which he was editing. We were very close friends. He was an eminent philosopher and leader. But I felt that the *Ain-e-Akbari* was not topical in the new age. Moreover, I did not care for Abul Fazl's prose. Most important, I had no interest whatsoever in history. So, I wrote a poem instead as a preface and sent it to him. Syed sahib didn't approve of it. He didn't publish the poem either. What could I do about it? It wasn't in my nature to praise someone's work just out of friendship. So I became isolated slowly, which I accepted. What novelty could I expect from life anymore?

Kallu got hold of a dastango one day and brought him to me. He used to be on the prowl for storytellers like a tiger. Kallu and I settled down for a story. He told us a heavenly tale from Maula Rumi's masnavi. Listen closely, my brothers.

I'm talking of the time of Omar, the second khalifa. A singer named Taslim lived in Medina. Not just singing, he was also an expert at playing the rabab. People used to say that his singing shamed even the nightingale, that the dead used to sit up in their graves when he sang. He was friendly with people from all strata of society. Taslim would be followed by a large crowd wherever he went; they behaved as though there was no one but Taslim in their lives.

But as Taslim grew old, his voice lost its magic; his fingers lost the power to make melody. It came to a point where he reminded the people of Medina of a braying ass when he sang. When Taslim turned seventy, he had no more listeners for his songs or his rabab. Since he had expected his popularity to

remain undiminished all his life, he had thrown away all his money on a good life. In old age he was weighed down with debt. His landlord evicted him. He could not even afford to buy himself a meal. Worst of all, he was forced to wander about on the streets with his rabab, whose strings were broken. All alone now, he talked to himself constantly. Most merciful Allah, why should I have suffered such agony? People used to consider him the musician to the lord at one time. And had the lord forgotten him now? Was there no justice in this world?

No one spared him a glance on the road. One or two people would hurry past with a 'Salaam Aleikum'. The people of Medina were thronging to listen to other performers. Taslim looked a broken man as he walked down the road. Thus it was that he arrived one day at a graveyard outside Medina. Weary and famished, he sat down on a gravestone. What was the meaning of such a life? Were all the honours he had received false? The fame of his youth was a bitter memory now. He would not be able to sing or play the rabab anymore. This was living hell. Taslim wondered whether pride in his own talent was his sin. Was he being punished for his attachment to fame? The graves around him told him the same thing—only death is true. Taslim decided to pray to the lord before death. He had never thought of Allah specifically before. Now he lay down on a grave, sensing that beneath him lay the cold bones of a man or a woman—only a framework of bones. His silent words mingled with his tears—'You have snatched my music away, Allah. Music was my breath, my livelihood. How will I survive without music? You gave this unworthy man a great deal, and then you took it all away. I have no complaints. Whatever you gave or took away was all yours. Just let me prove capable of bearing this pain. I stand at your door naked today. Take me in, O Lord. If I live a little longer, I will sing only for you, I will play the rabab for you alone. At least let me get enough money to buy some strings for this instrument. You pardon even those who forget you. Pardon me too, Lord.'

As he spoke, Taslim's life left his body and flew to the eternal garden where it is always spring. His soul was immersed in an ocean of nectar. He had no desire to return to earth. In this new world there was no fame or reputation or ambition. Can there be a happier place, wondered Taslim's soul. At that moment he heard the voice, my brothers, the original sound, of which all other sounds are mere echoes. The voice said, 'Do not put down roots here. This is merely a different experience for you. Leave now.'

— Where? Must I return to earth? Have pity on me, I shan't return.

At that precise moment on earth, Khalifa Omar was feeling drowsy on his throne. Soon he fell asleep. In his dream he heard the same original voice say, 'A favourite of mine is asleep in the graveyard outside Medina. Give him seven hundred dinars from the treasury and tell him to buy strings for his rabab.'

As soon as he awoke, Khalifa Omar hurried to the graveyard with seven hundred dinars. As he wandered around the graves, he came across a very old man who had lain down on one of the tombstones. The khalifa continued searching. Eventually he began to wonder, I walked past the old man because of his appearance, but he might well be the lord's favourite. Omar went up to him, and, after observing him closely for some time, recognized Taslim.

Taslim's soul was still whirling about in the otherworld. Suddenly a sneeze was heard. Khalifa Omar had sneezed, which Taslim's soul interpreted as a significant message. Everything in the lord's world was bound by rules. Taslim's soul re-entered his body, whereupon he sat up immediately. Seeing the khalifa, Taslim grasped his feet. —Don't imprison me for my debt, huzoor. Let me off this time.

— Don't be afraid, mian. Here are seven hundred dinars. Spend it as you will. But do buy strings for your rabab.

Stretching his hand out to accept the coins, Taslim gazed at them for a while. Then, returning them to Omar, he struck his rabab against the grave, smashing it to pieces, and began to tear off his clothes.

— What are you doing? You're a favourite of the lord's. He sent me himself.

— I am not worthy of this, khalifa sahib. I have grown distant from the lord because of this rabab. I could not see his beauty because of my voice. My ambition did not let me get near him. While I was busy seeking fame, his caravan went far away. My sin, my pride, cannot be wiped off in any circumstances, khalifa sahib.

— All these things that you're saying are also expressions of your pride, mian. Repentance will worsen your sins.

— But it was this rabab that kept me from him.

— It was he who put the rabab in your hands. Do you suppose you'd have had it otherwise? He sent me so that you can buy strings for your rabab. Allah sings through your voice.

Accepting the money from the khalifa, Taslim offered his respects. Then he went off to the market to buy a new rabab. No one ever saw Taslim after this. Playing his new rabab, he set off towards a silence that cannot be touched by the sound of any story on earth.

36

تھی خبر گرم کہ غالب کے اڑیں گے پرزے
دیکھنے ہم بھی گئے پہ تماشا نہ ہوا

The rumours were rife—Ghalib would be torn apart
I went to watch too, but the show was cancelled

I'm a writer of stories, Mirza sahib, but the court of official opinion had repeatedly convicted me as an obscene writer. At times, the Pakistan government dubbed me a communist and a suspicious character; at other times it awarded me the mantle of a great writer. Sometimes even the smallest opportunity for survival was snatched away from me, and sometimes I was given alms out of charity. On some occasions they said I was no one, an outsider; and then, when it suited them, they called me one of their own. But still it was obvious to me that I was nothing but an intruder to them, Mirza sahib; not just to the Pakistan government, but to any government, any power, I was only an outsider, a refugee. My entire life passed in this state. I asked myself over and over, who am I, then? Where do I belong? I never found my own place in Pakistan, Mirza sahib, although I kept looking for it frenziedly. And that was why I divided much of my time between the hospital and the lunatic asylum. Everyone spat on me. Manto! He's nothing but a writer of obscenities, a pornographer. He drinks all day; he begs and borrows to pay for his drinks. And then he enters his hell to write his dirty stories.

All this began much earlier, my brothers. The country had not been split into two yet. The uproar began immediately after the publication of my story 'The Black Shalwar'. The Lahore Sessions Court had set me free on that occasion. Then charges of obscenity were levelled against 'Smoke'. And 'The Black Shalwar' was also named along with 'Smoke' in the chargesheet. It was December, 1944. A detective police officer from Lahore asked me to report at the Goregaon Police Station. I was arrested as soon as I arrived. When I asked for the warrant an officer said, 'We cannot show it to you.'

— Why not?

— Orders.

— You cannot arrest me without showing me the warrant.

— I cannot answer any of your questions, Mr Manto. We have instructions to despatch you directly to the court in Lahore.

I telephoned Hiralal, the lawyer, from the police station. I was released after he spoke to the officer. On the night of January 8, I was arrested again, this time at home. I did get out on bail, but I was told to appear in the court of the Special Magistrate of Lahore.

Ismat was arrested around the same time for her story 'The Quilt'. She had to appear at the same court on the same day. I was quite amused by this, Mirza sahib. At least we would be able to relax and

have some fun together in Lahore. I went to Ismat's house with Shafia.

— You two have certainly started something. Patting me on the back, Shahid said, 'Let's celebrate. Ismat's very upset.'

— But why?

— That's what I said too. She now thinks she committed a big mistake by writing 'The Quilt'.

— I never said that. Ismat snarled.

— Well then?

— This is too much harassment just for writing a story.

— I said the same thing to Manto sahib. Shafia said, 'If you have to go to jail for writing a story, it's best not to write such stories.'

— Listen to me, Ismat behen, such things happen very rarely in life.

— What do you mean? You seem to have won the Victoria Cross.

— Of course. The Queen has sent you and me summons to appear in court for writing stories. Can there be a greater honour?

— You can put the honour in your pipe and smoke it, Manto bhai. You love to consider yourself different from others in every respect.

— Don't quarrel with me Ismat. Send for ice cream, Shahid. Can you imagine what a story you've written, Ismat? You can give yourself a thousand pats on the back. The Lahore trip will be great fun. You must come with us too, Shahid.

— Why should he go? Ismat scolded me.

— For heaven's sake, you have no idea how beautiful Lahore is in winter. As they say, he who has not seen Lahore has not been born. Fried fish and whisky—it's heaven, Shahid—red wine as warm as a lover's kiss, can you imagine?

— Will you stop now, Manto sahib?

— Why, Shafia? Why should I stop? Am I a thief or a fraud? Actually the Queen wants us to visit Lahore on the pretext of justice.

All the arrangements were finalized for us to go to Lahore and appear in court. Hiralalji would represent both of us.

Ah, Lahore! The entire city was like the Sheesh Mahal, Mirza sahib, the palace of mirrors. No, actually Lahore was like the woman whose flashing eyes reflect a rainbow, who gambles with her fate, who wants to draw you into the fragrance in her breast. No sooner had we reached Lahore than the invitations began to pour in. I knew everyone here. But they wanted to meet Ismat. Who was this strange woman who had created such a commotion just by writing a story?

We had to appear in the court of the Special Magistrate Rai Sahib Sant Ram. We had appealed to be excused from regular appearances since it was a long way from Bombay to Lahore. Our plea was not even entertained. So we had to appeal to the High Court. We had to appear in Justice Achhuram's court after this. We were astonished by what followed. After a long look at us, the judge said, 'I read both your stories eagerly. I rather liked them.' This was an unexpected gift. So we would be spared this time. But Achhuram had the case shifted to Deen Muhammad's court. 'Both of you are passing off profanities as literature,' he told us through clenched teeth. He rejected our plea. I really was ill at the time, Mirza sahib. So I had taken the doctor's recommendation along. Deen Muhammad sahib had had no choice but to excuse me from personal appearance.

I had presented my statement refuting the accusation of obscenity in no uncertain terms in the

court of Rai Sahib Sant Ram. Your Honour, with your permission, I would like to say one or two things of my own. There is nothing in the relationship between men and women that can be termed obscene. Nothing written about this relationship can be vulgar. But when the relationship between two individuals is depicted only in terms of eighty-four sexual positions, then and only then does it become obscene. Stories and novels and poetry and sculpture must be considered after taking into account the motivation behind their creation. If the objective is unethical, we can certainly term it obscene. Sexuality does not amount to obscenity. If it did, the temples at Konark or Khajuraho should be demolished. No one is born with obscenity in his heart, my lord. The world at large labels things clean or vulgar. In my story 'Smoke', I have only tried to describe a specific situation. The sexual excitement that the father and mother in the story enjoy by pretending to be apart is seeded in their son Masood, who had unexpectedly seen the incident. I don't know why this story is referred to as obscene. A sick mind will find obscenity in it. I have written my story for people with healthy minds. I am merely a writer, Your Lordship, don't turn me into a pornographer.

Rai Sahib Sant Ram probably did not hear a word. Or, even if he did, he had taken his decision already. I was fined two hundred rupees. I took the money out of my pocket and handed it over immediately. Chuckling, Sant Ramji said, 'So you came prepared?'

— What choice did I have?

But the fine was repealed on appeal.

Let's postpone these accounts of courts and fines and contempt for some time, my brothers. I will never forget those heady days of style and splendour in Lahore. Such shaanshaukat. Except for the time we had to be present in court, Ismat, Shahid, and I would wander around the city in a tonga and shop. Ismat bought countless Kashmiri shawls and shoes. I was tempted to buy shoes. Every time we went to a shoe shop Ismat would look at my small feet and say, 'Your feet make me envious, Manto bhai.'

— Don't talk rubbish. It's these feet I hate the most.

— But why?

— They're just like women's feet. Makes no sense. What on earth was the Lord doing! He fitted me with a woman's feet by mistake.

— Do you despise women's feet so much? I don't see any lack of interest in women though.

— You misinterpret everything, Ismat. Why should I hate women's feet? As a man, I like women. That doesn't mean I want to be one.

— Cut this nonsense.

— You're the one who starts the nonsense, then you ask me to cut it out. How do you tolerate her, Shahid?

Laughing, Shahid said, 'You draw out all her poison, Manto. What remains for me is the nectar.'

Ismat said gravely, 'Let's drop the man-woman business and talk of human beings, Manto bhai.'

— Human beings? What's that?

— Meaning?

— All I know is men and women. I don't know any human beings.

— You're playing the fool again. Ismat looked at me with wide eyes.

— I don't care for the disembodied, Ismat.

— What do you mean?

— The term 'human being' is disembodied for me. I know of Shahid, of Ismat, of Shafia—some of them are women; others, men. The term 'human being' is fraudulent.

— Everything is fraudulent for you, isn't it? Ismat shouted.

— You're not a fraud, Ismat behen.

— Again?

— What?

— Must you use the word 'behen'?

Shahid burst into laughter. —Go along with Manto's game in this life, Ismat. You can wait for him in the next one.

I said without a smile, 'Such serious women should not write stories, Shahid.'

Ismat didn't respond. Much later she looked into my eyes. —What should I do then?

— Don't make her angry again, Manto. Shahid ran his hand through Ismat's hair fondly. —She'll turn me into mincemeat after you leave.

— What was all that you were saying about feet, Ismat?

— Nothing.

— Here, have some almonds.

Ismat could never resist almonds. Taking a handful from me, she began to chew on them. A different Ismat emerged at once. —I didn't pay any attention to what you had to say. Those who have beautiful feet are very intelligent and sensitive.

— Really? Then am I both intelligent and sensitive?

— I don't know. Ismat shot back acidly. —My brother was. Azim Beg. He had very lovely feet. Just like girls'. They had swollen up so much when he died that I couldn't look at them, Manto bhai.

It was impossible to tease Ismat after this. Azim Beg Chughtai had come between us, after all. Ismat turned to stone whenever his name came up. What a scoundrel he was to have escaped her. All her hurt over Azim Beg was written into 'Dozakhi'.

Those were such happy days, Mirza sahib, those days in Lahore. We used to roam around the streets virtually the entire day. Anarkali Market, Shalimar Bagh, Noorjehan's tomb. Mushairas, gossip, fried fish, kebab, chicken tikka. Watercolours from the old days were scattered all over Lahore. My salad days.

There was uproar once again as soon as my story 'Blue' was published. Apparently there couldn't be a more obscene story. Moreover, the Christians were supposed to be very angry with me. In this story, Randhir had left a Christian woman for a dark-skinned lady of the night, the fragrance of whose body gave him the warmth of life. Ismat and I were on our way to Lahore again. Shahid was busy with his film; he couldn't travel with us. The first hearing over 'Blue' began.

My lawyer asked, 'Is this story of Manto sahib's obscene?'

— Of course. This was the government's reply.

— Which word is obscene?

— 'Breast'.

— Is 'breast' an obscene word, your honour? I don't think it is.

The government replied, 'It isn't. But in this case the reference is to a woman's breasts.'

I couldn't stay still anymore, Mirza sahib. Were court lawyers and clerks and government servants to determine the meaning of words? And would the man who lived with words in his waking hours and dreams and nightmares not be allowed to say anything? I leapt up, shouting, 'Your Lordship, in my story the word "breast" is indeed used to refer to a woman's breasts. Surely no one refers to them as "peanuts".'

A wave of laughter ran around the court. I couldn't stop laughing either, Mirza sahib. Had those who were sitting on judgment on me never seen breasts, never touched breasts, never pressed them or sucked them? Then why did they have all these objections to the word 'breast'? I love breasts, Mirza sahib. How beautifully they are shaped, like a pair of seashells risen from the depths; the aroma of the desires of so many unknown and unnamed creatures is gathered in their bodies. I run my fingers over their warmth, I observe their loveliness. They are like two ornate temple towers. Sometimes they are transformed into two birds, and I discover a caressing touch in their feathers. I love the woman's neck, her arms, the flower of her navel, her buttocks, her thighs. How dare you use the word 'obscene' for someone who has been endowed with such beauty by the Lord?

Judges are almost always sourpusses. Therefore this one announced, 'If the accused repeats such behaviour, he will be held in contempt of court.'

I sat down. Bringing her lips close to my ears, Ismat said, 'If breasts are obscene, why not the knee or the elbow?'

— Don't pay any attention to this rubbish.

— Aren't you going to say anything?

— What should I say?

— Are you going to listen to them tearing you apart without protesting?

— This is the writer's fate, Ismat. Anyone can slice you up with a knife. You will have to listen to it all. Truth has never been able to speak up in this world.

— I will speak up.

— What will you say?

— In favour of 'The Quilt'. I made no mistake.

— You must. Your words will echo around the courtroom. Never apologize, Ismat.

— What do you take me for, Manto bhai?

— Our spines cave in after repeated beatings, Ismat. We become helpless. I have decided to remain silent from now on. I have no other weapon besides silence.

That night Ismat suddenly asked me, 'Why don't you have the energy you once did, Manto bhai?'

What could I have told Ismat? Did she know that I was actually weak and impotent? I had presented myself to others as a raging bull simply in order to survive.

— I'm afraid of jail, Ismat.

— You're afraid of jail?

— I've never told anyone of my fear, Ismat. Whom can I tell, after all? I can't tell Shafia. She's such a good, quiet girl. She already leads a harassed life because of me. My daily life is already like a prisoner's, Ismat. If I'm put in jail on top of that, I won't survive a minute.

— What's the matter with you, Manto bhai?

— I'm so frightened, Ismat. I want to taste every morsel of this life. Let's say I'm walking down the road and someone shoots me dead suddenly. That would make no difference. But I don't want to die like a worm in a prison.

— Why must you think of such eventualities?

— My days are coming to an end, Ismat.

— Manto bhai! Ismat yelled. —What do you think of yourself? All you want is sympathy, isn't it?

— Have you seen the spare wheel attached at the back of a car, Ismat? I'm that spare wheel.

— We're sounding like Hindi film dialogue, Manto bhai.

I didn't say anything more. I had no wish to argue. To myself I said, someone is indeed making a film with us in it, Ismat. Perhaps he will screen it for us on Judgement Day.

37

ٹک میر جگر سوختہ کی جلد خبر لے
کیا یار بھروسہ ہے چراغ سحری کا

Ask after Mir soon, his soul is scorched
Who knows how long the night-lamp will burn

As you know, Manto bhai, by the time I entered the stage, the last scene was being enacted. We were only waiting for the lord to bring down the curtains. Emperor Shahjahan had two lines of Amir Khusrau's poetry inscribed on the walls of the Diwan-e-Khas of the Qila Mubarak—'*Agar firdaus bar rue zamin ast, hamin ast o hamin ast o hamin ast.*' If there is heaven on earth it is here, it is here, it is here. When I arrived at Emperor Bahadur Shah's court, this heaven had been converted to hell. Bahadur Shah ascended the throne in 1837 at the age of sixty-two. There was no such thing as an empire anymore. The British had annexed it all. The only opportunity for displaying royal airs and graces was inside the fort and in a couple of other places. By way of income there was the allowance provided by the British and taxes from a handful of areas by the Yamuna. And do you know the number of people living in the fort? Over two thousand. Most of them were illegitimate children. You cannot imagine, Manto bhai—all these bastards lived like worms. Bahadur Shah actually reigned as the emperor of worms.

