

SA‘ADAT HASAN MANTO

## Turnips\*

“PLEASE HAVE THE SERVANT BRING MY LUNCH. I’m starving.”

“It’s 3:00 o’clock. Where will you get food at this hour?”

“So what if it’s 3:00 o’clock—I live here. I need to eat. After all, I must have some rights in this house.”

“Oh yeah, what rights? How many?”

“Since when have you started keeping track of such things—questioning me like this?”

“If I didn’t, this house wouldn’t have lasted this long.”

“Boy, you’re amazing! Now, will I get my lunch or not?”

“You can forget about lunch if you keep turning up at 3:00 in the afternoon day after day. Even in a restaurant you wouldn’t get dal-roti at this hour. I absolutely don’t like your habits.”

“What habits?”

“That you show up at 3:00. The food gets cold while I’m languishing away waiting for you, and only God knows where Your Majesty is loafing around.”

“Well, don’t people have work to do? In any case, I was a little bit late just two days.”

“You call it a little bit late? Every husband has to come home by 12:00 noon so that he’s fed by 1:00 o’clock. And besides, he should be submissive to his wife.”

“Shouldn’t he perhaps take a room in a hotel and live there. At least the attendants would all be at his beck and call.”

“Wouldn’t you love that? In fact you’re planning to take off any day. Well, you can leave now, right this minute.”

“Without having my meal?”

“Eat it at your hotel.”

“But just now you said I wouldn’t even get dal-roti in any restaurant at

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\*“Shaljam,” from the author’s collection *Manṭōrāmā* (Lahore: Saṅg-e Mīl Publications, 1990), 523–28.

this hour? How quickly you forget!"

"You know why, because I'm going nuts, or rather, being driven nuts."

"That's for sure. But who's driving you nuts?"

"You—who else? You've made my life a living hell. I have no peace during the day nor at night."

"Never mind the day. But why don't you have peace at night? You sleep like a log, without a care in the world, or, as the saying goes, like one who sleeps after selling his horses."

"Who can sleep after selling their horses? What a stupid saying."

"All right, it is stupid. But just a few days ago you sold not only the horse but also the tonga along with it. And how nicely you slept snoring away all night long."

"There was no need to keep the tonga after you'd bought me the car. And the accusation that I was snoring is total nonsense."

"Your Majesty, how can you know whether you were snoring when you were drowned in sleep? Your snoring kept me awake the whole night, believe me."

"Wrong, absolutely wrong. It's a vicious lie."

"Okay, for your sake, let's just say it's a lie. Now give me my food."

"Not today. Go to a hotel ... why, you can live there for the rest of your life for all I care."

"And you—what will you do?"

"Rest assured, I won't die without you."

"God forbid that you should die. But tell me, how will you support yourself without me."

"I'll sell my car."

"And how much will you get for it?"

"Six, maybe seven thousand, at least."

"How long will that feed you and your kids?"

"I don't splurge like you do. It will last me till the end of my days, and the children won't lack for anything either—you'll see."

"Well then, teach me this secret. I'm sure you've hit upon some mantra that doubles the amount. You pull out some bank notes from your wallet, whisper the mantra over them, and presto, they double."

"You ridicule me. Shame on you."

"Let's put this aside and give me my lunch."

"You won't get it."

"For heaven's sake, why? What have I done wrong?"

"If I started to count your wrongs and misdeeds, I'd be counting till I'm dead."

"Look Begam, you've gone overboard. If you don't give me my meal,

I'll burn down the house. For God's sake, here I am, dying of hunger; there you are rattling away with this nonsense. I had some pressing work to take care of yesterday and today, that's why I was late. You're accusing me of coming home late every day. Give me my food, or else ..."

"Don't you threaten me. You won't get food."

"This is my house. I'm free to come and go as I please. Who are you to impose these unbearable conditions on me? I'm telling you, this attitude of yours won't get you anywhere."

"Like your attitude has gotten me somewhere. This interminable vexation has reduced me to such a pitiable state."

"Some state—you've gained twelve pounds while your crabby temperament has ruined my health."

"What's wrong with your health?"

"Have you ever bothered to ask why I always look so tired? Or thought about why I huff and puff climbing stairs? Have you ever felt it in your heart to give me a little massage when my head is about to explode from pain? You're a strange life-mate. Had I known I would end up with a wife like you, I'd never have come anywhere near you."

"And I would have swallowed poison had I known I'd be saddled with a husband like you."

"Poison—you can swallow it now. Shall I go get some?"

"Yes, please."

"But first give me my lunch."

"For the umpteenth time, you won't get it today."

"But surely I will tomorrow, and every day after tomorrow because by then you'll be in the next world. Anyway, I can't go out for your poison on an empty stomach. Who knows, I might pass out and drop dead while driving. Looks as if I'll have to do something on my own to get some food."

"Like what?"

"I'll call the cook."

"You absolutely will do no such thing."

"Why?"

"Because I said so. You have no right to poke your nose into household matters."

"This is the limit. I can't even call the cook. Well then, the servant. Where is he?"

"In hell."

"Which is where I am now too. But I don't see him anywhere. Move aside, let me look for him. Who knows I might find him."

"What do you want to tell him?"

"Nothing—just that I'm letting him go and taking his place."

“You, taking his place? Wouldn’t that be the day?”

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“Salam, huzoor. Begam Sahib, the dish is ready. Shall I lay Sahib’s food on the table?”

“Beat it.”

“But Begam Sahib, the turnips you cooked this morning were burned because the flame was too high. Then you said Sahib would be coming late so I should quickly prepare some other dish. Well, I cooked two dishes in two hours. Now, if you like I can set the table. Both dishes are still on the stove; if left longer I fear they’ll be charred like your turnips. Okay, I’m going. Just let me know when you want me to set the table.”

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“Now I get it—that’s what all the fuss was about!”

“What fuss?—I roasted in the kitchen all that time ... and this means nothing to you. You love turnips, so I decided to cook some myself especially for you. I had the cookbook in my hands and I dozed off reading it. The damned turnips turned into charcoal. Where do you see my fault in all this?”

“No, of course not. No fault at all.”

“All right then, get up now. Let’s eat. The rats are gnawing at my stomach.”

“And there are alligators in mine.”

“Will you ever quit joking?”

“Joking or no joking, come over here. Let me have a look at your *turnips*. Let’s hope they haven’t turned into coals.”

“We’ll see about that after eating.” □

—Translated by Muhammad Umar Memon