

SA‘ADAT HASAN MANTO

Pleasure of Losing*

PEOPLE TAKE PLEASURE in winning. But he, well, it was losing that gave him the greater thrill, especially when it came in the wake of winning. Winning was easy enough, it was losing that made him sweat. Earlier, when he used to work in a bank, the thought came to him that he too should make piles of money. His relatives and friends pooh-poohed the idea though. Soon afterward he left for Bombay and, before long, he was sending wads of money to relatives and friends to help them financially.

Bombay was teeming with possibilities. He chose to go into films as they promised both money and fame. He could make a bundle in this world, and lose it just as easily. He’s still marching on in that world. He made thousands, indeed millions, and squandered all of it. Making it took no time at all, losing it did. He wrote the lyrics for a film and raked in a neat 100,000 rupees, but it took a long time to lose this stupendous sum—in prostitutes’ balconies, their pimps’ assemblies, in races and gambling dens.

One of his films yielded a tidy profit of one million. The big question then was how to squander this windfall. So he wittingly stumbled every step along the way. He bought not one but three cars, one brand new and two crummy old ones that he was absolutely sure were lemons. He left them outside the house to rot away, locking the new one in his garage on the pretext that petrol was hard to come by. So a taxi was the answer. You hailed one in the morning and had the cabbie pull up a mile or so down the way near one gambling place or another, emerging the next day after burning twenty or twenty-five hundred rupees. You took another taxi and went home, purposely forgetting to pay the fare so that when you came out in the evening the taxi would still be standing at the door. You yelled at the cabbie, “Wretched man, you’re still here. All right, let’s go to my office ... I’ll have them pay the fare.” But arriving at the office, you once again forget to pay, and ...

* “Hārtā Čalā Gayā,” from the author’s collection *Manṭō Kabāniyān* (Lahore: Saṅg-e Mīl Publications, 1995), 70–75.

Two or three of his films back to back turned out to be smashing hits and broke all records. He was swimming in money and his popularity soared sky-high, which pissed him off. So he purposely made a couple of films that failed miserably, indeed, so miserably that the failures became proverbial. In ruining himself, he had taken a few others along. But he wasn't one to give up. He put some zing into the sagging spirits of those he'd wrecked and made another film that proved to be a gold mine.

His relations with women followed the same pattern of loss and gain. He would pick up a prostitute from some song-and-dance soiree or some kotha, spend lavishly on spiffing her up, and catapult her to the height of fame. Then, after he'd sucked every ounce of womanhood out of her, he would deftly set up opportunities for her to ditch him for the embrace of some other man.

He would take on the biggest fat-cats and many handsome, amorous young men in a deathly struggle to win some beauty's favor and always came out ahead. He would plunge his hand into the thorniest bramble and pluck the blossom of his choice. He would stick that blossom into his lapel, only to gladly let his rival snatch it away.

Back when he was visiting a Faras Road gambling den every day for ten days in a row, he was obsessed with losing, despite the fact that he had just recently lost a very beautiful actress and kissed good-bye to a tidy million on a film. But his thirst for losing still wasn't quenched as both losses had come much too suddenly. This time around his calculations had obviously misfired. Perhaps this was the reason he was now cautiously losing a fixed amount every day in the Faras Road gambling establishment.

He would set out for Pawan Pul in the evening with two hundred rupees in his pocket. The taxi would drive along the line of prostitutes' display-windows, which had iron bars running horizontally across them, and halt some distance away by a utility pole. He would get out of the taxi, adjusting his heavy eyeglasses and arranging the front fold of his dhoti, and then, glancing to his right at the terribly ugly woman behind the iron bars busily doing her makeup as she sat in front of a broken mirror, he would climb up to the *baithak* (den).

He had been visiting this gambling den at Faras Road regularly for the last ten days, determined to lose two hundred rupees on every visit. Sometimes it took only a few hands to lose this amount, sometimes it took until the wee hours of the morning.

After the taxi had pulled up at the utility pole on the eleventh day, he got out, fixing the heavy glasses on his nose and the front fold of his dhoti, and looked to his right. Suddenly he had this strange feeling about the fact that he had been looking at this ugly woman for the past ten days.