As emperor, he took the name Abul Muzaffar Sirajuddin Muhammad Bahadur Shah Badshah Ghazi. I wanted to laugh. Ghazi? You know what ghazi means, don't you? A holy warrior. But what war did he ever take part in? He did not have the ability to wage a war. The emperor lacked the courage and self-confidence that such an act needed. During the Sepoy Mutiny he was made to dance like a marionette. He was a mere puppet in the hands of Begum Zeenat Mahal and Khwaja Mehboob Ali Khan. The emperor did whatever Mehboob Ali told him to. And Mehboob Ali was controlled by Begum Zeenat Mahal. Don't be astonished, my brothers. The harems of Mughal emperors were overseen by eunuchs. When the empire was on its way to disintegration, the eunuchs had grown so powerful that the Badshah followed the eunuch Mehboob's instructions. Think about it, Manto bhai, when eunuchs wield influence, the downfall of an empire is inevitable.

And our emperor? He was a eunuch too. Yes, Manto bhai, a mental eunuch. He never had to fight a war. He lived off his forefathers' wealth, displayed royal airs, and wrote some worthless poetry. He had four legal wives: Begum Ashraf Mahal, Begum Akhtar Mahal, Begum Zeenat Mahal, and Begum Taj Mahal. And countless slave girls and concubines. He had fifty-four children—can you imagine? Twenty-two sons and thirty-two daughters. This was how emperors lived, Manto bhai.

The emperor knew very well that the sun was about to set on Timur's empire. That's why he could

not determine what he should do. He would appear in his durbar every day. Why? He had no idea. What use was it? He had no control over anything. Along with everyone else, I had to be present every day too. My task was to correct the emperor's ghazals when he wrote them. People would gossip among themselves in court. The emperor might suddenly recite a sher. Cries of 'Kyabaat! Kyabaat!' and 'Marhabba! Marhabba!' would rise at once in unison. Sometimes the emperor would fall asleep. We would wait for him to wake up and release us for the day.

One day he told me, 'Come to Salimgarh tomorrow, ustadji.'

— Very well, huzoor. But why?

— We're going to fly kites. Kite-flying by the Yamuna is a special treat.

— You'll fly kites?

— It's been a long time since I did. I had a sudden urge.

I had to put in an appearance at Salimgarh the next morning. After watching the emperor flying kites till lunchtime, I went home for lunch, but I had to go back afterwards. I would have to watch him at play till evening. When he was done flying kites, he made a new demand. I had to write a sher for him about flying kites. I recited one at once. Jahanpanah was thrilled, while I returned in exhaustion to my pigpen. Every day I was made to realize that there's no such thing as a poet's life, Manto bhai—all of us lived like servants. The poet puts on his kurta and pajama, combs his hair nattily, dyes his beard brown, and pours perfume over himself—but all of it is overpowered by the stench of perspiration, the rank breath of the slave. Not everyone realizes this, of course. Rubbing shoulders with power now and then makes them consider themselves powerful too. I tell him, dear poet, you're but a pawn on the chessboard of power.

So, make fun of it. Yes, Manto bhai, the only thing you can do with power is to mock it. If you imagine that defecting from one power centre to another will bring you honour, you're chasing a mirage. Power will merely use you, and when you are no longer useful, it will kick you into the drain. Which is why the poet must remain true to his talent. One day, perhaps, his gift for verse will be required, along with the finest poetry of the world, to plant the hearts of every living creature on earth in a field that produces an immortal golden harvest. He will go deep into the consoling arms of nature. He will wander about in towns and in ports. He will mingle with crowds. He will assault hopeless inconsistencies with the genius of imagination wherever necessary, in order to create something new. He will go back again, perhaps accompanied by eager cripples, into the arms of comforting nature; to the primitive mother, to the silent, absolving mother Aditi, alone under the sun, amidst the deep blue.

Do you know what a king does when he is handicapped or when he lacks the ability to rule? He writes annoying poems, organizes mushairas, flies kites, and leads parades perched on an elephant. Our emperor didn't have anything else to do either. He was surrounded by sycophants. They marvelled loudly at every utterance of the emperor's. In silence I watched the termites eating away at the book of history. Can what is left behind really be called history? Only some stories remain in the powder on the road.

One day Kallu brought a dastango. Grasping his arm, I said, 'Come with me to the court today, mian.'

— Court? What court?

— The emperor's court.

— Excuse me, huzoor. I'm not worthy of the royal court.

— Don't worry, I'll take you.

— What business do I have there, huzoor?

— You will tell Jahanpanah your dastan.

— Does Jahanpanah listen to dastans?

— Why shouldn't he? His life itself is an unusual story.

'Who's this person you've brought, ustadji?' the emperor asked me.

— You love listening to stories, don't you, Jahanpanah?

— Of course. Who told this story that you will tell us now, mian?

— Maula Rumi, huzoor.

— Very good.

The emperor began to draw contentedly on his hookah.

— The story is about a rat and a camel, huzoor.

— No human beings in it?

— No. But the rat and camel are human too, huzoor.

— Meaning?

— Some people have a rat hidden in them, huzoor, and others have a camel.

— Superb! Start your story.

— He was a rare sort of rat, huzoor. He used to think of himself as the king of kings.

— King of kings? The emperor began to laugh. —Even a rat considers itself the king of kings?

— Why shouldn't it? This rat used to proudly perform tasks that other rats wouldn't even dream of.

The emperor laughed uproariously. —Even rats can be proud, mian?

— If you look at us from the sky, huzoor, each of us is a rat too. Don't we feel pride?

— Never mind the nonsense. Let's have the story.

— He may have been a tiny rat, huzoor, but he considered himself a lion. He used to plunge boldly into dangerous situations, and then use his wits to emerge unscathed. The other rats would stare at him in wonder. One night the rat was on his way home through the desert. A camel was sleeping in the desert, huzoor. The rat was trapped in the reins around the camel's neck. But he was very clever. He managed to extricate himself from the coils.

— And then?

— Very clever people always have evil ideas, huzoor. The rat began to tug at the end of the rope. The camel woke up. He began to follow the rat. The rat told himself, 'A camel is walking behind me. They'll stagger in surprise when they see this sight.' They came across a river on the way. Its currents roared perpetually. Pausing on its bank, the rat wondered how to cross this bottomless stretch of water.

— What did he do? The emperor asked.

— All intelligence fails eventually, huzoor. The rat kept wondering. Then the camel said, 'There isn't another rat as intelligent as you. Why have you stopped, mister? Take me across the river.' The rat said, 'Don't talk rubbish. This river is very dangerous. We'll sink the moment we step into it.' The camel walked into the water. Calling the rat, he said, 'It's not as deep as you think. Look, the water's only up to my knees. What are you afraid of?'

— That's true. The emperor said, drawing on his hookah.

— You're a fool, said the rat. The water may only be up to your knee, but I'll drown in it.

— Why should you? Is there anyone as clever as you? Your intelligence and your courage will protect you. Come into the water. I will follow you.

— And then?

— The rat decided that he could not be humiliated by this stupid camel. Holding the rope in his mouth, he walked into the water. Buffeted by the terrible current, he reached the opposite bank half-dead. He was groaning on the ground near the camel's feet. The camel said, 'Don't consider yourself a lion, mister rat. Trust those who can see further than you. Your extra cleverness will do you in one day. It's easy for me to travel long distances. Climb on to my hump, I will take you home.'

— And then?

— Maula Rumi didn't say anything more, huzoor.

— What does this story mean, ustadji? The emperor looked at me.

I had begun laughing in my head already. The Maula had told the story to tell people to keep their faith in their teachers. But I could see another interpretation too. That rats want to become emperors sometimes. I said, 'We listen to stories for enjoyment, Jahanpanah. Did you enjoy the story?'

The emperor's thoughts were limited to the pleasures he wanted to enjoy and how to enjoy them. He went off to Zafar Mahal in Mehrauli quite often. His father had built the palace. The emperor had decorated it according to his own taste. Hunting, decadent pleasures, fountains of joy—these were the uses to which Zafar Mahal was put. And yet the British had announced in 1854 that no one would be allowed to live in the fort after the emperor's death; they would have to move to a palace near the Qutub Minar. The emperor turned a blind eye to the efforts of the British to wipe out the descendants of Timur. Ghazal sessions were still held in the fort from time to time. I would visit them now and then; sitting there in those soulless mushairas, I realized that the lord would shut down this farce any moment. I was constantly reminded of a sher of Mir sahib's:

شہر دل اک مدت ہوا بسا غموں میں
آخر اجاڑ دینا اُس کو قرار پایا

This city of hearts was founded in sorrow years ago
The verdict has come, it too shall be emptied out

I lived well for a few days, my brothers; but the lord would not have mercy on me forever. In 1856, dark clouds gathered again in the sky. The emperor's heir, and my pupil, Fakhruddin, died. And the British announced that the successor to the emperor would no longer have the title of badshah, or king. He would only be a shahzada, or prince. It was clear that not just the days of Timur's dynasty, but also of court poets like me, were numbered. An even greater misfortune was that the reign of the nawab of Lucknow came to an end that same year. As you know, Manto bhai, I used to get an annual allowance of five hundred rupees from Nawab Wajid Ali Shah. He had to leave Lucknow and go to Calcutta. If anyone ever deserved the title of nawab, Manto bhai, it was Wajid Ali Shah. His pseudonym was Kaiser. He wrote not just ghazals but also numerous thumris. He was a wonderful singer himself. There was another lovely pseudonym that he had adopted—Akhtarpiya. He wrote several ghazals and thumris under this name as well. It was impossible not to weep when you listened to his thumri in Raga Bhairavi, 'Babul mora naihar chhuto hi jaay'. I'm leaving home, my father. Every word in it was blue with the agony of exile. When leaving Lucknow he wrote:

در و دیوار پہ حسرت سے نظر کرتے ہیں
خوش رہو اہل وطن ہم تو سفر کرتے ہیں

I look longingly at the doors and the walls
Be happy, my compatriots, I will be travelling

But I was a street dog, I could not afford to grieve over the end of the Mughal period. I needed money; how was I to survive otherwise? I wrote a letter to Yusuf Ali, the nawab of Rampur. He had taken Farsi lessons from me once; he wrote poetry and was partial to my ghazals. He told me that he wished to anoint me as his teacher. This was all I wanted. The post of ustad to the nawab of Rampur would mean an income. All I needed money for was food and clothes, Manto bhai. I did not think of poetry anymore. Those days had long passed.

I wrote a qaseeda for Queen Victoria in Farsi, strictly for the money, and sent it to the Governor General, Lord Canning, to be forwarded to London. I added a letter, praying that the queen empress show some consideration for this poet. The reply arrived at the beginning of the year of the Mutiny, informing me that a decision on a title and an allowance would be taken after appropriate investigation. But nothing happened thereafter. Who was I, after all? Just a face in the crowd for the queen empress.

I have no shame in admitting to all of you today that I really was an imbecile, Manto bhai. Everything in my life went awry, but still I would imagine that the tide would turn—had the lord really brought me into the world only to be defeated at every step? I remained trapped in hope all my life.

تاب لائے ہی بنے گی غالب
واقعہ سخت ہے اور جان عزیز

You must succeed, Ghalib
The situation is dire, and life, precious

Despite all this the spring breeze blew for a few days again, Manto bhai. I never set eyes on her, however. But she was my pupil. Her shers made me reflect:

دیکھنا تقریر کی لذت،کہ جو اُس نے کہا
میں نے یہ جانا کہ گویا یہ بھی میرے دل میں ہے

Look at the magic of her words, what she said
Made me feel this was in my heart too

I had chosen the pseudonym of Tark for her. A lady from a noble family of Shahjahanabad, she was of Turkish origin, her forefathers having come here from Bukhara. Tark lost her husband very young. She sought shelter in poetry. Her mother's bother used to bring her shers to me. I used to run my fingers over her words, touching her body in this fashion. I visited their home now and then. She would always be behind a purdah. Women from families such as hers could not appear before men. To tell you the truth, Manto bhai, I would go just to hear Tark's voice. Like a gentle wind wafting through the cypress trees. Such sharp, clear diction. And her ghazals held such an unusual glow of imagination. I don't know if you agree, but I believe that women are different from men in the world of the imagination. Tark would attract me like a secret fragrance, which could be smelt but could never be seen.

دکھ اب فراق کا ہم سے سہا نہیں جاتا
پھر اُس پہ ظلم ہے کچھ بھی کہا نہیں جاتا

I cannot stand this pain of separation anymore
This is injustice, there's nothing to be said

I never did realize when the fragrance of the perfume vanished. One day I was told at their house that Tark would not meet me anymore. 'What's the matter, mian sahib?' I asked her uncle. 'Is she ill?'

— No, Mirza sahib. She does not write ghazals anymore.

— Why not?

— She only reads the Quran all day. She doesn't even leave her room.

— Ya Allah! A poetess of such talent has given up poetry! She could have been a great poet.

— How does our society value women, Mirza sahib? And then she writes poetry on top of that. People think she's mad.

— Do you think so too?

— No. But we haven't understood why she withdrew this way.

— Can't I meet her?

— No, Mirza sahib. She has asked me to tell you not to come here again. The saddest thing of all is that she has ripped up her own ghazals with her own hands.

I didn't feel like returning home that day. I went to the Yamuna and sat down on its banks. I didn't realize when evening descended. The currents of the Yamuna kept talking to themselves in the darkness. That was when I saw her. The anxious maiden. She was sitting on a bed of fallen leaves in the orchard, waiting for her lover. The flower-laden trees surrounded her, seemingly telling her, don't fret, Radhika, he will come, your Shyamrai is certain to arrive. A torrent flowed in front of her. It too seemed to be saying, wait a little longer, there's the sound of his flute. A frightened doe was drinking water at the stream. And behind a tree, a deer gazed at the maiden, entranced. I realized why Tark had given up writing ghazals. She could no longer bear the weight of each of those words. She would never be able to move the purdah aside and reach her hand out to a friend.

اب میں ہوں اور ماتم اک شہرِ آرزو
توڑا جو تُو نے آئینہ ، تمثال دار تھا

Now grief and I remain in a hopeful city
The mirror you shattered held a thousand images

38

ایماں مجھے روکے ہے جو کھینچے ہے مجھے کفر
کعبہ مرے پیچھے ہے،کلیسا مرے آگے

Faith holds me back; disbelief pulls me away
Kaaba lies behind me; the Church, in front

Do you know what all the people of integrity around me said to prove that I was an obscene writer, Mirza sahib? They had only one question—why do brothels and prostitutes keep featuring in my stories? How can a whore be the central character of a story? Who were these people to raise these questions? Those who puffed up their chests calling themselves progressive, chroniclers of the lives of the lower strata of society. Yes, Mirza sahib, even to these people, whores were worse than cockroaches in drains. And yet many of them had secretly visited red light areas. I never tried to conceal the fact that I had been there. Compared to the colourless people around me, those discarded, painted women, their pimps, the flower sellers and kebab-wallahs in those localities all appeared far more alive to me. Those girls could even kill to get someone whom they had loved. The red light world that lies beyond ours is like an epic poem. I didn't make up the stories of Saugandhi and Sultana and Nesti and Bismillah and Mehmooda and Zeenat; they all lived in the brothels of Delhi and Lahore and Bombay once upon a time.

I had a bitter argument with the King of Mahmoodabad once. His point was the same, 'What do you see in these filthy women, Manto? You visit them for fun, and then you write these philosophical stories about them.'

— Can you tell me what crime I've committed by writing about them?

— Literature isn't for depicting the world of immorality.

— Then why is literature written, Raja sahib?

— To depict our dreams.

I laughed. —Aren't 'they' among the 'we' you talk about? Don't they have the right to dream? Is no one going to write about their dreams? This game of 'them' and 'us' is a very interesting one, Raja sahib. The communists are experts at it.

— Do you hate Communism?

— I don't know. What I do know is that my communist friends were the first to brand me obscene.

— You will keep writing about whores, but you expect them not to call your stories obscene?

— If telling stories about whores is obscene, then the existence of whores is obscene too. Why is this obscenity allowed to persist? If it is forbidden to write about prostitutes, the profession must be forbidden too, Raja sahib. Put an end to prostitution, and no Manto will be born to write about

prostitutes. We can write about farmers and labourers, about barbers and washermen, about thieves and robbers. We're allowed to spin yarns about djinns and fairies. Then why can't we write about whores?

— Go on, write as much as you want to. Your stories will be nothing better than garbage.

— That's just what I want, Raja sahib.

— What do you mean?

— Let all that's filthy in our society be gathered in my stories. May all of you see what really lies behind the cleanliness.

— Do you consider yourself a prophet of God?

— No. Writers and poets are the weakest creatures in this world. Anyone can kick them away, Raja sahib. They have no power. They have only written honestly about what they have seen, what they have felt. No, I'm not trying to tell you all this. Because you won't understand.

— Then tell me the things I will understand.

— Do you know what a district of whores actually is?

— What is it? A district of whores can only be a district of whores. Still, let's hear Manto's new commentary.

— It's a rotted corpse. Our society bears this corpse on its shoulders. Until the dead man is buried, Raja sahib, people will keep talking about him. But you know what, no matter how badly the body has rotted, no matter how gruesome it looks, someone somewhere is going to look at its face. And what's wrong with that? Do we not have a relationship with the dead man? Think about it, Raja sahib, are we not the ones who killed him? Why is it still a crime to look at his face? Can Manto be branded obscene just because he looked?

— I agree that as a writer of stories you're the best, Manto. Can't you leave this world out of your stories?

— No, Raja sahib. Then let me tell you Nesti's story today.

— Who's Nesti?

— A whore. Listen to the story of how she became one.

— Tell me, then. Raja sahib smiled. —There's no match for you when it comes to spinning a yarn.

— Nesti was nowhere in the picture when this story begins, Raja sahib. It starts with Abu the coachman. Abu was a good man, Raja sahib. You must remember that the word 'good' carries the fragrance of the garden. He was a man of delicate tastes, and his carriage was the best in the city. He had done up his coach after his own heart. He never accepted casual passengers; all his passengers were regular customers. Unlike other coachmen, Abu wasn't addicted to drink; his craving was for clothes. When Abu's carriage went down the road, people would sneer, 'There goes the prince's vehicle.' This would not only make Abu's chest swell with pride, it would also make his horse Chinni canter faster. It was true that Abu held the reins, but Chinni read Abu's mind so well that he never had to be whipped. It was as though Abu and Chinni were not two separate creatures at all, Raja sahib. Some of the other coachmen did try to copy Abu, but none of them shared his fine taste.

So one afternoon Abu was lying back in his carriage in the shade of a tree. Just as he was about to fall asleep, a voice made him open his eyes. He discovered a young woman standing near him. Abu jumped up. Her beauty had pierced him like an arrow, you see. The dark-skinned, sixteen- or seventeen-year-old girl was glowing with the radiance of youth.

— What do you want? Abu stammered. It was like a dream, Raja sahib, as though an angel had descended from jannat to appear before him.

— How much to the tashun?

'Not a penny,' smiled Abu.

'How much to the tashun, please tell me,' she repeated.

— You think I'm going to charge you? Get in.

— What do you mean? She stiffened.

— Just get in. Pay whatever you like.

She got into Abu's carriage. —Quick.

— What's the hurry?

— You … you won't … She stopped.

Abu's carriage began to move. Chinni's hooves acquired an unknown rhythm. The young woman was sitting behind Abu. Several times he stopped himself from stealing a glance. Finally she said, 'Aren't we at the tashun yet?'

— We'll be there soon. Abu smiled. —You and I have the same tashun.

— Meaning?

— You're not so stupid, my love. You and I have the same tashun. I knew the moment I saw you. On my heart, I've become your slave.

She didn't answer, wrapping her shawl closely around herself.

Abu asked, 'What are you thinking of, my love?'

Still she didn't speak. Suddenly Abu stopped his carriage. Leaping down, he went round to the back and sat next to the young woman. Grasping her hand, he said, 'Give me the reins to your heart, my love.'

— Enough. The young woman spoke with a bowed head.

