

SA‘ADAT HASAN MANTO

Behind the Reed Stalks*

AS FAR AS I AM CONCERNED, it isn't necessary for me to tell or for you to ask what city it was. Let's just say that the locale of this story was in the suburbs of Peshawar, close to the border, where she lived in something like a mud hut behind a dense thicket of reeds. The reeds, located some distance from the cottage, more or less hid the sparse dwelling and anyone passing by on the dirt road in front could hardly see it.

The reeds were dried up, but they were burrowed into the ground in such a way that they formed a thick screen. God knows whether the woman had stuck them there herself or whether they'd been there all along. Whatever, at least they worked like an iron curtain.

Call it what you will, a house or a hut—it was just a cluster of three small but very immaculate and tidy rooms, with few furnishings to speak of. The room at the back had a large bedframe with broad cotton-tape meshing. On a niche above it, a small earthen lamp, its cotton wick dipped in mustard oil, burned all night long. The niche, too, looked quite clean and tidy, and so did the oil lamp. It was given a new wick and filled with fresh oil every day.

Shall I tell you her name now, the one who lived in this little place behind the reeds with her young daughter?

All manner of rumors circulated about the girl. According to some she wasn't the woman's own daughter but rather an orphan the woman had adopted and brought up. Others thought the girl was some child born out of wedlock, and still others that she was, in fact, the woman's own flesh and blood. Whatever the truth may be, one cannot be certain about it. Anyway, you'll have formed some opinion yourself by the time you're done reading this story.

Ah, yes, I forgot to tell you the woman's name. Actually, the name isn't important. You may call her by any name, Sakina, Mahtab, Gulshan, or

*“Sarkanḍōñ kē Pīḥē,” from the author's collection *Manḥōnāmā* (Lahore: Saṅg-e Mīl Publications, 1990), 542–55.

whatever. What's in a name? However, for your convenience, let me call her Sardar.

Sardar was middle aged. At some point she must have been quite beautiful. Her healthy-looking rosy cheeks had become a bit marred by wrinkles now; even so, she looked several years younger than her age. But we shouldn't be concerned with her cheeks, should we?

Her daughter—never mind whether she actually was or wasn't her daughter—was a breathtaking specimen of blossoming youth. There was absolutely nothing in her features that betrayed, even faintly, any suggestion that she was a trollop, but the fact is, her mother had set her up for prostitution and was raking in money with both hands. And Navab—again for your ease, let me give her this name—wasn't averse to her profession.

Because of her upbringing in a fairly secluded area tucked far away from the nearest habitation, the girl had no idea of the true joys of conjugal life. When Sardar introduced Navab's first man to her—on that very bed of all places—the girl perhaps thought this was how all young women got initiated into their youth, so she got used to her prostitute's existence and believed that her life's ultimate purpose lay in sleeping with men who came to visit her from miles away.

On the face of it, she was every bit an indecent young woman—which is how our noble and chaste ladies are wont to look upon her type—but if truth be told, she didn't even faintly think that she was living a life of sin. Think? She never even had the chance to think about it.

She was very giving, and she gave herself with utmost sincerity to every man who came to her in a week or ten days from far distances. She thought this was precisely what every woman was supposed to do. And she saw to every comfort of the man with unflinching devotion. She couldn't bear his slightest discomfort.

She was innocent of the lavish lifestyle of the city folk. She had no idea that the men who came to her riding in cars were used to cleaning their teeth with a brush in the morning and, first thing after waking up, took a cup of bed-tea and then went to defecate. Gradually, though, in her own girlish ways, she acquired some familiarity with the habits of these men. But it confused her a lot that they weren't all alike. One would ask for a cigarette when he woke up, another for tea, and some didn't even want to get up at all. Some stayed awake all night and took off in their cars at the crack of dawn.

Sardar was blissfully free of all cares. She had full confidence in her daughter, or whatever she was. She knew the girl was quite capable of handling her clients. So Sardar took an opium pill and lolled around on her cot. Now and then when she was needed—like when a client suddenly

felt out of sorts because he'd had too much to drink—she drowsily got out of bed and advised Navab to have the fellow lick some especially tart pickles, or to give him lukewarm salty water to induce vomiting and then put him to sleep with gentle strokes on his body.