As usual, she was seated on a wooden takht busily doing her makeup in front of the broken mirror.

Coming abreast of the iron bars, he peered at the middle-aged woman: swarthy complexion, oily skin, cheeks and chin tattooed with blue circles more or less blending in with her terribly dark skin. Her teeth were awful and her gums were practically melting away from chewing paan and tobacco. What kind of man would go to her, he wondered.

When he took another step toward the bars, the ugly woman smiled at him, put her mirror off to one side and said to him awkwardly, "Well, seth, want to come in?"

He inspected the woman, who regardless of her attributes and age still hoped for customers, even more closely. Greatly surprised, he asked her, "Bai, how old might you be?"

This hurt her feelings. She made a face and perhaps swore at him in Marathi. He quickly realized his mistake and apologized sincerely, "Bai, please forgive me. I just asked. That's all. But I do find it quite surprising that you sit here day after day all decked out. Do people visit you?"

The woman didn't answer. He again realized his mistake and asked her in a matter-of-fact voice free of curiosity, "What's your name?"

The woman was about to lift the curtain to go inside but stopped short and said, "Gangu Bai,"

"Tell me Gangu Bai, how much do you make in a day?"

The woman felt a note of compassion in his voice and came over to the window bars. "Six, sometimes seven rupees ... sometimes nothing."

As he repeated Gangu Bai's words "Six, sometimes seven rupees ... sometimes nothing" he thought of the two hundred rupees in his pocket that he'd brought along to burn. An idea suddenly flashed across his mind. "Look, Gangu Bai, you make six or seven rupees a day. What if I gave you ten?"

"For the work?"

"No, not for the work. But you could think of it as for the work." He quickly pulled out a ten-rupee note from his pocket and pushed it across the bars. "Here, take it."

Gangu Bai took the bank note but she was gawking at him, wondering.

"Look, Gangu Bai, I'll give you ten rupees every evening at about this time, but on one condition."

"Condition? What condition?"

"That after you get your ten rupees, you'll have your meal and go inside to sleep. I don't want to see your lights on."

A strange smile splashed across Gangu Bai's lips.

"Don't laugh. I mean it. I never go back on my word."

Then he headed for the gambling den. As he was climbing the stairs he thought, "Anyway, I came to blow two hundred, so what if it's one ninety."

Several days passed. The taxi stopped by the electric pole each evening. He got out, fixed the glasses on his nose, looked to his right at Gangu Bai ensconced on the takht behind the grillwork, arranged the front fold of his dhoti, pulled out a ten-rupee note and handed it to her. She touched it to her forehead, thanked him with a salaam, and he went up to the kotha to drop a hundred ninety rupees in card games. A couple of times on his way out, about 11:00 in the evening or 2:00 or 3:00 o'clock in the morning, he found Gangu Bai's shop closed.

One evening after giving her ten rupees he went up to the kotha and finished early, by 10:00 o'clock. On every hand he'd ended up with such unlucky cards that he lost that day's quota within a few hours. He came down from the kotha and was getting into the taxi when his eyes fell on Gangu Bai's shop. He was astonished to see that it was open and she was sitting on the takht behind the grillwork. It looked as if she was waiting for customers. He got out of the taxi and approached her. She panicked when she saw him, but by then he was already in front of her.

"What's this, Gangu Bai?"

She didn't answer.

"What a pity that you didn't live up to your promise. Didn't I say I wanted your lights off in the evening? And here you sit like ..."

His voice was filled with disappointment and sadness. Gangu Bai fell to thinking.

"You're bad," he said and started walking away.

"Don't go, seth, stop," she called after him.

He stopped. Gangu Bai started with slow deliberation, measuring every word carefully, "Yes, I'm bad, very bad. But who is good here? Seth, you pay ten rupees to keep one light off, but look around you, how many more lights are still on."

He looked through his thick lenses, first at the light bulb glaring right above Gangu Bai's head and then at her tawny face. He bent his head and said, "No, Gangu Bai, no." He got into the taxi with a heart with no pleasure in it. □

—Translated by Muhammad Umar Memon