Abu put his arms around her. She tried to stop him at first, but then quietened down. Abu went on, 'I love this carriage and horse more than my own life. I swear on the lord, for you I can even sell them. I'll buy you gold jewellery, my love. Say that you'll live with me. Otherwise I'll slit my throat right now, before your eyes.'

The young woman stared at him. Eventually Abu muttered, 'I don't know what's wrong with me today. Let me take you to the tashun.'

— No. You touched me.

— Forgive me. I made a mistake.

— Isn't there a price to be paid for a mistake? She flared up.

Abu looked at her. Putting his hand on his heart, he said, 'I can give my life up for you.'

Holding out her hand, she said, 'Then take my hand.'

Grabbing it, Abu said, 'I am your servant today onwards.'

This girl was Nesti, Raja sahib. She had come from Gujarat; her father was a cobbler. Leaving home, Nesti moved in with Abu. They were married the next day. No, Abu didn't have to sell either his coach or his horse. He bought Nesti silk kurta-pyjamas and earrings with his savings. He would often say, holding her in his arms, 'You are my princess.'

A month or so later, the police suddenly arrested Abu on charges of abduction. Nesti was by his side throughout. The court sentenced him to two years in jail. Putting her arms around him, Nesti told Abu, 'I won't go back to my parents. I'll wait for your return, mian.'

— Look after yourself. I've asked Dino to drive the carriage. Make sure he settles accounts with you daily, bibijaan.

Despite her parents' entreaties, Nesti didn't go back, Raja sahib. She lived by herself in an unknown city, waiting for Abu to return. Dino used to give her five rupees every evening. Nesti lived on it comfortably. She was allowed to meet Abu at the jail once a week. She would take specially cooked food and fruit for him.

One day Abu noticed that Nesti's earrings were missing. —Where are your earrings?

Widening her eyes, Nesti felt her ears. 'Oh my God! I didn't even notice. Where did they fall off?'

— There's no need to bring me food, bibijaan. I'm fine.

Nesti saw Abu collapsing with every passing day. The last time that she saw Abu in jail, he was a skeleton instead of a healthy man. Nesti thought that being separated from her was killing him. Actually, Raja sahib, Abu had tuberculosis. Abu's father and brother had also died of it. From the jail hospital Abu had told Nesti, 'If I'd known I'd die this way I wouldn't have married you, bibijaan. Forgive me. Look after Chinni and the carriage. They will take care of you. Tell Chinni I will never forget him.'

Abu left this world, leaving Nesti alone and without support. But Nesti was a girl of unusual mettle, Raja sahib. She stood firm through her agony. She spent all day at home by herself, thinking of Abu. In the evening Dino came with the money due to her.

— Don't worry, bhabiji. Abu was like my brother. I'll do everything I can for you. Dino said this to her one day.

— Whatever the lord's will …

— The lord accomplishes his tasks through human beings, bhabiji. Don't be so depressed, I don't like it.

— What should I do, Dino bhai?

— Get married again. Do you plan to spend your entire life mourning Abu bhai?

— Marriage!

— I'm ready whenever you are.

— Dino bhai!

— What is it?

Nesti had wanted to kick Dino out of her house. She couldn't do that, of course; all she could say was, 'I'm not going to get married again, Dino bhai.'

Dino's behaviour changed after this. Instead of five rupees, he began to give her four rupees on some days, even three at times. When Nesti asked he would say, there aren't enough passengers, earnings have dropped. Then Dino began to pay Nesti once in two or three days. Eventually Nesti was forced to tell him, 'You don't need to drive the carriage anymore, Dino bhai. I'll take care of it.'

Nesti gave the responsibility to a friend of Dino's. Within a few days, he, too, proposed marriage to Nesti. She turned him down as well. Now she asked a coachman she didn't know to drive the carriage. One night the man turned up drunk and began to tug at her hand, Raja sahib.

For seven or eight days the carriage and horse remained unused. Nesti didn't know what to do. How was she to pay for her daily expenses, Chinni's food, and the rent for parking the coach? All that the men did was propose marriage. Nesti knew only too well that they just wanted to sleep with her. People looked at her covetously whenever she went out. One night the next-door neighbour even began to kick on her door, saying, 'How much do you want, bitch? How much to open the door?'

One day, it suddenly occurred to Nesti that she could drive the carriage herself. When Abu took her out, she had driven sometimes. She knew her way about the city too. Why not, then? If a woman could labour in the fields and work as a porter, why couldn't she drive a carriage as well? Mulling over

this for a few days, Nesti decided that she would drive the carriage.

The other coachmen were stunned to see Nesti driving her carriage. Many of them began to laugh in amusement. The eldest tried to explain to Nesti that it wasn't a woman's job to drive a horse-drawn carriage. She paid no attention. Patting Chinni, and carrying on a conversation in her head with Abu, she set off.

There was uproar across the city. A pretty woman was driving a horse-drawn carriage. People waited for Nesti's coach to come by. In the beginning she didn't take male passengers, but later she overcame this reservation too. Nesti began to earn quite well. Her carriage never had to wait for passengers, Raja sahib. Men were always ready for a ride with her. I'm sure you will not deny the male urge to watch a woman's shoulders, waist, arms, breasts, and buttocks for a length of time, will you, Raja sahib? Nesti knew it only too well. But what could she do? She had to make an honourable living, after all. She had fixed hours for her work—from seven in the morning to noon, and then from two in the afternoon to six in the evening. Nesti had worked out her own survival strategy this way, Raja sahib.

One day she was summoned by the municipal committee and informed that her carriage licence had been cancelled. Why? Women were not allowed to drive horse-drawn carriages. 'I know how to drive, sir,' said Nesti. 'What's the problem?'

— You cannot drive anymore.

— Why not, sir? If women can do all other kinds of work, why can't they drive carriages? This carriage and horse belonged to my husband. Why can't I drive it? How will I survive if you don't allow me to drive, sir?

Do you know what the municipal officer said? —Go join a whorehouse. You'll earn plenty.

How was a woman like Nesti supposed to respond? She was forced to sell the horse and the carriage. She went to Abu's grave. I can swear, Raja sahib, there were no tears in her eyes— they were as dry as the desert. Placing her forehead on the gravestone, she said, 'They won't let me survive. Forgive me.'

The next day Nesti applied to the flesh market. Yes, she would sell her own flesh every night from now on. Shall we erase this story of Nesti's from history, Raja sahib? Will everything turn clean and pure automatically?

No, Mirza sahib, Raja sahib did not answer my questions. What could he have said, after all? Had he ever seen a woman like Sultana? I wrote about Sultana in my story 'The Black Shalwar', my brothers. A whore wants a black shalwar to wear for Muharram—where's the obscenity in this insignificant wish? But they—the pillars of society—were always able to ferret it out; they couldn't see the person as a whole, they merely winkled out a few words, certain moments. Do you know who they were? After all the manuscripts and comments and footnotes and ink and pens they ascend their thrones—they aren't poets—they're professors of the written word—toothless—a film of impotent mucus over their eyes, and salaries of a thousand rupees a month, with another thousand and a half to be earned from pecking at the flesh and worms in the bodies of dead poets.

How would they understand Sultana? In the late afternoon she appeared in the balcony of the dilapidated building in the district of whores. The railway yard was visible from Sultana's balcony. She looked at the railway lines and then at her own hands. The swollen blue veins on them seemed to resemble those railway lines. Train engines and bogeys were perpetually moving about in the yard; belching smoke, the engines darkened the skies in front of Sultana's eyes. Very often a train was shunted to a particular track and made to chug along it, making Sultana feel that she too had been shunted to a track on which she had been moving ever since. She had no control over this journey.

Some other people would press switches and make decisions for her. She would never get to know her destination. Then, one day, she would be made to slow down and stop somewhere unknown.

Sultana had met a rather unusual man. His name was Shankar. He could often be seen standing across the road, gazing at Sultana's house. Business wasn't booming for her, and she would be alone all day. One day she ended up beckoning to Shankar. He entered and took a seat in a manner that suggested Sultana, and not he, was the client. Sultana was amused. 'What can I do for you?' she asked.

— For me? Better to ask what I can do for you. You're the one who called me.

Sultana was surprised.

Shankar continued, 'I understand. Now listen to what I have to say. It's not what you think. I'm not the kind of person who'll just come in here, spend some cash and leave. I have a fee too. Don't you pay the doctor when you call him home? It's the same with me.'

Although taken aback by what Shankar told her, Sultana could not suppress a smile. 'What do you do for a living?' she asked.

— Exactly what you do.

— Which is?

— What do you do for a living?

— I … I … nothing.

— Nor do I.

— That doesn't mean anything. There must be something you do.

— Then so do you.

— I don't know. I just pass the time.

— So do I.

Shankar used to visit her quite often. One day Sultana asked him, 'Will you marry me?'

— Marry? Are you mad? Neither of us will ever get married, Sultana. All these old-fashioned things are not for us. Don't make such absurd requests again. You're a woman. Say something to make me happy for a little while. Life isn't just a place for transactions.

— Come clean with me. What do you want from me?

— What everyone else wants. Shankar answered dispassionately.

— Then how are you different from them?

— Look, Sultana, there's no difference between you and me. But there's a world of difference between me and the rest of them.

Yes, Mirza sahib, I knew all along, I even said it out aloud, that I was different from everyone else around me. But I wasn't different in any way whatsoever from Sultana and the rest of them. I came into the market of this world to sell myself in one way or another. Those who accused me of obscenity sold themselves too, but they concealed their prostitution and floated balloons of personal greatness. I was a whore through and through; every brothel in the world was my address.

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آہوں کے شعلے جس جا اٹھے تھے میر کل شب
واں جا کے صبح دیکھا مشتِ غبار پایا

Where the flames of Mir's lament raged last night
All I saw this morning was a handful of ashes

When the British annexed Awadh and exiled Nawab Wajid Ali Shah to Calcutta, I crumpled in anger and loathing, Manto bhai. I was an outsider to Awadh, but still it felt as though I had been personally evicted. The same British who had once seemed harbingers of a new civilization now revealed their teeth and claws to me with their destruction of Awadh. It wasn't just rage and hatred, I was also consumed by despair. Were the British going to bury our culture this way, destroying each of our states and exiling the rulers? No one with a sense of justice could accept this penchant for annihilation, my brothers. I could not accept Nawab Wajid Ali Shah being exiled. I was sure that they would now swallow us entirely, Manto bhai; all the people of Hindustan—Hindu or Muslim, it made no difference—would be sent into exile; we would have to wander about as refugees.

Another version of the events was heard around the same time. The British had already informed us that the descendants of the Mughal dynasty would be shifted out of the fort to a house near Qutub Shahi, and that no one after Emperor Zafar would get the title of king. Did every decision by the British have to be accepted? Many inhabitants of Shahjahanabad had begun to believe that the Shahenshah of Persia or the Czar of Russia would drive the British out and restore the glory of the Mughal Empire. Some people had pasted a poster on the wall of Jama Masjid two months before the revolt. It said that the Shah of Persia would arrive in this country very soon to rescue his suffering brothers. Even Hasan Askari, the son of the pir at the fort, predicted after making astrological calculations that something would happen soon to make the flag and the honour of the Mughal Empire soar in the sky once again. But we did not realize that this event would be the Sepoy Mutiny.

Many rumours were swirling, my brothers. They made me feel I was living in a land of fairies. People whispered to one another. One day I met Hasan Khan, constable of Paharganj, at Ghulam Nabi's paan shop in Chandni Chowk. 'What's all this I hear, mian?' I asked.

— I'm going mad with all the rumours, Mirza sahib.

— All these wild stories are true, then?

— How can I tell? But there's definitely something going on beneath the surface, Mirza sahib.

— What's all this about chapatis?

— I heard the stories too, but I didn't believe them at first. Early yesterday morning the chowkidar of Indrapur village came and showed me a chapati. Apparently he had got it from the chowkidar of

Sarai Farooq Khan. He had been told to make five more of such chapatis and pass them to the chowkidars of five other villages, and to tell each of them to pass on five chapatis to five other villages. I can't make out what's going on, Mirza sahib.

— Is anyone sending information inside the chapatis?

— No, there's nothing inside. I also heard that mutton is being distributed at some places.

— This looks like a magician's trick, mian.

Things grew more and more mysterious with every passing day, Manto bhai. The whispers increased. People looked as though they could no longer trust one another. News of sepoys rising in mutiny began to filter in from different places. Apparently British soldiers were given many facilities while soldiers from Hindustan were treated like slaves. There were only a few months to go for the hundredth anniversary of the Battle of Plassey. I was told that the Wahabis had announced that Hindustan had to be made independent again on June 23. Shahjahanabad was calm, but the breeze brought in news of war-like situations everywhere.

May 11. The date seemed to have been lurking in wait for us, my brothers. Now it pounced like a cheetah. That afternoon, the gates and walls of the fort shook in an explosion, the echoes spreading to every corner of the city. It was bigger than an earthquake. Rebel forces from Meerut arrived to occupy Shahjahanabad. They had entered the city through the Rajghat Gate near Daryaganj. The guards and soldiers stationed in the city joined forces with them. An orgy of killing began. The familiar map of Shahjahanabad was covered in blood. Kill Britishers and Anglo-Indians on sight, plunder their homes and set them on fire. It's not just the enemy that perishes in a massacre, my brothers, innocent bystanders are wiped out too. There was no tally of the ordinary citizens of Shahjahanabad who were killed.

Muhammad Bakht Khan, the leader of the rebel forces, was a subedar in a company of foot soldiers stationed in Bareilly. Under his leadership, Emperor Bahadur Shah was virtually imprisoned. He would have to accede to whatever the rebels wanted to do. Bakht Khan had only one thing to say. 'You shall be the Emperor of Hindustan again, Jahanpanah. But you have to do as we say.' They had Prince Mirza Mughal supporting their cause, too. The emperor had no choice but to agree to everything. Maybe he was tempted, just in case he could regain his throne thanks to all this turmoil. After all, he was incapable of doing anything on his own. What could he have done anyway? He was eighty-two at the time; he could only nod sleepily all day.

With the emperor as a front, it was his eldest son Mirza Mughal who controlled everything. Prince Jawan Bakht became the prime minister. The commissioner was reinstated. And do you know what Muhammad Bakht Khan's title was? Sahib-e-Alam Bahadur. The brave lord of the universe! There was no such post in the Mughal court before this. Hakim Ahsanullah Khan, whom the emperor trusted implicitly, was labelled a British spy. People stormed his house with the intention of killing him, but he was with the emperor in the fort at the time. Not finding him at home, the maddened crowd arrived at the fort, where the emperor saved Ahsanullah Khan by wrapping his arms around him. But the hakim sahib's house was looted—his lovely house, as beautiful as a Chinese painting, was torched.

Whatever the emperor's failings, he was steeped in his culture—a culture that began with Emperor Babar and blossomed to fullness in the time of Emperor Akbar. All you have to do is picture Fatehpur Sikri to understand its beauty. Mian Tansen's music was the pinnacle of this culture. Emperor Jahangir's picture gallery was lined with amazing paintings from the same culture. Bahadur Shah could not possibly have accepted these uncivilized, barbaric soldiers. The fort was nothing but a stable for them. 'How will you protect your empire with these people, Mirza?' he asked Mirza Mughal one day. 'They go

everywhere on their horses. The British officers never behaved this way; they would dismount at the entrance to the Diwan-e-Aam and enter barefoot.'

— We need them to keep the empire.

— These uncultured brutes? Do you think I don't keep myself informed? They're plundering the markets. They're breaking into noblemen's homes under the pretext that Englishmen are hiding inside and looting them.

— How does it matter to you, Jahanpanah? Don't you want to keep wearing your crown? They have made you the emperor, after all.

— Emperor of swine.

— But emperor nevertheless.

Yes, Manto bhai, it was actually a time when things were turned upside down. I could not understand what was going on. It was a period of darkness, when you were forced to take sides. You were either for the emperor, or on the side of the British. How could a man like me choose so easily? I knew I was worthless to both sides as a poet; they would only use me as required. I was nothing but the grass being flattened in a battle between elephants. I had to balance myself between both sides. The emperor mustn't cut me off, but the British must not suspect me either.

So I picked a corner of my room and began to write, Manto bhai. What else could a poet do in times like these? With the centuries-old empire now a rotting corpse, while the concealed daggers were clearly visible in the belts of those who had arrived as harbingers of civilization, what else was there to do besides paying homage to the corpse with an array of words? I began to write *Dastambu*. I would have to write all that I could see and hear, all that was happening around me, in Farsi prose. I named this bloody chapter *Dastambu–A Bouquet of Flowers*. I had imagined that someone or the other would have realized that the bouquet had blood on it, but later I realized that no one understood. I patted myself on the back for this. Finally you have learnt the art of hinting at things, mian. It was necessary to acquire this skill, Manto bhai. Otherwise a bullet—either from the rebels or from the British—would definitely have found its way to my chest.

I had to attend the emperor's durbar. Besides the task of correcting his poems, I had to convey the fact that I was on his side. The coins that the emperor released with the help of the rebels during his reign of four months carried a sher I wrote for him.

When the rebels declared that Bahadur Shah was the Emperor of India, I even wrote a qaseeda for him.

One day he whispered to me, 'What do you see, ustadji?'

— Your heyday is back, emperor.

— No. Haven't you seen the lamp before it dies?

— I have, Jahanpanah.

— That's me. The lamp.

I knew as much even without his having to tell me. I recited a sher to him that day:

ہم نے بہشت عقدۂ بزمِ جہاں میں جو شمع
شعلۂ عشق کو اپنا سرِ وسماں سمجھا

In the terrible emptiness of this worldly gathering
I considered the flame of love all I had

— Excellent, ustadji!

Other than proving my loyalty by appearing at the royal court from time to time, I kept writing *Dastambu* in my cell. I felt it was more important to write this account than to explicitly announce where my loyalties lay. I would have to write a daily log of our misery as impartially as possible. I knew it was not possible to do anything impartial. But still I wanted to write down an account of the events.

I know you will be upset, Manto bhai, but I could not accept the supremacy of lower-class sepoys. My culture was a different one. Even if I were to die of starvation, I would never be able to burn down anyone's art gallery. After all, paintings had satiated the appetite of my eyes and mind. I saw for myself how the sepoys destroyed each of the things of beauty in the fort. All they needed to keep their mutiny alive was food and money. They sold many of the priceless treasures of the city. If a revolution meant such barbarity, I did not support it. With all my heart and soul I wanted the British to regain possession of Shahjahanabad. At least peace would be restored.

Yes, my friend, I know you want to bring up the annexation of Awadh, don't you, Manto bhai? I hated it with all my heart. But still I retained an iota of hope, that the British at least would not demolish everything beautiful. Just imagine, Manto bhai, the sepoys lived in the barracks—it was just like prison—they had no life beyond food and sleep and sexual desire. Whatever culture they brought with them into the barracks was destroyed by the cruelty inculcated within them in preparation for war. At the end of the day, soldiers can fight wars and raze cities, but they can never usher in freedom. Freedom can be brought in only by the man on the road, whose weapons are rocks, branches of trees, and the memories of many centuries of warfare handed down by his ancestors. The battle to protect one's own house, own river, own forest … freedom is not just for human beings, Manto bhai, there is also freedom for waterfalls, freedom for trees, freedom for birds, freedom for fish … can soldiers in barracks ever think of such freedom? They have only been taught to fight in wars, but the battle for independence is more than a war with guns and cannons.

I can say all this to you now, but back then I had to keep my mouth shut. So I had nothing else to do besides writing *Dastambu*. Meanwhile, with the rebels having taken control of the city, my pension from the British government had been stopped. I had no idea how to provide for all the people at home. Worrying about it only made me want to laugh.

