

SA‘ADAT HASAN MANTO

Recite the Kalima!*

LA ILAHA IL-LAL LAH, MUHAMMADUR RASUL ALLAH¹—You are a Muslim, believe me, I speak only the truth. Pakistan has nothing to do with it. Honest. I’m ready any time to lay down my life for Quaid-e-Azam Jinnah. Please, don’t be so hasty. Yes, of course, I know you don’t have time, especially during these turbulent days of rioting. But, for God’s sake, at least hear me out. Yes, I killed Tikka Ram, slashed his stomach with a sharp kitchen knife as you say, but not because he was Hindu. Well then, if I didn’t kill him, who did, you might ask. All right, let me relate the whole story.

Recite the *kalima*: *La ilaha ...* What wretch knew that he would be embroiled in this mess? I killed three Hindus during the last Hindu-Muslim riots. But that was different, believe me. I’ll tell you what happened, why I killed this Tikka Ram.

Well, sir, what’s your opinion of this breed called woman? I think our elders have spoken the truth: only God can save us from their wiles, their shenanigans. If I’m spared the hangman’s noose, I swear, I’ll never come anywhere near a woman—ever. But, sir, a woman is not the only one to blame; men are no less guilty. The minute they see a woman, any woman, they start drooling all over. Inspector Sahib, I have to die one day and face my Lord. The moment my eyes fell on Rukma, I just crumbled.

Now one should ask: man, you’re a petty employee who makes only thirty-five rupees, what have you got to do with love? Collect the rent and be on your way. Call it my misfortune, Sahib, one day when I went to collect the rent for *Kholi* No. 16 and knocked at the door, Rukma Bai came out. I had already seen her several times before, but that day her body was glistening with rubbed oil under a loosely wrapped gauzy sari. God knows why, a sudden impulse gripped me to yank on her sari and start massaging her body with all my strength. Well, that was the day when this wretch

*“Paṛḥyē Kalima,” from the author’s collection *Manṭōnāma* (Lahore: Saṅg-e Mil Publications, 1990), 259–67.

¹There is no God but Allāh; Muḥammad is the messenger of Allāh.

surrendered his heart and mind to her.

My, my, what a woman she was! Her body—so firm I thought I was massaging a piece of granite. I was gasping from exertion within minutes, but she kept saying, “A while longer.”

Married? Yes, she was married. And if Khan the watchman is to be believed, she was also carrying on with a lover. But listen to the whole story, the lover will figure in it and so will everything else.

So, I went gaga over her that day. And she seemed to have guessed as much. She would give me a side-glance and smile. But, as God is my witness, every time she smiled a tremor of fear ran through my whole body. At first I thought it was the result of seeing one's love so close, but only later I realized ... but you should listen from the very beginning.

As I mentioned, I had exchanged amorous glances with Rukma Bai, now my entire effort was focused on how to get further along with her. Her husband, the bastard, remained glued to the *kboli* all the time carving his puny wooden toys and never gave me a chance.

One day I saw—what was her husband's name, yes, Girdhari—I saw Girdhari headed for the bazaar carrying a bundle of toys wrapped in a chador. Here was my chance. I immediately ran to *Kboli* No. 16 and knocked at the door with my heart pounding so hard it seemed as though it would jump out of my chest. The door opened. Rukma Bai stared at me. I trembled right down to the roots of my hair, I swear. I would have fled, but she smiled and signaled for me to step inside.

She closed the door behind me and said, “Sit!” I sat down. She came over near me and said, “Look, I know what you're after. It's not likely that you'll get it, not while Girdhari is alive.”

I stood up at once. Her closeness was roasting me. Even my temples were buzzing. She had oil rubbed over her body again today and had thrown the same gauzy sari loosely around her. I grabbed her shoulders and pressed them hard as I said, “I don't know what you're talking about.” Oh those biceps, by God, they felt as hard as steel! I can't even begin to tell you what kind of woman she was.

Anyway, please listen to what happened.

I was so worked up I was sizzling. I hugged her tightly and blurted out, “Girdhari can go to Hell ... you've got to be mine.”

She pushed me away. “Watch out, you'll get oil all over you.”

“Who cares,” I said and clasped her again. Even if somebody had flayed my back raw with a whip, I wouldn't have let go of her. But boy, oh boy, did she have a way with words! I cooled off and quietly sat down where she told me to sit. I knew she was thinking. That sala, Girdhari, is away at the moment. What is she so afraid of? When my patience ran out,

I said, "Rukma, we won't get such a fine chance again."

She ran her hand over my head lovingly and said with a smile, "Oh we will, we will, an even finer chance, you'll see. But tell me this: will you do as I say?"

Sahib, I was like someone possessed. I was broiling with passion. "Yes, yes. I can kill for you, not one but fifteen people ... if I have to."

She smiled, "Of that I'm sure."

I swear to God, once again I trembled all over. I thought it was because of my inflamed passions.

