

SA‘ADAT HASAN MANTO

## Upper, Lower, Middle\*

[My publisher refused to print this story, which made me squirm up, down, and in the middle quite a bit. The thing was that a lawsuit had been brought against it in Karachi and I was fined twenty-five rupees. To find some amends, I wanted to squeeze another twenty-five rupees out of my publisher, but he didn't give in. I fidgeted around a lot and somehow scraped together some funds to have this story published so that it might reach you. Surely you'll welcome it because you're my reader, not my publisher.

Signed: Sa‘adat Hasan Manto]

MIAN SAHIB: Ah, a chance to finally be together after quite a long time!

BEGAM SAHIBA: That's right.

MIAN SAHIB: Oh these umpteen responsibilities the nation expects me to shoulder ... I can't shirk them ... for the sake of our people. I can hardly breathe.

BEGAM SAHIBA: You know what your problem is—you're far too compassionate ... just like me.

MIAN SAHIB: Yes, yes, I'm kept abreast of your social activities. If you can find a free moment, do send me copies of the speeches you made on different occasions recently. I want to read them in my free time.

BEGAM SAHIBA: Well, all right, I will.

MIAN SAHIB: So, Begam, what about it ... I mean ... you know?

BEGAM SAHIBA: What about what?

MIAN SAHIB: Oh, maybe I didn't mention ... By chance, I ended up in our middle son's room yesterday. Would you believe it, he was reading *Lady Chatterley's Lover*.

BEGAM SAHIBA: That wretched book!

MIAN SAHIB: Yes, Begam.

BEGAM SAHIBA: So what did you do?

MIAN SAHIB: I snatched the book from his hand and hid it.

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\*“Ūpar, Ničē, Darmiyān,” from *Dastāvēz* (June 1982), 162–72.

BEGAM SAHIBA: You did the right thing.  
MIAN SAHIB: Now I'm thinking of talking to the doctor and have him change our son's diet.  
BEGAM SAHIBA: Exactly ... the thing to do.  
MIAN SAHIB: So how are you feeling these days?  
BEGAM SAHIBA: I'm fine.  
MIAN SAHIB: I was thinking ... to ask you.  
BEGAM SAHIBA: You're really becoming very naughty.  
MIAN SAHIB: All your doing ... your infinite charms.  
BEGAM SAHIBA: But your health?  
MIAN SAHIB: Health is good. Still I wouldn't do anything without consulting the doctor first. But I must also make sure you're fit as well.  
BEGAM SAHIBA: I'll ask Miss Sildhana today.  
MIAN SAHIB: And I'll ask Dr. Jalal.  
BEGAM SAHIBA: In principle, that's how it should be.  
MIAN SAHIB: What if Dr. Jalal says it's okay?  
BEGAM SAHIBA: And what if Miss Sildhana says it's okay! ... Anyway, you take care of yourself. Wrap the muffler securely around your neck. It's blis-  
tery cold outside.  
MIAN SAHIB: Thanks.

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DR. JALAL: Did you give her the green light?  
MISS SILDHANA: Yes.  
DR. JALAL: I also gave him permission ... but only to play with him a little bit.  
MISS SILDHANA: And I felt like not letting her have the go-ahead, just for fun.  
DR. JALAL: I kind of felt sorry for him.  
MISS SILDHANA: So did I.  
DR. JALAL: After holding back for a whole year he ...  
MISS SILDHANA: Yes, after a whole year.  
DR. JALAL: You know what? His pulse quickened as soon as I gave him the thumbs up.  
MISS SILDHANA: So did hers.  
DR. JALAL: He was afraid. He asked me, "Doctor, it seems as though my heart has gotten weaker ... won't you take my electrocardiogram?"  
MISS SILDHANA: And she asked for it too.  
DR. JALAL: Instead, I gave him a shot.  
MISS SILDHANA: So did I. A shot of only distilled water.  
DR. JALAL: Distilled water is perfect ... the best.  
MISS SILDHANA: Jalal, what if you were this Begam's husband?

DR. JALAL: And you this man's wife?  
 MISS SILDHANA: It would have ruined my character.  
 DR. JALAL: And it would have killed me.  
 MISS SILDHANA: People would also have taken it as a flaw in your character.  
 DR. JALAL: So what's new ... every time we visit these foolhardy socialites,  
 we damage our character.  
 MISS SILDHANA: It will be damaged today no less.  
 DR. JALAL: In fact, quite a bit.  
 MISS SILDHANA: But theirs take long intervals to spoil ... and that's the  
 problem.