Sardar was quite careful about one thing. She would have the client pay up front, tucking the money into her waistband. She would bless the fellow and pray for his well being with her characteristic “May you rock comfortably in your swing!” and then pop an opium pill in her mouth before hitting the bed.

All the proceeds belonged to Sardar, however, all gifts remained with Navab. Because her clients were filthy rich, she dressed well and gobbled all kinds of fruits and sweetmeats.

She was happy. As she saw it, she was living an interesting and pleasant life in that mud-plastered dwelling with three small rooms. One of her clients, an army officer, had given her a gramophone and a bunch of records. She played film songs in her free time and tried to mimic the lyrics. She didn't have a good voice, but perhaps she was unaware of it. As it was, she was unaware of just about everything, and had no desire to learn about anything. She had accepted, totally unawares, the path she had been flung down.

What was the world like on the other side of the reeds—she knew nothing about it except that the space beyond the reeds had a dirt road which came to life every second or third day with a car that came along kicking up clouds of dust, stopped, honked, and her mother, or whatever she was to Navab, got up from her cot, went out and told the man to park the car some distance away and then come in. The man would enter, sit by Navab's side on the tape-bed and begin to talk sweetly.

She didn't have many customers, say, a half dozen or so, but they were her regulars. And Sardar, with her superior skills, had so arranged that they would never run into each other. She was one cunning woman! She'd fixed a day for each of them with such finesse that they found no reason to complain.

She also made sure, on occasions when it seemed imminent, that Navab didn't get pregnant. The circumstances of Navab's life were calling for it and it was a certainty. But for some two-and-a-half years now, Sardar was dealing successfully with this eventuality.

The business was running quite smoothly behind the reeds for this period of time. The police didn't catch a whiff of it. The only ones who knew about it were the clients and Sardar and her daughter Navab, or whatever she was.

One day all hell broke loose in this mud house behind the reeds. A

big car, perhaps a Dodge, pulled up outside. The horn blared. Sardar emerged only to find a total stranger facing her. She didn't talk to him; nor did the stranger say anything to her. He parked the car some ways away and immediately walked into the house, as though he'd been coming here for years.

Sardar was bewildered. But Navab welcomed the man with a pleasing smile and led him courteously into the room with the tape-bed. They had just sat down when Sardar—the shrewd woman she was—stepped in. It didn't take her long to guess that the man was from a wealthy family. He was also handsome and in good health. She greeted him deferentially and politely asked, "Who has sent you our way?"

"She!" he said with a smile, lovingly poking Navab's cheek with his finger.

With a snap, Navab pulled away to one side and said with an air, "Oh—but I've never met you before."

The smile on the stranger's lips broadened. "But we have, several times."

"Where? When?" she asked. Her little mouth opened in utter amazement, enhancing the beauty of her face.

He grabbed her soft plump hand and, looking at Sardar, said to the girl, "You can't understand these things, at least not quite yet. Ask your mother."

Naively, Navab asked her mother to explain where and when she had met him. Sardar instantly understood the matter. Someone among the clients must have mentioned Navab to him and given her address. So she said, "I will, I will" and left the room. Then she plunked down on her cot, took out her small pillbox and, stretching out, popped an opium pellet in her mouth. Her mind was perfectly at ease: the stranger looked like a nice man and she expected no trouble.

One cannot be sure, but most likely the stranger, Haibat Khan by name and a native of Hazara, was loaded with money. He was so taken with Navab's sprightly, coltish manners that, as he was leaving, he made it plain to Sardar that he didn't want anyone else to visit Navab anymore. Clever Sardar told the man, "Khan Sahib, how can that be? Are you sure you can afford to ..."

Interrupting her, Haibat Khan dug into his pocket, yanked out a wad of one-hundred-rupee banknotes and tossed it at Navab's feet. Next he removed his diamond ring, put it on the girl's finger and quickly vanished on the other side of the reeds.