Well, I stayed with her a little while longer, engaged in some love-talk, ate her fried *bhajiya*s, and then quietly slipped out. That thing ... well, it didn't happen, but, Sahib, that sort of thing doesn't happen the very first time. Some other time, I told myself.

Ten days went by. On the eleventh day at two—yes, it must have been two in the morning, someone quietly woke me up. I sleep down by the staircase.

When I opened my eyes I was surprised to see Rukma Bai in front of me. My heart started to pound. "What's going on?" I asked in a hushed voice. And she said very softly, "Come with me."

I followed her barefooted to her *kholi*. I flung every thought to the wind and then and there clasped her tightly to my chest. And she whispered, "Wait a little." She turned on the light; the sudden glare blinded my vision somewhat.

When I was able to see again, I found someone lying on the floor on a mat; the face was covered with a piece of cloth. I gestured with my hand asking Rukma who it was. She said, "Sit down." I sat down like an uncomprehending fool. She came close to me and, caressing my head lovingly, said something that knocked the living daylights out of me. I was frozen stiff, as if all the blood had coagulated in my veins.

Recite the *kalima: La ilaha ...* I've never seen a woman like her in my life. "*Kambakht*," she said smiling, "I've bumped off Girdhari."

Believe me, she'd murdered a sturdy man with her own hands. What a woman, Sahib! Whenever I recall that night every hair on my body stands on end. The heartless woman showed me the braided electric cord she had used to strangle Girdhari. She had attached a piece of wood to the cord and twisted it around and around with such force that the poor man's tongue and eyes had popped out. She told me it only took minutes to finish him off.

She removed the piece of cloth and showed me Girdhari's face, and I froze down to the marrow of my bones. What a wench! There, in front of her dead husband, she hugged me. I swear by the Qur'an. I immediately

felt as though I'd become a dud forever. But, Sahib, the minute her body rubbed against mine and she gave me a strange sort of kiss, I was revived like never before. I'll remember that night for the rest of my life. Oblivious of the corpse lying in front of us, Rukma and I were deeply absorbed in each other.

In the morning we hacked Girdhari's body into three pieces. That was no trouble; the poor man's tools came in handy. Yes, we made a lot of banging noise, but people must have thought that Girdhari was working. Well now, you might ask: why did you participate in such a gruesome deed? Sahib, if you want the truth, she'd made me her slave in just one night. Had she asked me, I would have had no trouble making short work of fifteen men. Remember, I'd told her as much.

The big problem now was how to dispose of the chopped-up body. Rukma, regardless of her pluck and nerve, was a woman after all. I told her, "Darling, don't you worry. Let's just dump the pieces in the trunk for now. I'll carry it out at night and get rid of them. As luck would have it, a riot broke out that day and a lot of fighting and killing took place in five or six areas of the city. A thirty-six-hour curfew was imposed. I told myself, "Abdul Karim, you must dispose of the body today no matter what." So I got up at two in the morning and hauled the trunk out of her *kholi*. God, it was heavy! I was afraid of running into a khaki-turban any minute somewhere on my way and he'd sure as hell arrest me for breaking the curfew. But Sahib, no one harms him whom God wishes to protect. Every single bazaar I passed through was deathly still. I spotted a small mosque near one bazaar. I opened the trunk, threw the pieces inside the mosque's courtyard and went back.

Oh, wouldn't a man sacrifice his life to the Lord's absolute power! Come morning it was discovered that Hindus had set fire to that mosque. Girdhari must have been burned up with it, I imagined. Now, Sahib, there was no impediment. I advised Rukma to let it be known in the *chawli* that Girdhari had gone out with his toys. I would visit her about two-thirty in the morning and we'd have action. She said, "Abdul, let's not be hasty. Let's not meet at all for a fortnight." That made sense. I kept quiet.

Seventeen days passed. Girdhari stole into my dreams to frighten me, but I told him, "Sala, you're finished, dead. You can't do a thing to me now." On the night of the eighteenth day, as I was sleeping at the foot of the stairs as usual, Rukma came, woke me up and led me to her quarters. It must have been around twelve, or at most one.

She stretched out naked on the mat and said, "Abdul, my body is aching. Come, give me a massage."

I quickly took some oil and started rubbing it over her body. I was out

of breath within half an hour and a few drops of my perspiration dripped over her clammy body. But would she ever say, "You can stop now, you must be tired"? Eventually, I had to say, "Rukma, that should do it." She smiled, and what a smile it was! After catching my breath I sat down on the mat. She got up, turned off the light, and snuggled up to me. I was so exhausted from the hard work of massaging her that I couldn't think straight. I just put my arm on her breast and dozed off.

At some point I woke up with a start, feeling confused. I felt something hard digging into my neck. The thought of that twisted electric cord ran through my mind. Before I could wring myself out of the tightening noose, she had already mounted my chest. She gave the cord a couple of twists with such force that my throat began to make cackling sounds. I tried to scream, but my voice couldn't get to my throat. After that I passed out.