جز نام نہیں صورتِ عالم مجھے منظور
جز وہم نہیں،ہستی اشیامیرے آگے

The world exists only by name
All is imaginary, without basis, over here

My days went from bad to worse. I waited for the British to take control of Shahjahanabad again, and restore normalcy. As you know, Manto bhai, I didn't have to wait very long. The sepoys had taken over Shahjahanabad on a Monday in May; and on September 14 of the same year, also a Monday, the British regained control. The battle went on till September 20. The British occupied the fort that same day. The emperor escaped and took shelter in Humayun's tomb. It was like a sher from a ghazal, Manto bhai. The dying emperor seeks refuge at a grave. Eventually he surrendered to Captain Hodson on the assurance that he would be freed. Two of his sons, Mirza Mughal and Mirza Khijr Sultan, were shot dead personally by Captain Hodson in front of Khuni Darwaza. The emperor didn't spare them a glance, for he was too busy saving himself. I heard that Mirza Mughal apparently said before he died

—'Remember, my Hindu and Muslim friends, you will get a lot if you are united.' I saw such gruesome scenes during those days, Manto bhai. Eleven princes had been murdered in cold blood and left in Chandni Chowk, only a rag covering their naked bodies. Was this what the descendants of the Mughal dynasty deserved? The emperor and his wife Begum Zeenat Mahal were imprisoned in a tiny, dark room in the fort. The British considered him a beast in a zoo. He would lie on a makeshift bed in soiled clothes, repeating, 'I'm very happy, I'm very happy.' I heard from some people that he would stare at the floor all day and night, occasionally snapping out of his slumber to recite his own ghazals. Then his trial began, continuing for twenty-one days. I was told that he was asleep during most of the proceedings. He wrote the last ghazal of his life with a piece of chalk on the wall of the cell he was imprisoned in:

نہ کسی کی آنکھ کا نور ہوں،نہ کسی کے دل کا قرار ہوں
جو کسی کے کام نہ آ سکے،میں وہ اک مشتِ غبار ہوں

Not the light in anyone's eye, nor the peace in anyone's heart,
Someone who is of no use to anyone, I am a handful of dust

مرا رنگ روپ بگڑ گیا، مرا یار مجھ سے بچھڑ گیا
جو چمن خزاں سے اجڑ گیا،میں اُسی کی فصلِ بہار ہوں

My beauty has deserted me, my brothers have abandoned me,
I am the harvest of the garden that dried up in autumn

میں نہیں ہوں نغمۂ جاں فزا،مجھے سن کے کوئی کرے گا کیا
میں بڑے بڑوں کی ہوں صدا،میں بڑے دکھی کی پکار ہوں

I am no music of the heart, it's no use listening to me,
I am a desolate lament, my wails hold nothing but misery

After the English took possession of Shahjahanabad, I thought I was listening to the final cries of a dying beast. General Wilson, the Commander General of the British forces, threw a dinner at the Private Stateroom, the Diwan-e-Khas, of the fort the same night that they occupied the city. The honour of the Diwan-e-Khas was ground to the dust in a single night. When I think of it even now, my anger rages like a trapped animal. I will recount everything, my brothers, everything— how Shahjahanabad was emptied out—how the few of us who remained in Dilli spent our days in the fires of hell.

It was during this time that Mirza Yusuf left us, Manto bhai. I have told all of you already about this brother of mine; Yusuf had spent nearly thirty years in a state of madness. But he never troubled anyone; he would just sit muttering to himself, disappearing for several days sometimes before returning home. After the British occupied Dilli, many people fled out of fear of torture and death; Yusuf's wife and daughters abandoned him and escaped. The reason I cited in *Dastambu* for Yusuf mian's death was untrue, Manto bhai. I was actually writing *Dastambu* in order to present it to the British, so that they could give me a title and an allowance, and settle my pension in my favour. I did not want to consciously include anything in *Dastambu* that would make the British suspect me of being one of the revolutionaries. But you know what, one's creation goes out of one's control at some point; true to its

own calling, what you write holds hints to the truth within itself. That is why you will still see in *Dastambu* the images of the hell to which the British took us. The British Empire was the angel of freedom for Hindustan, yes, I wrote as much over and over again in *Dastambu*. But accounts of the destruction of Shahjahanabad within fifteen months of the beginning of the Mutiny, of the worm-like lives that we lived, are also presented in there.

In *Dastambu* I wrote that Mirza Yusuf died after five days of high fever. The chowkidar of his house informed us. But Yusuf was actually shot dead by the British. There was firing everywhere and all the time. Frantic at all the noise, Yusuf went out on the road and collapsed under a hail of fire. I know, Manto bhai, that the lord will never forgive this lie. I wrote a falsehood about my brother's death in my book in order to save my skin. I will never be released from hell. What was I to do with his corpse now? Given the state of Shahjahanabad, I had no idea where to get a sheet of cloth for his shroud. Who would bathe the corpse, where would I find gravediggers, where would the brick and lime come from? Which graveyard would I lay him to rest in? The Hindus could at least cremate their dead on the banks of the Yamuna. But what were we Muslims to do? There was constant firing in the street—how would I even get Yusuf to the graveyard? Some of our neighbours lent a hand. Kallu and another servant were there too. They were the ones who bathed the corpse, wrapped him in rags, and dug a grave in the grounds of the nearby mosque to bury Yusuf. The last bond of blood was severed, Manto bhai.

It was a time to vanish. Many fled; many others were evicted from the city. Those of us who stayed behind were prisoners of fear and hope. There was no balm to salve the souls either of those who had left or of those who had remained. Death seemed to have slipped grey masks on everyone's faces. Chandni Chowk was like a valley of death. The British hanged from the trees anyone they could get hold of. Spies roamed everywhere. Let's say you and I had had a feud, I took the opportunity to report you to the British as a member of the revolutionaries.

Sometimes I wondered whether I didn't commit acts of betrayal as well. I did, my brothers, as I must confess today. However dazzling an example of Farsi prose *Dastambu* might be, it is also a document of betrayal. I painted a picture of a period of nightmares, but to save myself I also sold the picture to the foreign empire.

زندگی اپنی جب اس شکل سے گزری غالب
ہم بھی کیا یاد کریں گے کہ خدا رکھتے تھے

When all my life has passed in this manner, Ghalib
What grace of God from the past can I possibly recollect?

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کس طرح کاٹے کوئی شب ہائے تار بر شگال
ہے نظر خوکردۂ اخترشماری ہائے ہائے

How will the dark monsoon nights pass
My eyes are used to counting the stars, alas

Let me tell you a story, my brothers. Bhishma told this tale to Yudhishthira in the *Mahabharata*. In the forest, a hunter's poison-tipped arrow missed its target and struck a huge, ancient tree. The tree began to burn at once. All sorts of birds had their nests in its branches. Realizing that the death of the tree was inevitable, the birds began to flee their nests. Only a solitary parrot remained. Meanwhile, the flames rose around the tree, threatening to engulf the parrot. But despite its imminent death, the parrot did not stir from its nest. Indra, the King of the Gods, was astonished to see this from the sky. He asked the parrot, 'Everyone else has flown off, why are you still waiting? Do you want to be burnt to death in the fire?'

— Lord, I was born in this tree, I grew up among its leaves and boughs. From this ancient tree I have learnt how to be patient and to survive. It is this tree that has sheltered all of us from hail and storms.

— But you will die too, along with the tree.

— So be it, lord.

— Do you not fear death?

— Who doesn't? Smiling wanly, the parrot said, 'But lord, can anyone abandon their dharma out of fear of death?'

— What is your dharma?

— If I am alive today it is because of this tree. I cannot abandon it when ill fortune strikes.

— A worthy response. I had indeed expected just such a faithful answer from you, o finest among parrots. What boon do you want?

— Will you fulfil my request?

— But of course.

— Then restore this ancient tree to life.

The tree had regained its life thanks to Indra's boon. But the ancient tree in which I had been born and grown up had no one to save it, Mirza sahib. The poison-tipped arrow of the Partition burnt it down to cinders. A country was cleaved to create two separate nations on two successive days of death and killing all over Hindustan. Today I do not want to judge who was wrong and who was right—there

are political leaders and historians enough for that—but the nightmares haunt me even in my grave. Some say, a million Hindus were killed; others, that a million Muslims died. I tell them, say that two million people lost their lives. Having killed Hindus, the Muslims imagined Hinduism had been eradicated; by murdering Muslims, the Hindus thought they had despatched Islam to its grave. Whom will you explain to, Mirza sahib, that a religion doesn't die this way? A religion lives in our heart, in our faith. Brothers killed one another over religion, sisters were raped by brothers, refugees from one country flooded another. We had become puppets in the hands of the Nehrus and Jinnahs and Patels. Such hatred, such distrust all around. These leaders were all leeches, my brothers, they deserved to be exterminated in boiling water. They had no other mission besides sucking our blood. No, Mirza sahib, I have no wish to talk about them.

The days were consumed in the kind of blazing conflagration where friends don't hesitate to kill one another. It was on one of those days that I understood what form the desire for blood can take. Thousands of Hindus and Muslims were dying every day. One day Shyam and I went to meet a Sikh family which had come from Rawalpindi. Shyam was from Rawalpindi, after all. My blood turned cold as I heard how members of their family were killed. Shyam became extremely agitated. I could guess what must have been running through his mind. When we came out, I saw that he was still trembling. I put my hand on his shoulder. Shyam looked at me with unseeing eyes, as though he didn't even know who I was.

— Shyam …

He was walking along in silence.

— What's the matter, Shyam?

'Nothing,' he answered with a sad smile.

— You're suffering, aren't you?

— No.

I heard the sound of his teeth grinding. —I'm a Muslim, Shyam. Tell me the truth, don't you want to kill me now? I asked him, clutching his shoulder.

Shyam looked at me with cold eyes.

— Tell me the truth, Shyam, don't you want to kill me?

Shyam spoke deliberately, 'No, not anymore.'

— What do you mean?

— When I was listening to their stories … how the Muslims killed us … yes, at that time … I could really have killed you then, Manto.

Shyam gripped my arm and began to weep. 'Forgive me, Manto.'

This was not just the Partition of India, not just Hindustan ki taksim, this was also a partition of friendship. All this killing and plundering—headless corpses swimming in a sea of blood—even children had been tossed on the streets with their legs ripped off—flies buzzing around the mouths of serially raped women—as I walked down the streets, I wondered, all this cold meat, this thanda gosht, everywhere, ya Allah, was I even alive?

Yes, I was alive all right, I was alive just as Ishwar Singh was alive. The universe was burning, I was burning. I cannot even imagine how Ishwar Singh survived, Mirza sahib. I had promised long ago to tell you the story of 'Thanda Gosht', my brothers.

It all happened on a midnight. A midnight in Ishwar Singh's life, and in our lives too, we who had lived in a country named India, but who had known that we would have to split our hearts right down

the middle into two. That night Kulwant Kaur got off her bed when she saw Ishwar Singh enter the room. Looking at him with pointed eyes, Kulwant shut the door. Going back to her bed, she saw Ishwar Singh rooted to the spot, perplexed, as though confronted with a problem he simply couldn't solve. He stood in a corner of the room with his kirpan in his hand, looking at the floor. His turban had come loose. Kulwant noticed that the hand in which he held his kirpan was trembling.

After a long silence, when she was no longer able to bear the stillness, Kulwant called out to him, 'Ishwar saiyan.'

Ishwar glanced at her for a moment before looking away.

— Where have you been these past few days, what have you been doing? Kulwant screamed.

— I don't know.

— Is that an answer!

Flinging his kirpan away, Ishwar Singh threw himself on the bed. He looked as though he had been sick for several days. Putting her hand on his forehead, Kulwant asked, 'What is it, jaani?'

Ishwar Singh had been staring at the ceiling. Now he looked at Kulwant and sobbed, 'Kulwant.'

— Tell me, jaani.

Taking his turban off, Ishwar Singh looked at Kulwant again. His eyes sought sanctuary. Then a groan escaped his lips. 'I'll go mad, Kulwant,' he said.

Running her hand through his hair, Kulwant asked, 'Tell me where you've been all this time.'

Clenching his teeth, Ishwar Singh said, 'Motherfucker, in bed with my enemy's mother.' Suddenly putting his arms around Kulwant, he began to laugh as he kneaded her breasts, 'I swear on the saint, kasam guru wahe ki, I haven't seen another woman like you, Kulwant.'

Lowering his hands from her breasts, Kulwant said, 'Swear on me and tell me the truth, where were you? Were you in town?'

— No.

— Something tells me you were. You've robbed a lot of money and now want to hide here, don't you?

— I am not my father's son if I lie to you.

Kulwant looked at him for some time. Then she flared up, 'I still don't know what happened to you the other night. You lay down beside me, you gave me all that stolen jewellery, you told me so many things between kisses. Then something went wrong suddenly. You dressed and left without a word. What? What was it?'

Ishwar Singh looked as though someone had drained all the blood from his face.

— Something's going on with you Ishwar saiyan. You're hiding it from me.

— Nothing like that, Kulwant. I swear on you.

— But you're not the man who was here eight days ago. Why? What have you done, tell me.

Without replying, Ishwar Singh clasped Kulwant in his arms, raining kisses on her madly. 'I'm the same Ishwar saiyan, jaani.'

— Tell me the truth, what happened that night?

— That fucking motherfucker's mother …

— So you won't tell me.

— What should I tell you? What?

— If you lie you'll cremate me with your hands, saiyan.

Ishwar Singh held Kulwant even more tightly, kissing her neck. Kulwant laughed, so did Ishwar

Singh. Taking off his shirt, he said, 'Come, let's play cards.'

Kulwant pretended anger. 'Go to hell.'

Ishwar Singh began sucking on Kulwant's lips. She couldn't prevent him anymore. Ishwar Singh shouted, 'Now for the bloody ace.' Disrobing Kulwant, he ran his tongue all over her body.

'You're an animal,' cried Kulwant.

— Of course I am.

He nibbled on Kulwant's lips and earlobes, pressed and sucked her breasts, rubbed his face on her stomach. Kulwant's body was on fire too. But Ishwar Singh realized that in spite of all this he wasn't aroused. Eventually Kulwant groaned, 'Enough of shuffling the pack, Ishwar saiyan. Where's your ace?'

No, he didn't have the ace up his sleeve today. Exhausted and disappointed, Ishwar Singh lay down, covering his face. Now Kulwant continued with her attempts to arouse him in different ways. Eventually she shouted in disgust, 'What witch have you been sleeping with all these days, Ishwar saiyan? She's turned you into pulp.'

Ishwar Singh panted. Kulwant shouted louder, 'Tell me who the witch is—what's her name …'

— No one, Kulwant. I have no one else in my life.

— I have to know the truth today. Swear on wahe guru and tell me who the whore is. Don't forget I'm Sardar Nihal Singh's daughter. If you lie to me I'll make mincemeat of you. Now tell me who the whore is.

Ishwar Singh only kept shaking his head. Kulwant was insane with rage. Picking up the kirpan from the floor, she pounced on Ishwar Singh. His cheek began to bleed. Shaking him by his hair, Kulwant let loose a torrent of abuse. 'Stop, Kulwant,' said Ishwar Singh coolly.

— Not before you tell me who the bitch is.

Blood was flowing down Ishwar Singh's face. He tasted his own blood with this tongue. A chill ran down his spine. Like a drunken man, he said, 'What shall I tell you, Kulwant? I have finished off six people with this kirpan.'

— I'm asking again who the bitch is.

— Don't call her a bitch. Ishwar Singh spoke hoarsely.

— Meaning? Who is she?

— I'll tell you. Wiping his face, he looked at his blood-soaked hand. Then he muttered, 'All of us are fucking … we're all motherfuckers.'

— Come to the point, Ishwar saiyan. Kulwant screamed.

— Wait. I'll tell you everything. But you have to give me time, Kulwant. Not everything can be said so easily. Human beings … you see, Kulwant … as I said … motherfuckers … human beings are the only motherfuckers. There was looting all over town, I joined the mob too. All the money and jewellery that I got, I handed over to you. But there was just the one thing I didn't tell you, Kulwant, that I couldn't tell you.

— What was it?

— We broke through the door of a house … yes, seven … there were seven people in the house … I killed six of them myself with this kirpan … never mind … never mind all this, Kulwant … there was a girl, you know … she was so beautiful … I could have sliced her up like the rest … but I thought … Ishwar Singh laughed. 'She was so beautiful, jaani, I can't tell you how beautiful. I thought, I have Kulwant every day, let me have someone new today.'

— I knew it. Kulwant's piercing look held both hatred and contempt.

— I slung her over my shoulder and went out.

— And then?

— On the way … Ishwar Singh was silent for a few moments

— Where was I? She was slung over my shoulder … we came across a canal, there was this dense undergrowth on its banks. I laid her down amidst the bushes. At first I had thought of shuffling the cards for a while. But I didn't know whether anyone was lurking nearby. So straight to the ace …

— Go on … go on …

— I dealt the ace.

— And then …

For a long time, Ishwar Singh sat with his head bowed. Then he looked at Kulwant as though he had woken up after a very long sleep. —The girl had died … I don't know when she died … she was just a lump of cold flesh. Thanda gosht. Jaani … your hand … jaani …

Touching Ishwar Singh, Kulwant found his body colder than ice.

Yes, Mirza sahib, we seemed to be walking through an ice age. How many people were murdered? How many women were raped? How many people became refugees? I don't know the numbers, my brothers. And what would I do with them anyway? I saw a child who had forgotten how to speak. Everyone in his family had been chopped up and shot dead before his eyes. When others spoke of the numbers, I would see the child's face—the empty look in his eyes, mute. A wet rag had wiped out all his memories with a single swipe.

It was obvious that I would now have to wipe Bombay out of my memories too. Shafia and our children had gone off to Lahore much earlier. She kept writing, asking me to join them in Lahore. Bombay was my second birthplace; how could I leave the city? I worked at Bombay Talkies at the time. Ashok Kumar the hero and Savak Vacha were the owners. Muslims were in important positions, because of which the antipathy of the Hindus was mounting by the day. Bombay Talkies received several letters threatening to kill Vacha sahib and torch the studio. I didn't care for the atmosphere of suspicion and violence anymore. I was drinking more and more. Many of the Hindu employees felt that Muslims were ruling the roost at Bombay Talkies because of me. Shahid, Ismat, Kamal Amrohi, Hasrat Lakhnavi, Nazir Azmiri, Ghulam Haider, me … we were all at Bombay Talkies then.

One day I told Ashok, 'Sack me now, dadamoni.'

— What do you mean?

— I don't want Bombay Talkies to be destroyed because of me.

— You've gone mad, Manto. Have patience. It'll sort itself out eventually.

But the insanity increased. Arson and looting everywhere, murders on the streets. One day Ashok and I were on our way back home from Bombay Talkies. When we reached his house, I wondered how I'd get to mine. 'Let me drop you, Manto,' said Ashok. 'We'll see what happens.'

To take a short cut, Ashok drove through Muslim slums. A wedding procession was approaching. 'Why have you taken this route, dadamoni?' I asked, gripping his hand.

— Be quiet. There's nothing to worry about.

I really was very frightened. Was there anyone who didn't know Ashok? Killing a famous Hindu like him would sanctify their weapon. When his car went up to the procession, there was a cry, 'Ashok Kumar, Ashok Kumar!' My blood ran cold. But Ashok was unaffected. I was about to poke my head out through the window and declare, 'I'm a Muslim. Ashok is taking me home.' Before I could, two young men came up to the window and said, 'The road ahead is blocked, Ashok bhai. Take the lane to the

left.'

We traversed the route safely. 'You were worrying unnecessarily, Manto,' Ashok said with a smile. 'They love artistes.'

Really? I have no idea. Does art hold any value for those who riot and flood the streets with blood? Walking the streets of Lahore one day, Kabir saw a shopkeeper making packets with pages torn from a book of Surdas's poetry. He could not hold back his tears. 'What have you done?' he asked the shopkeeper.

— Why, what's the matter?

— Can't you see that this is a book of Surdas's poetry? How can you use its pages for your packets?

— Surdas? The shopkeeper laughed. —No one named Surdas can be a devotee.

— Why not?