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BEGAM SAHIBA: This thing, *Lady's Chatterley's Lover*, why is it lying under  
 your pillow?  
 MIAN SAHIB: I wanted to find out just how smutty it is.  
 BEGAM SAHIBA: Well then, I'll look at it along with you.  
 MIAN SAHIB: All right. I'll pick out passages at random and read them to you  
 ... you listen.  
 BEGAM SAHIBA: Suits me fine.  
 MIAN SAHIB: I've already changed our middle son's diet after consulting the  
 doctor.  
 BEGAM SAHIBA: I was sure you wouldn't be negligent about the matter.  
 MIAN SAHIB: I never put off until tomorrow what I can do today.  
 BEGAM SAHIBA: I know that ... especially the thing you have in mind for today.  
 MIAN SAHIB: You look very cheery today ...  
 BEGAM SAHIBA: Your charm, what else.  
 MIAN SAHIB: Oh, I'm very amused ... now, if I have your permission ...  
 BEGAM SAHIBA: Wait. Have you brushed your teeth?  
 MIAN SAHIB: Yes, I have. I even rinsed my mouth with Detrol.  
 BEGAM SAHIBA: I did too.  
 MIAN SAHIB: The fact is: we're made just for each other.  
 BEGAM SAHIBA: No doubt about it.  
 MIAN SAHIB: So now, may I start reading from this wretched book at random?  
 BEGAM SAHIBA: Hold on. First check my pulse.  
 MIAN SAHIB: It's a bit fast ... now check mine.  
 BEGAM SAHIBA: So is yours, a trifle fast.  
 MIAN SAHIB: I wonder why.  
 BEGAM SAHIBA: Your heart ailment ... what else.  
 MIAN SAHIB: Makes sense. That must be it ... but Dr. Jalal said that it's nothing  
 to worry about.

BEGAM SAHIBA: Miss Sildhana told me the same thing.  
MIAN SAHIB: Did she give the go-ahead after a thorough examination?  
BEGAM SAHIBA: Absolutely ... after a very thorough examination.  
MIAN SAHIB: In that case, I guess we can proceed.  
BEGAM SAHIBA: You know best ... Hope it won't have an adverse effect on  
your health ...  
MIAN SAHIB: Or on yours either.  
BEGAM SAHIBA: One should take a step only after long, hard deliberation ...  
MIAN SAHIB: Miss Sildhana has taken care of *that*, hasn't she?  
BEGAM SAHIBA: Of what? Oh yes—yes, of that she has.  
MIAN SAHIB: You mean, it's perfectly safe?  
BEGAM SAHIBA: Yes, it is.  
MIAN SAHIB: Okay, take my pulse again.  
BEGAM SAHIBA: It's normal... Now check mine.  
MIAN SAHIB: Yours is normal too.  
BEGAM SAHIBA: Read now, some passage from this dirty book.  
MIAN SAHIB: As you say. My pulse is jumping again.  
BEGAM SAHIBA: So is mine.  
MIAN SAHIB: Have you had the servants put the necessary stuff in the room?  
BEGAM SAHIBA: Yes. Everything is here.  
MIAN SAHIB: If you don't mind, please take my pulse again.  
BEGAM SAHIBA: Can't you take it yourself ... The stopwatch is handy.  
MIAN SAHIB: Yes, we should note it down too.  
BEGAM SAHIBA: Where are the smelling salts?  
MIAN SAHIB: Got to be with the rest of the stuff.  
BEGAM SAHIBA: Yes, they're there on the teapoy.  
MIAN SAHIB: I think we should raise the temperature in the room a bit.  
BEGAM SAHIBA: Yes, we should.  
MIAN SAHIB: If you see me growing faint, please don't forget to give me  
medicine.  
BEGAM SAHIBA: I will try if ...  
MIAN SAHIB: Yes, but otherwise, please don't bother.  
BEGAM SAHIBA: Read, read this whole page.  
MIAN SAHIB: Okay, listen ...  
BEGAM SAHIBA: What—you sneezed?  
MIAN SAHIB: Don't know why.  
BEGAM SAHIBA: I'm amazed.  
MIAN SAHIB: I no less.  
BEGAM SAHIBA: I know ... I lowered the thermostat instead of raising it. For-  
give me.  
MIAN SAHIB: I think it was good that I sneezed. It alerted us in time.

BEGAM SAHIBA: I really am very sorry.  
 MIAN SAHIB: Oh, don't worry. Twelve drops of brandy will take care of it.  
 BEGAM SAHIBA: Stop! Let me pour them out. You always mess up the count.  
 MIAN SAHIB: Very true. You pour.  
 BEGAM SAHIBA: Drink slowly ... very slowly.  
 MIAN SAHIB: This is slow enough.  
 BEGAM SAHIBA: So how do you feel now—better?  
 MIAN SAHIB: I'm getting there.  
 BEGAM SAHIBA: Maybe you should rest a little.  
 MIAN SAHIB: I was feeling the need for it myself.

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MALE SERVANT: What's the matter. No sign of Begam Sahib anywhere today.  
 MAID: She isn't feeling well.  
 MALE SERVANT: Mian Sahib isn't feeling well either.  
 MAID: We saw that coming—didn't we?  
 MALE SERVANT: Yes. But I'm at a loss to understand.  
 MAID: Understand what?  
 MALE SERVANT: These games Nature plays. We should have been on our deathbed<sup>1</sup> today instead.  
 MAID: What kind of talk is that? It's they who should be on their deathbeds.  
 MALE SERVANT: Now don't bring up their being on deathbeds ... that would be a marvelous sight to see. I'd be seized by this overwhelming desire to gather her into my arms and carry her into my little room.  
 MAID: Where are you going?  
 MALE SERVANT: To look for a carpenter ... that damned cot, its about to crumble.  
 MAID: Yes, of course. Tell him to use very sturdy wood this time. □

—*Translated by Mubammad Umar Memon*

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<sup>1</sup>Manto's use of the word is ironical. What is meant is the conjugal bed.—*Tr.*