Navab didn't even bother to give the money lying at her feet a cursory glance. She was busy contemplating her finger, adorned with a big diamond

emitting multicolored rays. The car started up and sped away spewing clouds of exhaust. Navab started and walked out to the reeds. All she could see was the dirt road and the trail of spiraling dust.

Meanwhile, Sardar had picked up the wad and counted the notes: one more and it would have been a full two thousand rupees, but the short-fall didn't bother her much. She deftly tucked the notes into the waistband of her billowing shalwar and headed for her cot. She took out a rather large opium pellet from its box, popped it into her mouth and dozed off peacefully.

Navab was feeling very pleased. She couldn't stop looking at the diamond ring on her finger.

A few days later one of the regular clients came. Sardar sent him away saying that she had folded up her business because she was afraid of the police. The man was very rich and he was quite disappointed. Sardar had been much impressed by Haibat Khan. In her inebriated state she thought it was infinitely better if she made as much money as before from only one client. She decided that she would send off all the old customers with the excuse that the police were after her and she didn't want to risk her reputation.

Haibat Khan showed up a week later. During this time Sardar had already turned away two old clients.

He came with the same pomp and pageantry as he had the first time. The moment he stepped in he pulled Navab to his chest and clasped her tightly. Sardar remained silent. Navab took him, or rather Haibat Khan took her, to the room with the tape-bed. This time around, Sardar didn't interfere. She stayed on her cot, popped her pellet, and started to doze off.

Haibat Khan enjoyed himself a lot. He felt even more pleased by Navab's youthful coltishness. She was totally innocent of the wiles and antics of professional prostitutes, and also didn't show any trace of the domesticity of ordinary women. She had a quality that was entirely her own. She lay down with him like a child with its mother, running its hand over her breasts, sticking its fingers in her nose, pulling at her hair, and little by little falling asleep.

This was a wholly new experience for Haibat Khan. He found her an entirely new breed of woman: unique, interesting and delightful. He started coming twice a week. Navab had become an attraction he couldn't do without.

Sardar was happy that she was getting plenty of notes to tuck into her waistband. Navab, however, often wondered, in spite of her naiveté and coltishness, why it was that Haibat Khan appeared to be afraid of something. Why did he start when a lorry or a car sped by on the dirt road

beyond the reeds? Why did he withdraw his body from hers and hurry out to look stealthily to see who it might be?

A lorry went by about twelve o'clock one night. Both were asleep in each other's embrace. A tremor shot through him and he abruptly sat up. Navab was in a light sleep and his tremor shook the whole of her like a seismic jolt. "What happened?" she shrieked.

By now he'd gotten hold of himself a little. Making an effort to regain complete control over himself he said, "Nothing ... perhaps I was frightened in my dream."

In the stillness of the night the sound of the lorry could still be heard in the distance.

"No Khan, it's something else," she said. "You react the same way every time a car or a lorry passes by."

Navab had put her finger on his painful nerve. In a sharp tone, calculated to restore his male pride, he berated her, "Don't talk nonsense! The sound of cars and lorries—huh, who's frightened of that?"

Her heart was much too fragile. His sharp tone hurt her to the quick and she began to cry inconsolably. In his effort to calm her down he became aware of the most delicate pleasure of his life and his body drew even closer to hers.

Haibat Khan was a handsome man of good height and with well-toned muscles. For the first time in her life Navab had experienced the soothing warmth in his arms, and he had mentored her in the basics of sexual pleasure. She began to love him, or the meaning of whatever love was became known to her. Now when he disappeared for weeks she played doleful love songs on the gramophone, sang along ... and sighed. But the puzzle of why he was so apprehensive of the sound of cars continued to agitate her mind.

Months went by. Her ability to give herself to him and her regard for him grew stronger. Now, though, another matter added to her confusion. He would visit her for only a few hours and then leave in a terribly agitated state. She could understand that this was perhaps due to some reason beyond his control; otherwise he loved to stay with her longer.

She asked him about it several times, but he was evasive. One morning his Dodge pulled up beyond the reeds. Navab was still asleep. When he honked, she woke up and came out rubbing her groggy eyes. By then he had already parked the car and come up close to the house. Navab ran and wrapped herself around him. He picked her up and brought her into the room with the tape-bed.