I believe it must have been around four when I slowly came to. My neck was hurting badly. I stayed put and started slowly unraveling the rope around my neck. Suddenly I heard noises. Holding my breath with my eyes wide-open, I probed the pitch-dark room but saw nothing. The noises gave the impression that two men were wrestling. Rukma was gasping. Breathless she said, "Tikka Ram, turn on the light!" A frightened Tikka Ram peeped feebly, "No, no. Rukma, no." She said in a mocking tone, "So timid! How will you cut him up and carry the pieces out in the morning?" My body froze stiff. I have no idea how Tikka Ram responded to her.

God knows at what point the light suddenly came on. I got up rubbing my eyes. Tikka Ram let out a scream, hurriedly opened the door and took off. Rukma quickly closed the door behind him and latched it securely. Sahib, how can I ever tell you about my state then. Although my eyes were wide-open and I was seeing and hearing everything, I had absolutely no strength in me to move.

Tikka Ram was not somebody I didn't know. He often came to our *chawli* hawking mangoes. I have no idea how Rukma managed to hook up with him.

She was gaping at me as if she didn't believe her eyes. She thought she had killed me. But here I was alive and breathing right in front of her. She was about to pounce on me when there was a knock at the door followed by a crescendo of voices. She quickly grabbed my hand and dragged me to the bathroom. Then she opened the front door. The people outside were all *chawli*-wallahs. They asked her, "Is everything all right? We just heard a scream." "Everything is fine," she replied. "It's just that I have this habit of walking in my sleep. When I opened the door and came out, I dashed against the wall. I panicked and screamed. That's all." The people felt satisfied and left.

Rukma shut the door and latched it tightly. I was worried sick thinking of what lay in store for me. Believe me, sir, thinking the wretch wouldn't leave me alive produced a burst of energy in me to fight her with all my might. In fact, I decided to hack her to pieces. When I managed to get out of the bathroom and saw her peering out of the big window, I leapt over to her, lifted her rear end and pushed her out. All this happened in a blink. I heard a heavy thud, quickly opened the door and cleared out. Lying on my cot, for the rest of the night I kept rubbing oil on my badly frayed neck to sooth it—here, you can see the bruises. None of the neighbors would have a clue about what happened, I thought with satisfaction. Didn't she tell them herself that she had this habit of walking in her sleep? Her corpse lying on the other side of the *chawli* would convince them that she must have been sleepwalking and fell out the window. Dawn broke, taking all the time in the world. I had wrapped a kerchief around my neck to hide the bruises. It got to be nine o'clock, and then twelve, but nobody was talking about her dead body. Where she had landed was a long, narrow space wedged between two tenements with a door on either end to stop people from using it for a toilet, still quite a heap of trash tossed out of the windows of the two buildings got collected. The sweeper woman carried it away every morning and evening. Perhaps she hadn't come to collect garbage that day, I thought, for if she had, she would have noticed Rukma's dead body as soon as she entered and would have made quite a hullabaloo. What the hell was going on? I wanted people to know about it without delay. By two o'clock. I couldn't hold back anymore. I opened the door and peeked. I was stunned. No dead body, no garbage either. Wonders! Where the hell did Rukma disappear? I swear by the Qur'an, if I ever walk away from the hangman's noose a free man, it wouldn't surprise me more than her inexplicable disappearance. I'd pushed her from the third floor onto the cobbled ground below. How could she have survived? But then who carried her corpse away? Reason refuses to accept it, but who can tell, Sahib, the woman she was, she might have walked out alive. *Chawli*-wallahs think that either some Muslim made off with her or killed her. Good for him if he killed her, but if he's keeping her in his house, you can imagine what end he'll come to. God save him, Sahib.

Now let me tell you about Tikka Ram. He met me twenty days later and asked, "Where's Rukma?" I told him I had no idea. "No, you damn well know," he insisted with a veiled threat in his voice. I told him, "Brother, I swear by the Qur'an, I know nothing about her." "No," he said, "you're lying. You've killed her. I'm going to file a report with the police. I'll say that first you dispatched Girdhari, then Rukma." And then he left. I broke into a sweat from sheer terror. I thought long and hard about what to do,

but couldn't think of anything except that I should make short work of him. You tell me, what else could I have done? So I took a kitchen knife and sharpened it in absolute secrecy, and then I went out looking for Tikka Ram. By chance I found him near the urinal at the corner of the street. He had just put his empty boxes of oranges down outside and gone in to take a leak. I darted in behind him. He was just unwrapping his dhoti when I yelled, "Tikka Ram!" The moment he turned around, I plunged the knife into his stomach. He tried with both hands to keep his guts from spilling out but doubled over and crumbled. There and then I should have made my escape, but look at the foolhardy thing I did. I started to check for his pulse to make sure he was dead. All I'd heard was that everyone has this vein, but whether it was on the left or right of the thumb I didn't know. I was taking a long time figuring it out. That was my undoing. A constable entered unbuttoning his crotch. He grabbed me. Well, Sahib, this is the whole story, pure and simple, without a grain of falsehood. Recite the *kalima*: *La ilaha ...!* □

—Translated by Muhammad Umar Memon