— What does 'sur' mean?

— It means melody. Even God's name …

— Don't you know 'sur' means 'suar', a pig? The shopkeeper began to laugh.

— So that's what it means for you?

Another day, Kabir saw that some people had smeared the Goddess Lakshmi's idol with straw. He began to clean the idol. A group of people turned up and asked, 'What do you think you're doing?'

— What do you mean?

— Don't you know idol worship is forbidden by our religion?

— No religion demands that a beautiful idol be soiled.

The people began to laugh at what Kabir had said. He wandered about the lanes and bylanes of Lahore, weeping. Are you surprised, my brothers? How could Kabir have visited Lahore? I wrote a story about him. 'Dekh Kabira Roye'–'See, Kabir Weeps'. Kabir could have gone wherever he pleased; if Mirza sahib could have met him at the Manikarnika Ghat, why should he not have walked the streets of Lahore?

Eventually it was Lahore that I had to return to. In January 1948, I packed all my belongings and boarded the ship from Bombay to Karachi. Perhaps I was afraid. I'm a coward, after all. I'd told Ismat, come to Lahore with me, all the Hindus there are coming over to India, you'll find a house. Come along, Ismat, let's start afresh in Lahore.

Ismat didn't agree. She only asked, 'You'll abandon us just to save your skin?'

— I am an outsider in this country, Ismat.

— Who told you that?

— I know.

— No you don't. You're a coward. That's why you're running away.

I realized from Ismat's eyes, Mirza sahib, that she began to hate me from that day onwards. But did that mean not writing me a single letter? Or not even answering any of mine? Does hatred erase all memories? Perhaps. Or else how could the hatred during the riots have erased so many centuries of memories?

41

وہ دل نہیں رہا ہے نہ وہ اب دماغ ہے
جی تن میں اپنے بجھتا سا کوئی چراغ ہے

The old heart is gone, the mind too
There's life in the body, like a lamp burning down

Yes, Manto bhai, after this came a period of staying awake in a fog of forgetfulness. The mind no longer spoke, no waves crashed on the shores of the heart. Having taken over Shahjahanabad, the British gifted us a dead city. Where a cold wind blew all the time, where the fallen leaves could be heard rustling, where the streets were blackened with the congealed blood of dead people. Every day was cursed, I knew there was no end to this; it had all been destroyed.

One neighbourhood after another emptied out. They had slaughtered the Muslims; those who had managed to survive had fled. There was no light in their homes at night, no smoke rose from their ovens during the day. There was no one to have a conversation with. I could not survive without talking to people. Besides my friends, I had warm relationships with my neighbours too. I suffocated without laughter and jokes and gossip. How was I to tolerate such silence? Eventually I began to converse with my own pen, and my own shadow became my friend. I didn't even have the means to correspond with my friends. The postal system had collapsed completely. Newspapers were not delivered. French wines were not available either. I could not sleep without a drink. A friend sent rum from time to time, on which I managed to survive.

My pension had been stopped, but I had to support several people. We began to sell Umrao Begum's jewellery. Even our beds and clothes had to be sold. I laughed at myself. Others eat bread, Mirza, and you eat garments. But what will you do when you've eaten through all your clothes? Suck my thumbs. Even if I get the rest of my pension, the mirror won't lose its stains. And if I don't, the mirror itself will be shattered. I'm not talking in riddles, my brothers. This heart is exactly like a mirror. Every day I'd tell myself that it was time to flee from Delhi, that it wasn't possible to survive here anymore. Even water wasn't available; we had to take measured sips. Can you imagine, Manto bhai, for two days in a row we had no water at home.

If we survived in spite of this, it was because of a helping hand from three or four people. The lord gave me this one invaluable asset—human beings. In times of distress, someone or the other always stood by me. Hira Singh and Shivjiram Brahman were like my sons, my pupils—they helped me in many different ways. Shivjiram's son Balmukund helped me too. And Hargopal Tafta sent money from Hyderabad whenever he could.

I get confused when I think of all those days. I feel as though I'm trapped inside a labyrinth, with blood clotting in its lanes, the severed heads of familiar and unfamiliar people scattered on the ground,

all of them staring at me unblinkingly, as though they want to say something, I see their lips trembling with hatred and humiliation. Surely they didn't deserve to end up as unclaimed corpses, Manto bhai.

No one who had a relationship with the emperor was spared death. To them, all Muslims were traitors. I was on the list of suspects too. One day, Colonel Burne sent a team of white soldiers to arrest me. Maharaja Narendra Singh of Patiala had been on the side of the British from the beginning. Well-known people like Mehmood Khan, Murtaza Khan, and Ghulamullah Khan lived in the same lane as I did. All of them belonged to the royal court of Patiala. With the consent of the British, Maharaja Narendra Singh installed his own soldiers in our lane. So we could at least venture out to arrange for food and water. We were not permitted to go beyond Chandni Chowk on pain of death. But the British soldiers jumped over the wall into our lane and laid siege to my house. Along with me, Bakir, Husain, Kallu and one or two other neighbours were marched off to Colonel Burne. He was in Qutubuddin's haveli near the square. They really were naïve, like newborn babies. The first question I was asked in broken Urdu was, 'Are you a Muslim?'

Why should I give up an opportunity for a joke? 'Half-Muslim, huzoor,' I answered.

— Meaning?

— I drink, but pork is a profanity.

The colonel burst into laughter. —I see you have a sense of humour.

— Sixty years of humour, huzoor. I extended the letter from London towards him as I spoke. The letter of acknowledgment for the qaseeda that I had sent the Queen Empress Victoria.

— What's this?

— Take a look, huzoor.

After a quick glance Colonel Burne tossed the letter back at me. —I don't need to read such useless things.

— Yes sir.

— Why didn't you meet us after we restored peace in Dilli?

— I wanted to, huzoor. But they would have shot me if I ventured out.

— What else are they supposed to do with traitors?

— That is true, huzoor.

— Then why didn't you come?

— Huzoor …

— I would like to know why you didn't come.

— I am a Mirza, sahib.

— Meaning?

— I do not go anywhere except in a palanquin. There are no bearers in the city. How could I have come?

— So you're a nobleman who cannot travel except in a palanquin! Colonel Burne screamed. 'Get out … I'm letting you go because the documents at the fort did not have your name … get out …'

The propensity to insult people was in their blood. The more they could humiliate people, the drunker they got on power. You think I couldn't have pissed on the colonel's face? But we had our backs to the wall, and were left with no option but to escape from Shahjahanabad. All these insults and torture, even death, simply for being Muslim? I was a suspect only because I was a Muslim? Who gave them the science that they brag so much about, Manto bhai? None other than Muslims. Can history be erased so easily? But it can, for I saw for myself how Shahjahanabad was erased.

Do you know what you must do before making someone disappear? Brand him a criminal. It's very easy after that. A farcical trial and the death sentence. In the case of Emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar, they ran the farce for twenty-one days before exiling him to Rangoon. Now listen to what they did to the nawabs of Jhajjhar, Bahadurgarh, Vallabhgarh, Loharu, Farrukhgarh, Dujana, and Pataudi, who owed allegiance to the emperor. Except for Dujana and Pataudi, the other nawabs were brought to the fort and imprisoned within a few days of the fall of Shahjahanabad. The nawabs of Jhajjhar, Vallabhgarh, and Farrukhgarh were hanged from trees near Chandni Chowk.

Now the armed British soldier
Is an independent tyrant
People are frozen with fear
The roads empty
The joyless home is a prison today
The square red with the blood of the vanquished
The city thirsts for Muslim blood
Every speck of dust is discontent

All I do is sit and count the number of dead and missing. Some of them are my friends and relatives; others, people I know. My friend Fazl-e-Haq was exiled for life. Shaifta was imprisoned for seven years. Others were either killed, or they managed to escape. Only their names remained in my life—Muzaffaruddaulah, Mir Nasiruddin, Mirza Asur Beg, Ahmed Mirza, Hakim Raziuddin Khan, Mustafa Khan, Qazi Faizullah, Husain Mirza, Mir Mehdi, Mir Sarfraz Husain, Meeran … From my devil's chamber, I gazed at the stairs. There's Mir Mehdi. Isn't that Yusuf Mirza? There's Meeran too. I can see Yusuf Ali Khan as well. Ya Allah! Would I have to bear the weight of the death of so many of my friends? There would be no one left to grieve for me when I died, Manto bhai.

The kingdom of those who invoked the law at every step turned lawless. Only, you—the people of Hindustan—would not be allowed to say that they had laid the law in its grave. They would tell you the law didn't apply to them, and you would have to accept it. Let me tell you of an incident. Hafiz Mammu was a close associate of ours. When the accusation of conspiring against the British didn't stick on him, his confiscated property had to be returned. The Commissioner sent for Mammu.

— Who is Hafiz Muhammad Khan?

— I am, huzoor.

— Who is Hafiz Mammu?

— I am, sir.

— What do you mean?

— My name is Hafiz Muhammad Khan. But everyone calls me Hafiz Mammu.

— Why?

— Their wish, huzoor.

— How do I know that the two of them are the same person?

— I'm telling you they are, huzoor.

— Then I'm telling you that you won't get anything back.

— But why, huzoor?

— You must first prove who you are.

Hafiz Mammu had to return home empty-handed. This was the rule of law, after all. I was told that an office had been opened in Lahore to pay compensation. Those whose property had been looted by mutinous sepoys would receive ten percent compensation. If you'd been robbed of a thousand rupees,

you would get a hundred. But there would be no compensation for the things plundered by British soldiers. What could be more convenient? Hindustan was their own property—why should they offer compensation for plundering it?

I didn't feel like talking to anyone at all, Manto bhai. Bakir and Husain would appear sometimes and hug me. We want this, we want that. I had no money. But I couldn't tell them that. Annoyed, I sent Kallu to the mahalsarai one day. In case Umrao Begum had any jewellery to sell.

Kallu did not return, and Umrao came to my room a little later. She stood with her head bowed.

— Why are you here, Begum?

— I have nothing more to sell.

— That swine Kallu could have told me himself. Where has he gone?

— He's not to be blamed, Mirza sahib. I had something to tell you.

— Sit down. How can we talk while you're standing?

— Pardon me, Mirza sahib.

— What's the matter, Begum?

— I'm an imbecile. I didn't realize …

— What is it, tell me. Did you steal something to eat? I laughed. —But then what do we have for you to steal anyway? Nothing but fresh air.

— Mirza sahib … She began to weep without finishing what she had to say. Where did these women get such copious tears?

— Don't cry, Begum. The British will shoot you if they see. They want to turn our country into a desert, and here you are hiding all these tears. Now tell me what folly you've committed. You cannot be a bigger fool than I am.

— When the sepoys came, I left a box full of jewellery in Kale sahib's house. He was the emperor's teacher, surely the sepoys would not rob him.

— Hmm. All gone, isn't that so?

The sepoys did not plunder Kale sahib's house, Manto bhai, but the British soldiers were not going to spare the emperor's teacher. Thus were Umrao's last jewels looted. She wept as she told me this. Grasping her hand, I said, 'You have adhered to the Din all this time. Don't you realize the significance of the fact that the lord has now turned you into a beggar? The entire world is yours now.'

Umrao looked at me with glazed eyes.

— Celebrate, Begum, celebrate. The more your life loses its embellishments, the wider will the doors to happiness open for you.

— What will we live on, Mirza sahib?

— Shit. We will live on our own shit. The bastards can't touch it.

— You have no idea what you're saying, Mirza sahib.

— I'm right, Begum. They have come to Hindustan to get rid of us from this world.

Many of my ghazals were stored at the fort and in the Nawab of Loharu Ziauddin Khan's library. Nawab Ziauddin would keep copies of whatever I wrote. He had nearly nine hundred pages of my prose and over two thousand of my verses. Those volumes had to be seen to be believed. Bound in Morocco leather, with special motifs on the cover in gold and silver thread. The emperor's son, my pupil Mirza Fakhruddin, also had a collection of my ghazals in his library. I had never managed to arrange my own work systematically. All these years had passed chasing money for a livelihood and the dirty tricks necessitated by this. When the foreigners began to plunder our city, they didn't spare the libraries.

Numerous wonderful books were lost from this world. One day I heard a beggar on the road singing my ghazal. 'Where did you learn this ghazal, mian?' I asked him.

— On the road, huzoor.

— Do you have the paper it was written on?

Taking a tattered piece of paper from the pocket of his robe, he handed it to me. Yes, it was my ghazal. A page from one of the handwritten volumes in the library at the fort. I couldn't hold back my tears, my brothers.

— What's the matter, huzoor?

— Will you give me this piece of paper?

— Of course. What will I do with it?

— How will you sing now?

The beggar smiled. 'I've copied it into the book of my heart, huzoor.'

As each day passed, the pages in the book of my heart were torn off one by one, fluttering away in the wind. There wasn't a person I could bare my heart to. You can chat pleasantly with lots of people, laugh and joke with them too, but we all want someone whose tastes and sensibilities match our own. I longed for the company of at least one or two people with whom I could discuss poetry and imagination. Without them, even the finest garden decays. Dilli was now home only to soldiers, the British, and Punjabis and Hindus. Where were the people who shared my culture? No Zauq, no Momin Khan; where had Nizamuddin Maamun gone? Among the poets, only Arzuda and I were alive. Arzuda had fallen completely silent, and I was bewildered. No one wrote ghazals anymore, or talked of poetry. There come certain times of misfortune in the world, Manto bhai, when poetry dies. I seemed to be keeping a vigil by the grave of the ghazal, counting the hours. I could think of nothing but the time when death would come to take me beyond this worldly life.

Entire nights would pass in wakefulness. One day I saw a shadowy figure standing in my cell. Who was he? How had he got into my room? My throat ran dry at the sight of this tall man. 'Who are you?' I asked. 'Where are you from?'

— I am Jalaluddin Rumi, huzoor.

— Maula Rumi! I threw myself at his feet. —Is my Judgement Day here, then?

— No, huzoor.

— Why do you address me as huzoor? There can be no greater sin on my part, Maula.

— Each of us is a huzoor, Mirza. Huzoor has said that the only happy existence is that of the grass. Seasons will come and go, leaves will fall and sprout again, but only the grass will survive on every field. Only the grass knows how to spread from the centre to the sides.

— What can I do for you, Maula, tell me.

Maula sat down, facing me, and put his hand on my shoulder.

— I came to tell you a story, Mirza.

— I have been reborn today, Maula. How many people have the fortune of listening to a story from you?

— I have been reborn too, huzoor. The lord has given me the opportunity to tell a story to the finest poet of Hindustan.

— I am insignificant in comparison to you.

— We are all stars scattered about the sky. No one except the lord knows how far away each one of us is. Some of us are dead, some alive. But still our dialogue continues, by the grace of God. Prophet

Muhammad was sitting beneath a date palm tree one evening. He was surrounded by his disciples and nearby villagers. Pink and blue were at play in the sky as the sun set. Suddenly Zawhl stood up, shouting, 'Muhammad, there's never been anyone as ugly and filthy as your ancestor Hashim. Even his children have given birth to a succession of hideous offspring.'

Haider, Hazrat Muhammad's most devoted disciple, unsheathed his sword at once. Calmly, Muhammad said, 'You are right, Zawhl.' Haider was deflated. He had been ready to behead Zawhl.

A little later, Abu Bakr knelt before Muhammad, saying, 'Pardon Zawhl, O Prophet. There has not been another man more courageous or beautiful than your ancestor Hashim. You are the same.'

Smiling at Abu Bakr, Muhammad said, 'You are right, Abu Bakr.'

There was a long silence. Suddenly an agitated Haider said, 'The two of them are saying two different things, prophet. Both of them are right, you say. How is this possible?'

Muhammad smiled at Haider. —You are right too, Haider.

— I am right too?

— Yes. I am only a mirror, Haider. The lord has long been polishing me. Everyone sees himself in my mirror. If you look at the world through a blue-tinted glass, the world appears blue; if you see it through a red glass, it's nothing but red. What people see is their own reflection.

— Then there is no such thing as truth in the world?

— You seek truth?

— I do.

— Then free yourself of all excitement and emotions, Haider. Keep polishing the mirror within yourself till all the colours are worked off and it becomes completely transparent. Only then will you see him, Haider.

— See whom, Maula? I clung to Jalaluddin Rumi's feet.

— Let go of my feet, Mirza. You are being extinguished … you are merging into the depths of creation … there is no greater joy or truth. I pray that you die like a cat.

— Why?

— Cats can sense their hour of death and isolate themselves. They do not bother anyone, do not seek anyone's pity. They face death alone. Solitude is the only truth, Mirza. Why do you fret? Everything will be swallowed by the black hole one day. You have been born in this world, you will leave it … such an effortless voyage, like a feather … this joy alone shall be your companion in solitude.

42

جلا ہے جسم جہاں،دل بھی دل گیا ہو گا
کُریدتے ہو جواب راکھ ،جستجو کیا ہے

Since the body's been burnt, so has the heart
Only ashes are left, there's nothing to be found here

I am not a historian, my brothers, so I cannot say how many millions lost their homes because of the Partition, how many were lost forever, how many women were raped, how many people were murdered to the accompaniment of roars of 'Har Har Mahadev' or 'Allahu-Akbar'. All I have in my bag are a few stories; those stories are all I can tell you. But then, history is not just an account of dates and numbers; stories and songs on people's lips also create the big picture of history. From a friend in Delhi I heard that over twenty thousand Muslims there were killed; the houses and properties of over forty thousand Muslims in old Delhi were seized. But what will I do with these statistics? Is any compensation possible for the way the lives of young girls like Sharifan or Vimla ended? Should people like Sahai have died the way they did, like dogs? And how shall I wipe out the memory of the old woman who went mad looking for her daughter and died on the street? What insane violence was it that made a good man like Ramkhilwan want to kill me? Those of us who did not become victims of the riots have been carrying just such a history, the history that is to be found not in the archives but on the streets. In that history, Toba Tek Singh lies on a small, nameless patch of land between India and Pakistan. These, Mirza sahib, these are the people who are still the living history of our days of exile. Would anyone forget Sharifan once they had heard her story? Different historians will give different numbers for how many Muslims were killed in Delhi, the toll may climb or fall with time; but when Sirajuddin shouted, holding his daughter Sakina's corpse, 'My daughter is alive, huzoor, my daughter is alive,' that moment can never be changed. The wound will remain as long as the universe exists, just like the mass murders at the Nazi camps and the gulags can never be obliterated.

The Partition became a macabre festival of killing in our lives, Mirza sahib. Human beings didn't just kill other human beings, they also killed mutual trust, love, dependence. A family had somehow saved itself from rioters and hidden amidst the bushes. The elder of the two daughters was never found. The mother held the younger daughter in her arms. The rioters took their buffalo away. The cow was left behind, but its calf was lost. So the husband and wife hid in the undergrowth at night along with the cow. The little girl cried in fear from time to time. Her terrified mother clamped her hand over the girl's mouth. Suddenly a calf was heard in the distance. At once the cow called out in a frenzy; she had recognized the cry, it was her offspring. The couple simply couldn't quieten the cow. A little later they saw a line of torches approaching. In rage and despair the wife told the husband, 'Why did you have to

bring the animal along?' The flame of the riots burnt all our sensitivities down to cinders in this way.