They talked for a long time, with words full of love. Heaven knows what came over Navab that she made her first ever request from him:

“Khan, buy me a pair of gold bracelets.”

He kissed her plump, rosy wrists several times and said, “You’ll have them by tomorrow. What are bracelets, I’ll give you my life.”

With an air, but not without her peculiar coltish manner, she said, “Never mind Khan Sahib. It will eventually be me who has to give up her life.”

Her words prompted him to offer his life as a sacrifice for her over and over again. He left after a delightful time in her company, promising to return the next day and put the bracelets around her wrists himself.

Navab was happy. That night she played cheerful songs on her gramophone and danced around well into the night in the room with the tape-bed. Sardar was also happy. That night again she popped a big opium pellet and fell asleep.

The next day Navab’s happiness was even greater: she was going to get her gold bracelets and Haibat Khan would put them on her wrists himself. She waited all day. He didn’t come. Perhaps his car broke down—she thought—perhaps he would come sometime in the evening. She stayed awake the whole night but he didn’t show up. Her gentle heart was hurt badly. “Look,” she repeatedly said to her mother, or whatever she was, “the khan hasn’t returned. He went back on his promise.” Then she would think awhile and say, cringing from some foreboding, “Could something have happened to him?”

Many possibilities assailed her mind: car accident, sudden illness, attack by some highway robber. But her mind repeatedly went back to the sounds of cars and lorries that frightened him so. She thought about it for the longest time but couldn’t comprehend why.

A whole week went by during which not one of her old clients visited, Sardar having already told them to stay away, although a few lorries and a couple of cars did go by billowing clouds of smoke on the dirt road. Every time one of them passed, the relentless desire to run after it and set it on fire overwhelmed Navab. She felt that these were the very things that were keeping him away. But after a while, she would wonder how such vehicles could be an impediment and laugh at her foolishness.

Why a strong man like Haibat Khan would cringe from fear at the sound of vehicles was beyond her understanding. That he cringed was a fact and no argument could change that. This made her very sad. On her gramophone she now played songs full of pain and anguish that made tears well up in her eyes.

A week later, after Navab and Sardar had finished their lunch and were thinking of taking a nap, suddenly a car honked outside. They started because the horn didn’t sound like Haibat Khan’s Dodge. Sardar darted out to see who it was and send him away if it happened to be an old

client. But as she got close to the reeds, she saw Haibat Khan sitting in a brand new car, with a well-dressed beautiful woman on the rear seat.

He parked the car some distance away and got out, so did the woman, and both approached the house. Sardar was confounded. Haibat Khan came here to have a woman, why has this well-dressed and beautiful young woman tagged along? What does she want?

She was still wondering about it when Haibat Khan stepped into the house with the woman, decked out in priceless jewels, in tow. Sardar followed them, but neither paid any attention to her.

When Sardar entered the room with the tape-bed, she found Haibat Khan, Navab and the other woman sitting on it in a heavy silence—a strange silence. However, the bejeweled woman seemed to be a bit restless because one of her legs was shaking badly.

Sardar stopped at the door. The sound of her footsteps made Haibat Khan look up. She greeted him. He didn't respond. He looked terribly upset. But the woman stopped shaking her legs and spoke directly to Sardar, "We're here; at least prepare something for us to eat."

"Just say what you would like and it will be made ready," Sardar replied with utmost hospitality.

The woman, whose very features and bearing screamed that she was one hell of a domineering woman, said, "Well then, let's go to the kitchen, get the fire going and, yes, you've got a big cooking pot, haven't you?"

"Yes," Sardar affirmed, nodding her big head.

"Go and wash it. I'll be along shortly." She got up from the bed and started watching the gramophone.

"I'm afraid there won't be any meat," Sardar apologized.

"Don't worry, it'll be there," the woman said, placing the stylus on the record. "You just do as you're told. Make sure the fire is plenty hot."

Sardar withdrew. The well-dressed woman now addressed Navab with a pleasant smile, "Navab, we've brought you a pair of gold bracelets."