Mirza sahib, I keep remembering someone somewhere muttering like a madman, over and over again:

I have killed a man—his blood has drenched my body
I am the brother of this slain brother on the road
He considered me the younger one, but still he hardened
His heart and was killed; in fear of a wave on the bloodied
River I killed the flabbergasted older one, and now
I sleep—when I rest my face on his insubstantial chest
It seems that someone who had made a loving vow
To spread the light to all of us went forward but,
Finding no light anywhere, is sleeping.
Sleeping.
If I call out he will rise like a wave from the river
Of blood and say, coming closer, 'I am Yasin,
Hanif, Muhammad, Maqbool, Karim, Aziz …
And you are …?' His hand on my chest, he will raise
His eyes from his dead face—from the foaming river
Of blood he will say, 'Gagan, Bipin, Shashi … from
Pathureghata, Shyambazaar, Galiff Street, Entally …'

Yes, there was no one, nothing—the sun had gone out. It would never be lit again. On just such a day Kasim arrived home, limping. He had been shot in his right leg, which was soaked in blood. As soon as he pushed the door open and entered, a blackened curtain of blood swayed before his eyes. His wife's corpse lay in a pool of congealed blood. Kasim stared in bewilderment for some time, and then picked up the axe used to chop wood. It was time to pay back murder with murder. He would also let loose a torrent of blood on the roads, in the markets. As he was about to leave, he suddenly remembered Sharifan—where was his daughter Sharifan? 'Sharifan, Sharifan …' Kasim shouted.

There was no response. Maybe she was hiding somewhere, terrified. Peering through the door leading into the corridor inside the house, Kasim whispered, 'Sharifan … beti … I'm back.'

It was as silent as in a desolate cave. Kasim froze as soon as he opened the door and stepped into the corridor. Sharifan lay dead nearby, completely naked. Like a rose that had just been torn into shreds. Kasim wanted to explode, but he simply stood there with his lips clamped shut. Then he wailed, covering his face with his hands, 'Sharifan … my girl …' Groping like a blind man, he found some clothes and covered her with them. He didn't look back after that. He didn't pause before his wife's corpse either. Perhaps all he could see was Sharifan's naked body. Kasim left home with his axe.

He began to run like lava flowing from a volcano. Near the crossroads he saw a Sikh and swung his axe at once. The man crumpled like a tree uprooted by a storm. Kasim advanced, swinging his axe. Three more corpses were left behind on the road, killed by Kasim's axe. All he could see was a naked Sharifan; the gunpowder within him was crackling and smouldering. Crossing one deserted market after another, he entered a lane. But all the houses here belonged to Muslims. He took a different road. He let loose a flood of invectives against Hindus, while his bloodstained axe sparkled.

Kasim stopped on seeing a name written in Hindi on the door of a house. He began to beat on the door with his axe. The door collapsed. Entering, Kasim began to swear. 'Come out you bastards, wherever you are.'

As soon as he pushed the inside door open, he came face to face with a girl, about the same age as Sharifan, innocent, tender. 'Who are you?' Kasim asked through clenched teeth.

— Vimla. Her voice held the trembling of young leaves.

— Hindu bitch …

Kasim looked at the fifteen-year-old girl for some time, his eyes still. Putting his axe down, he grabbed her with both hands and took her into the corridor, tearing her clothes off like a mad man. Time had stopped, Mirza sahib. Disrobing her completely, Kasim throttled her, and then stared at her. Just like Sharifan—it was Sharifan who was lying there. Kasim covered his face with his hands. All this while a fire had been blazing within him—now it was just ice. The burning lava of the volcano had turned into cold rock. Kasim didn't have the power to move.

A little later a man appeared, whirling a sword. He saw another man with his eyes closed, throwing a blanket with shaking hands on something lying on the floor. 'Who are you?' he roared.

Kasim looked at him, startled.

— Kasim! What are you doing here?

Quavering, Kasim pointed to the blanket heaped on the floor and sobbed, 'Sharifan …'

Many of those who killed went mad this way. None of them were murderers, Mirza sahib. So they could not have cold-bloodedly borne such sin all their lives. That's a skill reserved for politicians, those who have never loved anything besides power. They can even wash the blood of their dearest ones from their hands. But to people like Kasim, Sharifan and Vimla are no different from each other. It's not just from home or country, people are also evicted from their relationships in this way; they turn into meteorites falling through space. So abandoned that they cannot protect themselves. I have killed human beings—my body is drenched in their blood. I am the execution ground.

In the execution ground of my memories roams the mother who goes mad searching for her daughter, and then dies one day on the road. I was in Pakistan then, Mirza sahib. Muslims were still streaming across the border from the other side; Hindus were still leaving Pakistan. The refugee camps were like pens for cows and sheep. No food, no medical facilities. People were dying like flies. Attempts were being made to rescue the women and children who had fled across the border—who had been abducted, actually. Many people joined these efforts voluntarily. Hope rose in my heart at this. Everything was not finished, then. Surely the lord would not allow human beings to become complete animals. The volunteers had many stories to tell. One of them said that two girls from Saharanpur did not want to return to their parents anymore. Many young women killed themselves in shame and self-loathing on the way back. Many others had become addicts after prolonged torture. They asked for liquor instead of water when thirsty; when they didn't get it they let loose a volley of abuse.

When I thought of these abducted girls, Mirza sahib, all I could see was their swollen bellies. What would happen to those who were inside those bellies? Who would accept them—India, or Pakistan? And which of the countries would pay the expenses for carrying them for nine months? Or did this have no value? Should we leave it all to nature?

Lost Muslim girls were coming across the border from the other side; Hindu girls without addresses on this side were going across. Officially they were called 'absconders'. But actually no one had absconded. They were abducted and raped continuously; some turned to stone, some went insane, some wiped out their entire past.

One of the volunteers told me the story of the mother.

— We had to go across the border several times, Manto sahib. Every time we went, we saw an old Muslim woman. The first time was in Jalandhar. Dressed in a tattered sari, her hair full of grime and dust, constantly looking for someone.

— Looking for whom?

— For her daughter. She used to live in Patiala. Her only daughter was lost in the riots. They

searched for her everywhere, but she wasn't found. Maybe she had been killed. But the old woman simply wouldn't accept this possibility. The second time I saw her was in Saharanpur. She was looking even more sickly, her hair was even dirtier. It was matted now. I tried to explain to her that she should stop looking for her daughter now, they had killed her. She muttered, 'Killed her? Never. No one can kill her. No one can possibly kill my daughter.'

— And then?

— The third time that I saw her, she was wrapped in a strip of rag, practically naked. I tried to buy her clothes but she refused. I explained to her again, you have to believe me. Your daughter's been killed in Patiala. 'Why are you lying?' she muttered.

— I'm not lying. You have shed enough tears for your daughter. Let me take you to Pakistan now.

— No … oh no … no one can kill my daughter.

— Why not?

The old woman's voice sounded like the morning dew. —You don't know how beautiful she is. So beautiful that no one can kill her. They wouldn't even be able to slap her.

— How strange.

— I was astonished, Manto sahib. How can someone who has been dealt so many blows in life still believe that no one can kill beautiful people?

— Only those who have can do this, bhai. All she can fall back on now is a little beauty. What happened after that?

— Every time I went across the border, I saw the old woman. She practically turned into a skeleton as the days went by. Eventually she could barely see, but still she kept searching. The more time passed, the firmer her conviction grew that no one could have killed her daughter. That she was certain to find her one day.

— That's why hope has to be slaughtered like halal meat. I said with a laugh.

— A woman volunteer told me it was no use trying to convince her, she had gone completely mad. It would be better to take her to Pakistan and have her admitted to a lunatic asylum. I didn't want that, Manto sahib.

— Why not?

— She was alive only with the hope that she would get her daughter back. She was at least able to conduct her own search in this giant lunatic asylum. But if she were to be locked up in a cell she wouldn't survive. The last time I saw her, in Amritsar, I wept, Manto sahib. I actually considered taking her to Pakistan and having her admitted to a lunatic asylum.

— Your conscience would have stopped gnawing at you, wouldn't it?

— Perhaps.

— Go on.

— She was standing at Farid Chowk. Looking around her with virtually sightless eyes and searching. I was talking to someone about an abducted girl. The girl used to live with a soap market trader, a Hindu. At this moment a young woman appeared, holding the hand of a young Punjabi man, her face covered with a dupatta. When they came near the old woman, the young man retreated a couple of steps, tugging at the girl's hand. The veil covering her face shifted and her pink face flashed. I cannot tell you how beautiful she was, Manto sahib.

— I know.

— Meaning?

— We have forgotten the language for it. Go on.

— I clearly heard the young man tell the woman, 'This is your mother.' She took a look at the old woman, and then told the young man, 'Quick, let's go.' And the old woman screamed, 'Bhagwari! Bhagwari!' Going up to her, I held her arm and asked, 'What's the matter?'

— I saw her, beta.

— Saw whom?

— Bhagwari, my daughter. There, she just left.

— Bhagwari died a long time ago, ammijaan. Your daughter isn't alive anymore, believe me. The old woman looked at me for some time. Then she collapsed on the ground. When I checked her pulse, I found her dead.

— Is it possible that the lord will never have mercy on his orphans?

— Mercy? You call this the lord's mercy?

— Death is his best gift, bhai.

But the death that visited us during the riots was not the lord's gift, my brothers. There was no funeral prayer for them, no janaza, you can still hear their unfulfilled souls fluttering their wings … the rattling of the chains on their arms and legs can be heard … Kasim still wanders around the streets of Old Delhi, shouting, 'Sharifan … Sharifan …'

I know that Sahai's dying cries are still buried in the pavement in front of Bombay's JJ Hospital. Maybe angels appear on earth in the form of people like Sahai. He was a pimp—yes, a pimp for prostitutes. But I never saw another Hindu as devoted as he was. Sahai was from Benaras. You seldom see such a perfect person. He used to run his business from a small room, but it was always spick-and-span. Sahai's girls had no beds for clients; only sheets and pillows spread out on mats. I never saw a stain on any of the sheets. Although Sahai had a servant, he used to supervise everything himself to ensure cleanliness. I know he never lied to anyone, Mirza sahib, never deceived anyone. 'I have earned twenty thousand rupees in three years, Manto sahib,' he told me once.

— How?

— The girls earn ten rupees each time. My commission is two-and-a-half rupees.

— Then you must have saved a lot.

— As soon as I have another ten thousand rupees, I will go to Kashi.

— What? Why?

— I will start a garment shop. I won't stay in this business anymore.

— Why a garment shop? You could do other things as well. Sahai didn't say anything. He himself didn't seem to know why he wanted to start a garment shop in particular. Sometimes he sounded like a fraud, a cheat. Who would believe that he thought of his prostitutes as his daughters? But the strange thing was that he had opened savings accounts in post-offices for the women. He even supported a dozen or so of them. I simply couldn't reconcile all this with his trade. Everyone in Sahai's small kotha had to eat vegetarian food. So he used to give them a day off every week to go out for non-vegetarian meals. One day, he burst out in happiness when I visited him, 'Manto sahib, Daata sahib has blessed me.'

— Meaning?

— Irfan used to visit this kotha, Manto sahib. He and Chandra fell in love with each other. So I got them married. Chandra lives in Lahore now. I got her letter today, she had prayed for me at Daata sahib's dargah. It seems he has heard her prayers. I won't have to wait much longer for the remaining

ten thousand.

I didn't meet Sahai for quite some time after this. The riots began. There was a curfew in the city, no people on the roads, no buses either. I was walking through Bhindi Bazaar one morning. Near JJ Hospital, I saw a man lying on the pavement, his body streaming with blood. Another victim of the riots. Suddenly I discovered that the body was still trembling. There was no one else on the road. I bent over the man. Oh my God, it was Sahai, a mist of blood hanging over his face. I called him by his name. When I got no response for a long time, I was about to leave. Suddenly Sahai opened his eyes. —Manto sahib …

I kept asking him questions. Sahai did not have the strength to answer. Somehow he managed to say, 'I won't survive Manto sahib.'

It was a peculiar situation, Mirza sahib. Sahai lay in a pool of blood in a Muslim neighbourhood—he had obviously been killed by a Muslim, and I was a Muslim too, standing next to him as he died. If anyone saw us, I would be identified as his killer. For a moment I considered taking him to the hospital; the very next moment, I thought, what if he takes revenge by framing me! This was how the riots had turned our faith and trust upside down. To tell you the truth, I wanted to run away. Sahai called out my name. I simply couldn't go away.

Sahai was trying to pull something out of his shirt, but he didn't have the strength to do it. Finally he told me, 'There's some jewellery and twelve thousand rupees in an inside pocket … all of it belongs to Sultana … you know her, don't you … I was on my way to return it to her … the way things are going … no one knows what tomorrow will bring … please give these to Sultana … tell her to leave this country … yes, you too … you must escape too … you won't survive otherwise …'

The rest of what Sahai was trying to say congealed with his blood on the pavement. I could also have been killed on the Bombay streets like he was. That was a time, my brothers, when there really was no difference between being dead and alive. One day Manto's friends saw off his corpse on a Karachi-bound ship.

43

زیر فلک بھلا تُو روتا ہے آپکو میر
کس کس طرح کا عالم یہاں خاک ہو گیا

You bemoan your own fate under the sky, Mir
So many different worlds have burnt to ashes here

Many memories came back to me, Manto bhai, as I looked at Dilli, the city of the dead. We didn't see those days for ourselves, we only heard about them from generations of noblemen who had passed the stories down through the centuries. All reality becomes fiction one day. Each of the stories was like a painting in Emperor Jahangir's gallery—such colours, such lustre, such subtlety!—like an extraordinary world reflected in a drop of water. The Mughals didn't just create an empire or plunder this country of its riches, they also gave birth to an etiquette, a tehzeeb. It was this tehzeeb that taught us that no one can be noble without manners and morals, adab and akhlaq. The Sufi poet Khwaja Mir Dard used to say that his father was the last word in adab. His grace was evident in his external appearance. When he rode horseback along Delhi's roads, acquaintances and strangers alike used to touch his feet reverentially. The 'Salaam Aleikum' with which we greet one another is not just a phrase; it prays for the lord's peace to be rained upon the recipient. Just consider the centuries of adab contained in this greeting. To me, the death of Dilli was the death of adab and akhlaq.

Some Englishmen had suggested blasting the fort off the face of the earth with their cannons and razing the Jama Masjid to the ground. A palace and a church named after Queen Victoria would be erected in their places. Even if they did not go so far, the Lahori Gate and the Dilli Gate were renamed for Victoria and Alexander. They converted the entire fort into a camp for the army. The Jama Masjid and the Ghaziuddin Madrassa met the same fate. The Fatehpuri Mosque was sold off to a Hindu businessman. A bread-making plant was set up inside the Zinatul Mosque. Do you know what I could see from my dark cell? There, Qila Mubarak was ready. In the official documents and on people's lips, the palace fort was referred to as Qila Mubarak—the fort of good deeds. April 19, 1648. Emperor Shahjahan stepped over the threshold of the Daulatkhana-e-Khas. The date had been fixed by astrologers. We cannot even imagine the nature of the celebrations, Manto bhai. Innumerable musicians and singers had come from all over Hindustan and Kashmir and Persia. The furniture and carpets with which the clerk Sadaullah Khan had adorned the room were apparently worth sixty thousand rupees. I'm told he wrote a poem and had it carved on a wall of the chamber of dreams, the khwabgah. You know what the khwabgah was, don't you? The rooms where the emperor slept and dreamt. The bedroom was named the chamber of dreams; just think of the fancies entwined with this

name, Manto bhai.

A long wall of stone encircled Shahjahanabad. Seven large gates were made for entry and exit—Kashmiri, Modi, Kabuli, Lahori, Ajmeri, Turkmani, and Akbarabadi. The Lahori and the Akbarabadi gates were the two principal ones. Emperor Shahjahan had erected statues of a pair of elephants at these gates. Emperor Aurangzeb had the statues demolished. You know the number of storms that Dilli had to weather after that, Manto bhai. The city was stripped bare by the invasions of Nadir Shah and of the Marathas. Mir sahib wrote:

دلی جو ایک شہر تھا،عالم میں انتخاب
رہتے تھے منتخب ہی جہاں روزگار کے
اس کو فلک نے لوٹ کے ویراں کردیا
ہم رہنے والے ہیں اُسی اُجڑے دیار کے

Dilli was the chosen city of the world
The finest people of the world lived here
Time has ravaged and laid the city to waste
I am a resident of this city of broken walls

The British were even more cruel, my brothers. In November 1858, the British government took over the administration of this country from the East India Company. I had been seeing a comet in the western sky for quite a few days after sunset, Manto bhai. My heart trembled with foreboding. I realized that our end was imminent. Governor General Lord Canning took over the administration on behalf of the Queen of England. Hai Allah! I knew that their aim now would be to wipe out Shahjahanabad and its culture. The white-skinned people would now remake the city according to their own needs; and we, broken men, would remain like wounded shadows.

My only friend then was a mangy dog from the locality. It used to be a guard dog for one of the families which had run away. Emaciated and flea-ridden, its fur falling off. It was lying outside my front door one day, whimpering. When I went up to him, it began to bark.

'Woof … woof,' I responded in jest.

— Mirza sahib …

I retreated in fear. Could a dog speak like a human? You never knew, anything was possible under British rule.

It called out again, 'Mirza sahib …'

— You uncultured dog!

— I haven't eaten for two days, Mirza sahib.

'Kallu … Kallu, you swine!' I shouted.

Kallu came running. He stared at me in bewilderment. Kallu had virtually stopped talking by now. He could not live without stories, but who was going to tell him stories in this Karbala that Dilli had been turned into?

— Give the dog something to eat.

— Where will I find food for him, huzoor?

— Why, don't we have any food, Kallu? The English government is in the country now—they have so much food in their country, so many different wines—red, blue, white … why is there no food for us?

Go see if there are any bones of anything.

— Huzoor …

— What, huzoor? Are you just going to stand there? Do you want the dog to starve to death?

— You're starving too.

— So what? Don't you know that if anyone wants something from a staunch Muslim, they cannot be turned away?

— Woof … woof …

— What is it mian? Wait a bit, something is bound to turn up.

Wagging its tail, the dog said, 'Let's go for a walk. We're certain to find something to eat on the road, Mirza sahib.'

I laughed at this. Putting my hand on Kallu's shoulder, I said, 'See how Dharmaraj Yudhishthira himself has appeared at our home. I shall set off for the last long walk to death now. You needn't be unhappy anymore, Kallu. You will hear stories about my journey towards death. Go fetch my walking stick.

— Where are you going, huzoor?

— Let me take a look around Shahjahanabad before it is lost forever.

That was the beginning of my final journey, Manto bhai. Dharmaraj decided to live in my veranda. I used to address him as mian. I found it hard to walk, my legs kept swelling; my vision wasn't clear either. Mian used to take me around everywhere, showing me the sights. One lane after another, one neighbourhood after another, was razed to the ground. The British were rebuilding the entire city. There could be no labyrinthine lanes or congested neighbourhoods in it anymore. A maze only meant danger lurking around the corner; revolutionaries always holed up in such places. Therefore, wide roads would have to be built, so that nothing could take place out of the Englishman's sight. All the houses that extended into the distance beyond the gates of the fort were demolished. Appeals made by senior citizens saved Dariba Bazaar somehow. Can Shahjahanabad be thought of without its bazaars, Manto bhai? Urdu Bazaar, Khas Bazaar, Kharam ka bazaar, and, above all, Chandni Chowk. You only had to walk through the bazaars of Shahjahanabad to hear its heartbeat. They weren't just places for buying and selling, all kinds of relationships were forged here. I had roamed around these bazaars by myself many times. Do you know why? Just to watch the fountains of colour and the new faces that flashed every now and then—faces that I had never seen before. It was while wandering around the bazaars that I had picked up many of my shers. Only a bazaar could give you the craving to walk around amidst a crowd of people. But they did away with all of them—Urdu Bazaar, Khas Bazaar, Kharam ka bazaar.

— Woof woof … Mirza sahib …

— Yes, mian? Woof … woof …

— Where are we in that case?

— Underground. When I came to Shahjahanabad for the first time, they had risen from the depths to talk to me. Do you know who, mian? Those who had been buried when Shahjahanabad was built. Such is the tradition of building a city. The British are building a new city now, so we have no choice but to go beneath the earth. It won't be so bad, mian, we will lie there with our arms around each other.

What would I do in the new city of the British, Manto bhai? Our city and theirs were different. You will see very few straight and wide avenues in the cities built in our country. Here we had a profusion of lanes, and clusters of mohallas around those lanes. There was a different sense of life behind this sort of

urban planning. We wanted to live near one another. The lanes allowed us to walk unhurriedly, stopping for pleasant conversations, for a smoke in our neighbours' balconies, for unexpected glimpses of beautiful women in windows out of the corners of our eyes; fruit sellers and flower sellers and kulfi sellers walked alongside us. These paths were not just for walking; you could call them a sort of gathering place, where neighbours as well as strangers could meet. The new city that the British were building was meant to keep watch over us. All the houses and shops in the extended area around the Jama Masjid were demolished. The Dar-ul-Bakao made by Arzuda was razed to the ground. Literature, medicine and religion used to be taught here free of cost. But what need did they have of our literature or medicine or religion? The lord was merciful; I had become hard of hearing. Otherwise my head would have been filled with nothing but the noise of demolition.

Sitting amidst those ruins, I could no longer touch ghazals, Manto bhai. I, was it I who wrote ghazals once? I would be overcome by confusion when I pondered over things. There was no comfort either in Ibn Sina's philosophy or in Naziri's poetry. All of it was meaningless—all poetry, empire, philosophy—none of it made any difference. Nothing was more important than living happily. The Hindus had their avatars; the Muslims, their prophets—what difference did they make? I wrote to Hargopal Tafta, it doesn't matter whether you become famous or remain obscure. To live, eat, and dress well are the only things that count. Art is actually an execution ground, Tafta, where you're both judge and executioner. Release me from this web of illusion, my lord. All these years, I have shed my own blood, the blood of my dearest ones; and this blood has reddened the flowerbed of my art. I support you, Jahanpanah Aurangzeb. Destroy all the paintings and sculptures—throttle Mian Tansen—behead Mir Taqi Mir—what will we do with all this illusion? In my darkened room I could recognize nothing, Manto bhai. Not the world around me—not anyone. Even if someone were to pronounce my names along with Sadi's or Hafiz sahib's, how would it matter? I lived only like a persecuted street dog.

Muslims were nothing but stray dogs to them. Sometime after they had captured Dilli, Hindus were allowed to return to the city, but not Muslims. They were given permission much later. Women and children from aristocratic families were begging on the streets then, Manto bhai. The begums from the fort, whose faces were once as radiant as the moon, now wandered about in rags, muttering to themselves and giggling. On the road to my death I saw these destroyed people, the living dead. And I prayed to the lord, take me to my grave. Put aside a sheet of cloth to cover me, keep my kafan safe.

One day I slumped to the ground in the front yard of Jama Masjid. I couldn't breathe; I thought my final moment had arrived. I could make out clearly, Manto bhai, that its shadow was on the door. I sat upright in bed every midnight. In my sleep there was only death and more death. Corpses hanging from rows of trees. I would wake up with the pain of a dagger plunged into the left side of my chest. I would be afraid, what if my heart stopped beating this very moment? Have mercy on me, O Lord, send death now, I would say this to myself all the time. But why then did I wake up in fear, why did I clutch the left side of my chest and wait for dawn? As I panted in the courtyard of Jama Masjid, my mian barked.

— Woof … woof

— Let me rest a bit, mian. Woof … woof …

— Resting already? There's so much more to see, Mirza sahib.

— Woof … woof. Go away, mian. I shan't walk the road to death anymore.

— Very well, listen to some poetry then. Woof … woof …

— I don't give a damn for poetry.

— Woof … woof. You mustn't curse what you love, Mirza sahib. I know you never loved anything or anyone besides poetry.

— I loved nothing? Loved no one?

— No. No one. You saw the form and beauty of this world only in words, Mirza sahib. Words were the only flesh and blood for you. I shall recite your final poem to you, listen.

— My final poem?

— Woof … woof. Which will be written a century later.

— Recite it then, mian.

— Woof … woof. How well poetry travels through centuries, does it not, Mirza sahib?

Sitting still, my Dharmaraj mian looked at the spire of the Jama Masjid and began to recite:

Here I kneel towards the west now
Spring has arrived empty-handed today
Destroy me if your will so desires
Let my descendants remain in my dreams.
Where has his transparent youth vanished
Where does decay gnaw away furtively
Abject defeat in the corner of my eye
Pours poison in my arteries, lungs and veins.
Let the azan from a grey emptiness
Awaken the extremities of the city
Turn me to stone, make me quiet, still
Let my descendants remain in my dreams.
Or is there no relief for the future
In the germs of sin that my body bears?
In celebrating my own barbaric win
I summon death to my own house.
Or do the flashing lights in the palace
Burn all my bones, even my heart,
And allow a million foolish worms
To find a home deep within my frame?
You have endowed me with many things
Where will you put me when I'm in ruins
It's better that you destroy me, oh God
Let my descendants remain in my dreams.

But I had no dreams left, Manto bhai. The British had minced all my dreams and made meatballs out of them. When I returned home that day I found a group of people outside my house, and Umrao Begum standing in the veranda. She broke down in tears when she saw me. 'Mirza sahib …'

— What's the matter, Begum?

— Kallu …

— What has that swine Kallu done?

After all these years, Kallu had left us, my brothers. How could he have survived, after all? Who was going to tell him stories? So Kallu fell asleep, a line of froth trickling from his mouth. Running my hand across his forehead, I called, 'Kallu … my son …'

— Huzoor …

— Don't call me huzoor, Kallu. You're my father … you're my son … where did it hurt, Kallu?

— Where did all the dastangos disappear, huzoor?

— But I used to tell you so many dastans, Kallu.

— Forgive me, huzoor, but your dastans were colourless.

— You want colour? Come, take my hand.

— Where will you take me, huzoor?

— To the court of Emperor Solomon.

— Mashallah!

— Can you see the light flashing off all those pearls and diamonds and rubies and sapphires?

— Yes, huzoor. So much light … so much light … my release is in all this light, huzoor. *Amaar mukti aloye aloye*. I could see just such lights in stories, huzoor.

— There, see how the court poet Shahed has flung himself at the emperor's feet. He doesn't know what to say—his speech is garbled.

Solomon asked, 'What's the matter with you? Why are you so distraught?'

Shahed's lips were blue with fear. 'Save me, emperor,' he said, his voice quavering.

— What's wrong? Who wants to kill you?

— The wind, Jahanpanah … the same wind everywhere … so cold … piercing my chest, my stomach, my eyes, like a knife … it won't let me survive.

— Who?

— Israfel, emperor. I saw him as I was coming to your court. His face was covered in black. His eyes pierced me like a dagger. Save me from Israfel's breath, Jahanpanah. I have so much left to do. I don't want to die yet.

— What do you want me to do?

— The wind is your slave.

— Hmm.

— Tell it to carry me to India. I will live on the other side of the ocean, far from Israfel.

— So be it.

Emperor Solomon summoned the wind. He ordered it to take his favourite poet across the mountains and the seas to the remote forests of the Himalayas.

The next day the emperor spotted Israfel among the crowd in his court. Summoning the angel of death, he asked, 'Did you frighten my favourite poet yesterday?'

— No, emperor. I was surprised to see the poet Shahed. The lord had ordered me to take him to India by the very next day. So I thought, the poet will not be able to reach in a day even with wings. So …

— Huzoor … Kallu opened his eyes to look at me.

— Yes, Kallu.

— Which country is this, huzoor?

— India.

— Salaam aleikum, huzoor. Kallu shut his eyes again.

Having laid Kallu in his grave, I returned to my tiny room. It was like sitting under a starless sky. I didn't even realize when Begum entered. When I heard the sound of weeping, I asked, 'Who is it?'

— It's me, Mirza sahib.

— Umrao … what is it … you haven't slept yet?

— Nor have you.

— Do you want to say something?

— Come, let us leave this country.

— And go where?

— You decide.

— There's nowhere to go besides the grave, Begum. Only the lord knows when he will summon each of us. You just have to dream for a few days till then, Begum. That you're still in Shahjahanabad. Listen carefully—there's Mian Tansen's invitation wafting in from Fatehpur Sikri …

It was raining. My Dharmaraj mian was whimpering as he got soaked.

Have pity on me, Manto bhai, let me sleep now for the last time. God is merciful. Allah meherban.

ہم نے بہشت عقدۂ بزمِ جہاں میں جو شمع
شعلۂ عشق کو اپنا سر و سماں سمجھا

In this terribly empty gathering of the world, I consider
The flame of love, like a lamp, is all I have

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یہ لاش بے کفن اسد خستہ جاں کی ہے
حق مغفرت کرے،عجب آزاد مرد تھا

This shroudless corpse is indeed the heartbroken Asad's
May God forgive him, his will was far too free

For three months after I reached Lahore, my mind was in a whirl, Mirza sahib. Sometimes I felt as though I was still in Bombay; sometimes as though I was at my friend Hasan Abbas's house in Karachi; and at other times it seemed like Lahore after all. Every hotel in Lahore used to host music and dance performances at the time to collect money for Quaid-e-Azam Jinnah's fund. I could not determine what I should do. A sandstorm seemed to be raging in the desert that was my head. Like a tangled montage of scenes on a giant cinema screen. One moment, Bombay's markets and roads were visible, dissolving into the small trams and donkey-carts on Karachi's narrow streets; the very next moment, one of Lahore's riotous bars came into view. Where was I, exactly? Sitting in my chair like an Egyptian mummy, I was tossed about by waves of thoughts. 'How long will you stay cooped up at home like this, Manto sahib?'

— But where should I go?

— You have to get a job. How will we survive otherwise?

— Who will give me a job, Shafia?

— If you could start visiting the industry people … By 'industry' she was referring to the Lahore film industry. Shafia didn't know that the Lahore film industry was not worth its name at the time. Many film companies were heard of, they even had some sort of offices; but they had nothing to show besides the signboard outside. Producers used to brag of making films worth lakhs of rupees, setting up offices and hiring furniture for them, and then they'd disappear without even paying their bills at the small restaurants nearby. Each of them was a cheat. How could I expect those who lived on borrowed money to give me a job? But I really did need to work. The money I had brought from Bombay was almost exhausted. It wasn't just household expenses; I had to pay for the liquor at Clifton Bar too. Gradually I realized that I was indeed in Lahore, and that I would have to spend the rest of my life in this same chaotic Lahore. Not just the refugees, but also those who had not actually moved from India were involved in the racket of acquiring a shop or a factory with a trumped-up story. Many people advised me to take this opportunity and get something for myself. I couldn't bring myself to join the gang of robbers, Mirza sahib. Here the country had been partitioned because of misguided politics, and was I supposed to cash in on this and become a rich man overnight? It wasn't possible to stoop so low. I had never seen such an atmosphere of uncertainty. If a man here smiled, another one was smothered in

sighs of despair over there. The price of one man's survival was another's death. On the roads we could hear slogans, Pakistan zindabad, Quaid-e-Azam zindabad—long live Pakistan; long live Muhammad Ali Jinnah; and within those slogans I could hear smothered sobs. It wasn't just people who wept, but also the birds and the trees. The refugees who had found no home but the streets stripped the bark off trees and lit fires with them on winter nights; how else were they to live? Hundreds of trees and branches were chopped down to be used as kindling for stoves. Only bare trees could be seen on the streets of Lahore—if you paid just a little attention, you could hear them crying. The houses all seemed dark with grief. People's faces looked as though the blood had been sucked out of their bodies—paper figures, all of them.

I would either sit at home in a chair like a marionette, or wander about the streets of Lahore like a vagabond. I would observe the expressions on people's faces and listen to their conversations. Yes, I would listen closely, devouring their discussions on their gains and losses, how their dreams had been shattered, even their nonsense. As I walked around and listened to people talk, the smog that had gathered in my mind lifted. The words and sentences that floated about, the warmth clinging to their bodies, the sobs that had dried into sighs, all percolated into me; when I returned home and sat in silence, these words and sentences tried to emerge. I felt as though every pore on my skin would burst—they—the words—were trying to force their way out in rage and misery and hatred—all lost words actually want to reach someone, Mirza sahib. It seemed that they wanted to live their migrant life through me.

I resumed writing gradually. I didn't have much choice anyway. There was no film industry to supply stories with to make a living. So it was down to whatever I could make writing for newspapers and magazines. I used to hire a tonga for the day and go out. You could call me a peddler of stories. Asking the tonga to wait outside the newspaper office, I'd go inside and start writing my story. Stories served hot for instant cash. Then off to another newspaper or magazine office. This one wants a piece of satire; I sit down to write it out. Tuck the money into my pocket and off again in the tonga. I never did count my earnings; it wasn't in my nature. If I made a reasonable amount of money, the first requirement was a drink, after which the rest went into household expenses.

When I moved to Lahore my drinking went out of control, Mirza sahib. Without any friends anywhere, the days ahead loomed dark. If I died my wife and family would have to take to the streets. Every now and then came the trance that made me think I was still in Bombay. I had expected Pakistan to give me the respect due to me as a writer; I had moved from India thinking of Pakistan as my own country. But soon I realized that they thought me nothing better than a stray dog. I wished I could be in an alcoholic haze all the time, alone on a hillock engulfed by fog. Besides the hours I needed to stay awake to write, there was nothing that could bring more peace than being sunk in a drunken stupor. Hundreds of people used to appear in this stupor—indistinct shadows, all of them—I lived like a haunted house. I used to talk incessantly with these shadow men. Shafia would shake me awake, destroying my reveries. As soon as the stupor left me my body would crave liquor according to its own compulsions. My madness would be further heightened. Shafia left no stone unturned in trying to release me from this alcoholic cycle. And the more she tried, the more I resorted to new ruses to get back into my world of drunkenness. I gathered a few pals; I was aware that they had no idea of Manto the writer; we were just drinking partners. When I had no money they were the ones who bailed me out, so how could I abandon them? Excessive drinking had pushed both mind and body into a corner, infuriating me when anyone offered sage advice. Ahmed Nadim Kasimi tried to persuade me many times to stop; for some time I heard him out in silence, but finally I grew furious and told him one day, 'You're my friend, Kasimi, not a mullah from a mosque who's responsible for my moral character.' Kasimi didn't

try to reform me again. I had a couple of old friends in Lahore, but they began to drift away from me too. My extended family wouldn't even talk to me, walking away when they saw me. Oh hell, there's Manto—let's get away—the bastard will ask for a loan again. Yes, that was how low I'd stooped. How much did I make from writing anyway? I needed money for my drink every day, after all. I'd try to borrow money from anyone I ran into, sometimes lying that Shafia was ill, at other times that my daughters were sick. I was aware of the bottomless depths that my addiction was leading me into, but this blind dependency was beyond my control now. I couldn't stay calm unless I had alcohol inside me, my hands and feet trembled, my temper grew even fouler.

I played my dirtiest trick when my eldest daughter Nighat had typhoid. Borrowing some money from a relation for medicine, I returned home with a bottle of whisky instead of pills for my daughter. Normally Shafia screamed and shouted when this happened, but she didn't say a word this time. She looked at me with empty eyes for a long time, and then left a glass of water for me before leaving the room. I could hear Nighat's fevered moans from the next room. As soon as I drank a sip of the whisky, neat, I vomited. In the next room I found Shafia putting cold compresses on Nighat's forehead. Grasping her feet, I said, 'Forgive me.'

— She has a very high temperature. Go to your room, Manto sahib.

— No. Forgive me. I swear by Nighat not to drink again.

— How many more oaths will you take, Manto sahib?

— Believe me … This time, really … I'll start afresh, Shafia. Calmly Shafia said, 'My energies are exhausted, Manto sahib.'

— Believe me this last time, Shafia. You know how determined I can be. I can do anything if I try hard enough.

Shafia smiled. —Very well. Go to bed now.

I sat down by Nighat, running my fingers through her hair. I wanted to hold her, kiss her. I was dying of shame, what kind of father was I to use the money for my daughter's medicine to buy whisky? Forgive me, Nighat, beti. I wanted to draw her into my arms, but I did not have the strength anymore. Eventually Shafia began to pull me away, yelling, 'Haven't you caused enough harm already? Leave the girl alone, Manto sahib.'

— No. I'm going to spend the night by her side.

— Nighat's going to get worse if you behave this way.

— She's my daughter … I want to …

— Have mercy, Manto sahib. We are not your playthings. What do you think of yourself? You'd better kill all four of us instead.

Some people came into the room, drawn by the loud voices. Hamid's wife merely said, 'That's enough, chachaji. This isn't one of your drinking dens. Go away to your room.'

For the first time in my life, someone had dared to look me in the eye and speak to me like this, Mirza sahib. I was unable to retort. Coiling up in my shell like a snail, I returned to my room. I didn't have the willpower to respond. Not humiliation, nor self-loathing—I felt as though I had nothing to fall back on. I had handed them the weapons to wound me with. I decided that I really wouldn't drink anymore; I would have to start afresh in Lahore, run my household as efficiently as I did in Bombay.

The next morning I started with the household chores. I swept and swabbed every single room with my own hands, dusted the cobwebs on the walls and furniture. One of the chairs had a broken leg; I repaired it. I sold all the old documents and liquor bottles that had gathered. In the veranda I strung up a swing for the children. I bought a cage full of colourful birds at the bazaar. Nuzhat and Nusrat—my

two younger daughters— ran up to me and hugged me. Their eyes were shining like stars. I wept, Mirza sahib. These two little girls could be so happy with such small things, but I had never noticed it in my drunken haze.

Shafia came and asked in a sombre tone, 'What is this new madness, Manto sahib?'

— How can a home be built without birds, Shafia?

— Whose home are you talking about, Manto sahib?

— Why, ours, of course, Shafia. Why should I try to build someone else's home?

— You want to build the home? So that you can destroy it all over again?

Gripping Shafia's hand, I said, 'Have faith in me this one last time, Shafia. And help me a little. I will build a home for us once more.'

— I have survived all this time only out of my faith in you, Manto sahib. Or else I'd have committed suicide long ago.

— Shame, Shafia. Don't forget you have three daughters.

— Aren't they your daughters too?

— Trust in me, Shafia; those nightmarish days will never return.

For some time I led a completely different life. I was very weak because I wasn't drinking, for which I got vitamins and tonics. It wasn't just our family, but everyone else around us who also joined the celebrations. Manto has given up drinking—no news could be sweeter for all of them. Not that any of them could quite believe it. This had happened several times before. This time too, Manto broke everyone's trust. He got back together with his drinking pals in just a few days. The bottle re-entered the house. I could make out that my dependence on alcohol had reached an extreme point. I couldn't write a word on the days I didn't drink. And if I didn't write, how were the expenses to be met? Survive or perish—alcohol became my final refuge, Mirza sahib.

I had come to Pakistan with such hope. Many questions were connected with this optimism. Would the new nation of Pakistan have a different literature of its own? If it did, what form would it take? Which of the two nations was the legitimate owner of the literature that had been composed in undivided India? Would this literature also be split into two? Would Urdu be utterly destroyed across the border? For that matter, what form would the language take in Pakistan? Would ours be an Islamic nation? Would we be able to remain faithful to the nation but still criticize the government? Would we have better lives than under the British? I did not get the answers to these questions, Mirza sahib. How could someone who ran his household by peddling stories afford the time to think about such weighty matters? Moreover, the Pakistan government was perpetually out to get me. There were charges of obscenity and fines for my stories 'Thanda Gosht' and 'Upar, Neeche, aur Darmiyan'–'Upstairs, Downstairs, and In Between'. Many writers and intellectuals of Pakistan wanted me to be imprisoned and taught a severe lesson. Regular appearances in court, continuous cross-questioning … I couldn't take such pressure anymore, Mirza sahib. Drinking caused me pain, but so did abstinence. The doctor had declared that my liver was close to collapsing—my brain wasn't functioning properly anymore either—I had no other option but suicide. Still, I did give up drinking a countless number of times. And fell even more severely ill each time. Once, Shafia asked, 'Do you really want to give up drinking, Manto sahib?'

— There can be no bigger release in my life, Shafia.

— Then will you listen to what I say?

— Tell me.

— You need treatment for some time.

— Where?