She dug into her vanity bag and produced the bracelets wrapped in a thin red paper. They looked quite heavy and gorgeous.

Navab was staring at Haibat Khan who sat next to her sunk in deep silence. She glanced at the bracelets and asked him in a very soft but frightened voice, "Khan, who is she?"

"Who am I?" said the woman, playing with the bracelets. "I'm Haibat's sister." She looked at him and he cringed at her answer. Then she again spoke to Navab, "My name is Halakat."

Navab was at a loss to understand. She was mortally afraid of the woman's eyes, which, though definitely beautiful, were dangerously wide open. They seemed to be raining down plumes of fire.

The woman moved forward, grabbed Navab's wrists and put the bracelets on them. Suddenly she stopped, let go of the girl, and ordered the man, "You make yourself scarce, Haibat Khan. I want to doll her up before presenting her to you."

Haibat Khan was in a daze. When he didn't get up, the woman spoke sharply, "You heard me, didn't you? Now go out!"

He left with his eyes fixed on Navab. He was feeling terribly agitated. He didn't know where to go or what to do.

Going toward the verandah, he passed by the makeshift kitchen with a gunnysack curtain and saw that Sardar already had the fire going. He didn't speak to her and walked out to the dirt road beyond the reeds. His condition was like a half-crazy person. Even the slightest sound made him jump.

A lorry was coming along in the distance. The urge to stop it, hop aboard and disappear gripped him. But when it drew near, it kicked up an atrocious cloud of dust that enveloped him completely. He tried to call out, but wasn't loud enough because of all the dust in his throat.

When the dust settled he felt as though he was half-dead. He wanted to go back to the house behind the reeds, the house where he had spent many days and nights of indescribable bliss by the side of that coltish girl, but he couldn't. His feet refused to budge.

Standing by the dirt road for a long time, he wondered what was going on. His affair with the woman who had accompanied him here went back a long time. Her husband had been a close friend of his and he had first visited her to commiserate with her at her husband's death. As luck would have it, this turned into an affair. Barely two days had passed since his friend's death when he was back at her house. She ordered him inside as if he was her servant and offered herself to him.

Haibat Khan was a rank amateur where women were concerned. That Shahina had expressed her feelings for him, never mind her terribly commanding manner, was no small thing for him. No doubt she was very wealthy, partly her own and partly her late husband's, but it was not her wealth he cared about. His only interest in her was that she was the first woman in his life. If he had allowed himself to be cowed by her overbearing manner, it was because he was a complete novice.

He kept thinking for a long time standing by the dirt road. Finally, he couldn't hold back and walked over to the house. There, in the makeshift kitchen, he saw Sardar frying some meat. He continued toward the room with the tape-bed but found the door closed. He rapped softly on it.

Some moments later the door opened. The first thing he saw was blood all over the floor. He trembled. Next he saw Shahina leaning against the

door. "There," she said to him, "I've dolled her up for you!"

With difficulty Haibat Khan moistened his parched throat with saliva and asked, "Where is she?"

"Some of her is on the bed, but the best parts are in the kitchen."

Haibat Khan didn't quite get it. All the same, terror engulfed him. He couldn't get a word out and remained rooted to his place by the door. It wasn't just the gore, he also spotted small pieces of flesh on the floor and ... and a sharp kitchen knife. It looked as if someone was lying on the bed, covered in a blood-soaked sheet.

Shahina smiled and said, "Shall I lift the sheet and show her to you ... your bedecked and adorned Navab—why, I've made her up myself. But first, you should eat. You must be starving. Sardar is making a delicious meat dish. I've cut the meat myself."

Haibat Khan began to shake. "Shahina," he screamed, "what have you done?"

She smiled, "Darling, this is not the first time. My husband, may God bless him with paradise, was as unfaithful as you are. I butchered him and threw pieces of his flesh to the crows and buzzards to feast on. I love you, so, instead of you, I have ..."

She didn't complete the sentence and pulled the sheet off the heap on the bed. Haibat Khan choked on his scream and fell unconscious.

When he came to, he saw Shahina at the steering wheel and they were driving through an unfamiliar terrain. □

—*Translated by Muhammad Umar Memon*