— You will have to be admitted to the ward for alcoholics at the Punjab Mental Hospital. They will definitely cure you. You won't feel the desire to drink again.

— Are you sure?

— Many people have been cured, Manto sahib.

— All right. I'll admit myself. Call Hamid.

When Hamid appeared I told him, 'Make arrangements for my admission to the hospital, Hamid. As quickly as possible.'

Hamid made all the arrangements the very next day. However, I had to run away before they could take me to the hospital. I was told that the hospital superintendent's fee was thirty-two rupees. The money had to be collected. I took some advances from a couple of magazines, on the condition that I would deliver stories to them when I was released from the hospital. I borrowed some more money from one or two other people and came back home. They had thought that I had fled in order to avoid being hospitalized. But I was indeed admitted to the hospital. The first few days were terrible. A demon used to stir inside my body, demanding sustenance. But six weeks later, it was a different Manto who walked out of the hospital. My body was ravaged, it was true, but still my former sheen seemed to be in evidence. Believe me, my brothers, I didn't drink for eight whole months after this. And besides a string of stories, I wrote all kinds of other things as well.

One day I told Shafia, 'I've recovered. Let's go away from Pakistan now.'

— Go where, Manto sahib?'

— To Bombay.

— You cannot forget Bombay, can you?

— Bombay is my second birthplace, Shafia.

— Who will give you a job in Bombay?

— Let me write to Ismat … I'm sure she can arrange something in Bombay.

— Ismat behen doesn't enquire after you, Manto Sahib.

— She lives in her own world. She'll definitely respond if I return to Bombay. You're ready to go, aren't you?

— I'll go wherever you go.

I wrote to Ismat at once—I want to return to Bombay. I want to stay in India. Make arrangements for me, Ismat. So that all of us can go back. I am absolutely fine now. If you can find a job for me with a studio, we can spend our lives together again, all of us.

I wrote to Ismat twice or thrice more. She didn't answer. Did Ismat believe till the end that I was an opportunist who had moved to Pakistan to look after his own interests? Or perhaps she had come to know that alcohol had consumed me completely, that I had no way of returning. But I waited for her letter every single day. My drinking also intensified in proportion. I passed the days in a drunken haze, holding conversations with the characters from my stories.

Yes Mirza sahib, I was dying, consciously dying a little every day. I lacked the courage to kill myself by putting a noose round my neck or taking poison or slitting my veins. I used to love myself and Shafia and our three daughters madly. So I chose the path of slow poisoning. I had no wish to stay alive in a country that had heaped nothing but calumny and condemnation on me. And I was only too aware of the burden I was becoming on my family with every passing day. Neither hatred nor pity—they did not

even consider me a human being anymore.

One night in my sleep I heard someone whispering to me, 'Manto bhai, Manto bhai …'

I opened my eyes to find Ismat at my bedside, crunching an ice cream bar between her teeth and smiling.

— When did you come, Ismat behen?

— Ages ago. I've been trying to wake you all this time.

— Where's Shahid? Hasn't he come.

— Of course he has. Get dressed quickly.

— For what?

— You're going to Bombay.

— Bombay! I leapt out of bed. —Have you fixed up a job for me?

— You bet!

— Shafia … Shafia … I shouted. —Come quickly, Shafia. Didn't I tell you Ismat couldn't possibly ignore my letters?

Shafia came and put her arms around me. —What is it, Manto sahib? Did you have a bad dream?

— Give Ismat some nashta-paani. Where's Shahid? Call him.

— Where's Ismat, Manto sahib?

— Here she is … Right here … Where did she go? She must be hiding in your room, Shafia.

Shafia clasped me to her breast like a baby. Running her fingers through my hair, she made me lie down again. —Go to sleep, Manto sahib, go to sleep. Her fingers played like a feather all over me.

I woke up early next morning. The strains of a Punjabi folk song I had heard long ago wafted in from somewhere. I found Shafia asleep near my feet. Her face was glowing, as though she had been born only this morning. The Partition had not cast a shadow on it; it was not spattered with blood from the riots. She was a sleeping maiden in a Pahadi painting; a new world was being born around her. The sky, the water, the air, the clouds, the flying cranes, the deer and does—a celebration was underway in my room.

Suddenly my belly churned and vomit gushed out. A stream of blood spread across the bluish-yellow water in the bathroom sink. And then there was nothing but blood. I was startled when I rinsed my mouth out and looked at myself in the mirror, Mirza sahib. Who was this? Was it Saadat Hasan Manto, or was it Death himself? I patted his back. 'You've won this time, Manto. Just hang on by the skin of your teeth for a few days more.'

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Manto's pen will stop now, my companion, my reader. Mirza sahib is sunk in deep sleep. What else does he have left to say? The death of the tehzeeb that came with the death of Shahjahanabad also marked the end of Mirza Ghalib. The next twelve years were just a question of surviving, alive but lifeless. Afflicted by disease and old age, unable to walk, hard of hearing, his vision dim, his memory fading. I do not want to write about this ruin anymore. Now it only remains to wait for the day when I will say 'Khudahafiz' and take your leave.

But I want to tell you about my dream last night before I go. I was strolling outside the Jama Masjid. Suddenly someone came up to me and grasped my arm. Looking up, I saw it was Kallu.

— What are you doing here, Manto bhai?

— Do you know me?

— How could I not? Kallu smiled. 'I've been hearing so many stories from you and Mirza sahib from my grave.'

— From your grave?

— You were in your grave too, Manto bhai, don't you remember?

— But I'm not dead yet, Kallu.

— Really? Kallu scratched his head. 'I must have dreamt it then.'

— Dreamt? But you're dead, Kallu …

— So what, Manto bhai?

— Do dead men dream?

— You bet they do. Do you know how many dreams are floating about in this world? There are more dreams than people on earth. That's why they possess dead men as well. Would you like to hear a story, Manto bhai?

— A story? Who's telling stories here?

— Oh I come here every day. And I inevitably find a dastango. There he is …

— Who?

— That man there, wrapped in a blanket, he's a wandering storyteller.

— How do you know, Kallu?

— See for yourself—he can't stop laughing to himself. Do you know why? People who have stories bursting out of them just cannot stop laughing. Come, come with me.

Going up to the man, Kallu sat down in front of him.

— Mian …

— Who is it? Glancing at Kallu, the man smiled. Oh, it's Kallu mian …

— You know who I am, mian?

— Is there anyone in the whole wide world who doesn't know you? Damned Kallu Qissakhor, Kallu the story addict.

Kallu burst out laughing. Tugging at my arm, he said, 'Sit down here, Manto bhai, sit down.'

— I see you're famous, Kallu. I chuckled.

Turning to me, the man in the blanket said, 'How many people really know how to listen to stories, janab? Some scratch their ears, others finger their arse. Their eyes wander. There's an etiquette to listening to a story. Just as you trust in the lord, so too must you trust in the story and keep listening. I wander about on the road, I look for an audience, but no one has the time these days for stories. The world has become far too violent, janab. No one understands that stories can restore peace to the heart.

— Then start, mian. Kallu spoke excitedly.

— Don't rush me, Kallu mian. Give me time to turn over the pages of my heart. How will telling a story make me happy unless I'm fulfilled by it?

For a long time the man sat with his head bowed, muttering to himself, and crooning softly. Then he said with a smile, 'The story of the shaikh will go down well today. This is a story about the search for the eye that lies within the heart.'

He remained sitting with his eyes shut for a few moments, and then began his tale.

A shaikh had lost both his sons to illness. But no one had ever seen him weep or grieve for his children. He went to work punctually every day, even hummed to himself at work, and laughed and joked with everyone when he returned home. The shaikh's mother and wife grew increasingly surprised at this behaviour. One morning, when the shaikh was at breakfast, his mother exclaimed, 'Can you imagine the state we're in, beta, after losing two of our boys? Our hearts bleed constantly. Have you even looked at your wife lately? She's wilting by the day. You go to work as usual every day, as though nothing has happened …' The shaikh's mother broke down in tears.

His wife burst out in anger too. 'Do you even have a heart? I haven't seen you shed a single tear. How could you have behaved this way if you'd really loved your children? As though nothing has changed … as though they're still alive …'

— Nothing has actually changed, bibijaan. The boys are alive within me. I see them all the time.

— And I look for them everywhere. I cannot sleep nights. 'We're cold, ammi,' they cry to me. 'We're so hungry. Take us inside.' Why can't I see them?

— Look for them with the eye within your heart, bibijaan, you're bound to find them.

— You're blind in that eye. You cannot see anything with it.

— No, I'm not. We don't see things properly with our eyes. We see them differently. To me it's all the same. I see my children all the time. They play here, around me.

— Where? Show me. I cannot see them.

— They cannot be seen with our eyes. Have you ever seen the wild plants that lean over the water? Our senses are like those plants. You can see only if you move them aside. Shut your eyes and imagine what cannot be seen. Your sons will appear and hold you, bibijaan.

— My heart is emptied out, janab. Your beautiful words cannot fill it again. The shaikh's wife wept and beat her breast.

The shaikh's mother said, 'We cannot understand the eye you're talking about, beta, don't try to

comfort us with mere words.'

The shaikh was silent for a long time. His initial irritation with his wife and mother gave way to unhappiness. He was not capable of dispelling their grief. They had accepted the separation as the truth. The shaikh began to tell them a story.

— Let me tell you about a woman. Each of her children died within a few months of birth.

— But our boys lived for several years, his mother interjected.

— And the woman? Asked the shaikh's wife. —She must have died of grief. I want to die too, but death won't take me.

— The woman lost twenty children. Not two but twenty. She used to wander around the streets, cursing the lord. Then something strange happened one night.

— What?

— In her dream the woman was crossing a desert. Blood streamed from her stomach, soaking the sand. She arrived at a tiny door. Entering, she went into a narrow passage, like a womb, which brought her to an astounding new world. She saw the fountain of eternal life, with the river of heaven flowing through the garden. The plants in this garden never died. Not everyone had seen this garden. Only those who believed it existed could actually see it. All the world's celebrations of joy took place in this garden.

'It's all your dream,' screamed the shaikh's wife. 'There's no such garden anywhere.'

— This garden has no name, its loveliness cannot even be described. But still, it does exist in this world, bibijaan.

— Tell us what happened to the woman. What did she get in the garden after losing all her children?

— She waded into the river of heaven. All her unhappiness and doubts were swept away at once like dirt. As she bathed in the river, she heard her children laugh. Truly, believe me, her children swam about her, laughing. A torrent of happiness coursed through the woman's heart.

— Take me to this place, then. Tell me how to get there.

— Think of the fakirs of this world, bibijaan. They have no complaints about the things that happen in their lives. Allah will give them more than he has taken from them. They have to follow the path that he leads them to.

— How will we take this difficult road?

— It isn't easy. Even Dakuki was beset by doubts.

— Who's Dakuki?

— Then listen to the stories of the travellers who accept everything that happens on the way.

— Tell us, my son, your stories are making our hearts lighter. The shaikh's wife began to eat some bread.

— Dakuki was a pilgrim. He was always on the move from one place to another. He would never settle down anywhere or with anyone.

— How strange! Can anyone actually be this way?

— But he did have one weakness.

— For his children? The shaikh's wife asked.

— No, for fakirs. How he was drawn to them! Through them he could see the universe in a grain. It was the fakirs who had told him that the lord resides within human beings. There was no place Dakuki did not visit in his search for fakirs. His feet would bleed as he tramped along. When people asked, how

will you cross the desert on bleeding feet, Dakuki would say with a smile, that's nothing.

— And then?

— One evening Dakuki arrived at the seashore. He saw seven candles glowing in the distance, taller than even the palm trees. The whole place was full of light. Walking towards the candles, Dakuki arrived at a village. The villagers were wandering about on the roads with lamps without any oil in them.

— What's the matter? Dakuki asked one of them.

— Can't you see? Our lamps have no oil, no wicks. We don't have food for our bellies either.

— But just look around you. The sky is full of light. Can't you see those seven candles there? The lord gives us light on his own.

— What light? The sky is completely dark, where do you see any light? You're mad.

Dakuki looked at the man closely. Although his eyes were open, they were actually stitched up. It was the same with everyone else. Their eyes were open, but shut.

As soon as the sun rose the seven candles turned into seven trees. When the desert grew hot, Dakuki sat in the shade of the trees, plucking their fruit to eat them. He saw that the villagers had made canopies with tattered clothes to protect themselves from the sun. Calling out to them, Dakuki said, 'Why don't you come and sit here in the shade of the trees? Can't you see the fruits? They will quench your hunger and your thirst.'

— We can't see anything. What trees? It's all a desert here. Are you making fools of us? We shall leave this village at once.

— Where will you go?

— There's a ship anchored in the sea, we'll board it to go wherever we please.

— Listen to me, my brothers. You're all deceiving one another with lies.

— Shut up. Don't try to fool us with falsehoods. We have seen the trees too, but it's all a dream. We do not believe in it. We want to return to reality.

— Reality? What is reality? Hunger and thirst and the strong sun? The trees are full of fruits, can't you see?

— No. We're sure of finding a better place on the other side of the sea.

Dakuki was bewildered. He wondered, am I the one who's mad, then? So many people cannot be wrong. He went up to one of the trees and put his arms around it. 'I'm an imbecile, as you know,' he whispered into its ears. 'Don't you prefer my moistened madness to dry intelligence?'

Suddenly six of the trees lined up in a row and the seventh began to pray before them like a priest. Gradually the seven trees were transformed into seven humans. 'Dakuki!' they addressed him in unison.

— How did you know my name?

— Nothing can be kept from the heart that seeks Allah, Dakuki. We have a single heart. The heart of Allah. Don't search for a heart by yourself, Dakuki. Come, help us read the namaz now.

— I know nothing, huzoor. I'm worse than an ass.

— A pious ass like you is above everyone else.

The shaikh's wife had broken down in tears. 'Tell me where I can meet my son.'

— Wait a little longer, bibijaan.

— What happened to Dakuki, beta? The shaikh's mother asked him.

— As he read the namaz Dakuki could hear stricken wails in a multitude of voices. He opened his eyes to discover that the sea had turned turbulent in the moonlight. The ship was rolling and pitching

like flotsam on the waves. All the villagers were on it. They were screaming … Save us … Have mercy, O Lord … Save us … Suddenly the ship was split into two.

— Did they all die, beta?

— Dakuki's eyes were streaming with tears. Lifting his arms to the sky, he prayed, save them, Lord, forgive their ignorance, open their eyes, lead them to your heaven.

The shaikh broke down in tears. Stroking his back, his mother asked, 'They survived, didn't they, son?'

— Yes. The sea grew calm. They swam ashore.

For the first time in many weeks, the shaikh's wife ate a piece of bread and drank some water.

— And then? Asked the shaikh's mother.

— Looking at the sea, the seven men asked, 'And who played God with God?' Nobody but Dakuki, of course. With this, they disappeared into thin air. Dakuki continued wandering, now in search of his seven companions.

One night he saw the reflection of the full moon in a well by the road. Delirious with joy, he began to sing and dance. Suddenly a cloud covered the moon. The reflection vanished. Dakuki lay down by the well, rising to his feet after a long time. 'Idiot!' he began to shout. 'I'm an idiot! I am still taken in by reflections. Allah can give light even without a lamp. Why am I still searching for those seven men? How much longer will I remain distracted by external form? Give me the strength to think only of you, O Lord.'

Breaking the silence that the dastango had lapsed into, Kallu asked in excitement, 'And then?'

— What do you suppose?

— What happened to Dakuki?

— Everyone in the shaikh's family returned to their own tasks. Dakuki continued on his travels.

— Where will Dakuki go now?

— Where do you suppose? He was in my bag, and that's where he's returned. The dastango extracted a wooden puppet from the bag slung across his shoulder. —Look, mian, this is Dakuki.

— Who else do you have in your bag, mian?

— See for yourself, do you recognize who this is?

— Mirza sahib, huzoor.

— And this?

— Jahanpanah Bahadur Shah.

— This?

Kallu leapt up. 'Manto bhai … you … you … you have become a puppet too?'

Pulling out wooden puppets one after another from his bag, the dastango arranged them around the precincts of the mosque. In astonishment, I discovered that they were all characters from my novel *Dozakhnama*. The painted puppets glittered in the light. They had not been soiled by the heat and dust of history.

Allow Manto to bid you farewell now, my reader, my companion. Khudahafiz.

Ever since we finished Manto's novel, I keep thinking of a strange incident in Mian Tansen's life, Tabassum. Mian was an expert at Raga Bhairav. He used to sing its alaap only at the hour that Emperor Akbar awoke. To the emperor, Tansen was first among all the ustads. That's why the other ustads used to envy Tansen. Once, they decided to plot Tansen's death. They told the badshah, 'We have never

heard the Raga Deepak, Jahanpanah. We want to hear it. No one but Mian Tansen knows this raga.' The emperor had no inkling of the ustads' motive. He told Tansen, 'I wish to hear Raga Deepak, mian. Will you sing it for me?' Tansen said, 'Singing this raga will lead to my death, Jahanpanah.'

— Why?

— I cannot explain it to you.

— How can singing a raga cause one's death?

— I am telling you the truth, Jahanpanah.

— That's impossible, mian. You must sing Raga Deepak for us.

After much thought, Tansen asked for a fortnight's time. He knew that the blaze sparked by Raga Deepak—the fire of the melody—could roast its earthly singer. So someone would have to douse these flames with the cooling strains of a counter melody. While he sang Deepak, another musician would simultaneously have to invoke Raga Megh. Only then would Tansen survive. For a fortnight, Tansen trained his daughter Saraswati and Swami Haridas's disciple Rupabati to sing the Raga Megh.

Tansen went to the royal court on the morning of the appointed day. The place was teeming with people. Tansen started the preparations for singing Raga Deepak. Meanwhile, Saraswati and Rupabati did the same thing in their own home for Raga Megh. Tansen had instructed them to begin the alaap in Raga Megh as soon as he had completed his invocation to the Raga Deepak and begun singing.

After the prayers and invocations were over, Emperor Akbar arrived. Taking his permission, Tansen began singing Raga Deepak. Lamps were arranged all around the court. Tansen had said that he would stop singing as soon as the lamps lit up. No sooner had he started the alaap than everyone present felt as though a severe heat wave had descended on them. Tansen began to perspire too. His eyes grew bloodshot. Then his body began to burn, all the lamps in the court lit up—the flames spread in all directions. People fled in whichever direction possible. A half-roasted Tansen also began to flee in the direction of his own home.

Saraswati and Rupabati had just begun their alaap in Raga Megh. As soon as their song began, the skies of Dilli were overcast, a stormy wind sprang up, and then it began to rain torrentially. Tansen's burnt body was cooled.

In this novel Manto is like Mian Tansen's Raga Deepak, Tabassum. We have crossed successive rings of fire on this journey. Where are the Saraswatis and Rupabatis today, who can sing the Raga Megh to bathe Mirza's and Manto's scorched bodies and souls in the rain? My search for them is propelling me towards a new novel. It's titled *The Mystery of Radha*.

A Note on the Author

Rabisankar Bal is a Bangla novelist and short-story writer, with over fifteen novels, five short-story collections, one volume of poetry, and one volume of literary essays. He has edited a collection of Saadat Hasan Manto's writings translated into Bangla.

Born in 1962, he has been writing for over thirty years. His novel *The Biography of Midnight* won the West Bengal Government's Sutapa Roychowdhury Memorial Prize. *Dozakhnama*, acknowledged by the late doyen of Bengali literature Sunil Gangopadhyay as the finest novel of 2010, won the West Bengal Government's Bankimchandra Smriti Puraskar.

A journalist by profession, Bal lives in Kolkata and passionately follows literature, music, painting, and world cinema. His next novel is based on the life of the Sufi poet Jalaluddin Rumi, and told through the imagined eyes of Ibn Batuta.

A Note on the Translator

Arunava Sinha translates contemporary and classic Bengali fiction into English. *Dozakhnama* is his seventeenth published translation.

Born and educated in Kolkata, he lives in New Delhi.