SHORT STORY

Dishonour

by Sa'adat Hasan Manto

WORN out by the day's work, she lay down on her bed, and fell asleep as soon as her head touched the pillow. The municipal sanitary inspector, whom she addressed as "Seth", had just left for his home, dead drunk, after having rattled every bone and muscle in her body. He would have stayed the night here, were it not for his great solicitude for his wife, whose love for him was boundless.

The rupees she had received from the superintendent in exchange for her physical labour, were stuffed into her tight blouse. With the rise and fall of her breath, these silver coins jingled, and their jingling mingled with the unrhythmic beating of her heart—as though the silver had dissolved into her heart's blood.

She felt a heat in her chest, the result partly of the half bottle of brandy the inspector had brought with him, and partly of their having resorted to drinking it with water after they had run out of soda.

She was lying face down on the big teak bed. Her arms, bare to the shoulders, lay spread out like a kite bow which has gotten soaked in dew and detached from the thin kite paper. Next to her right arm was a fold of flesh which had turned blue as a result of repeated twisting and looked like a torn off piece of chicken skin.

The room was very small and countless objects lay scattered about in disarray. Under the bed lay three or four worn out old slippers which a sleeping dog was using as a pillow. In his sleep the dog was pulling faces at some invisible creature. The dog was suffering from the itch and his fur had fallen off in patches. From a distance, he could be mistaken for an old doormat lying folded on the floor.

Her toilet articles were kept in a niche on the wall—rouge, bright red lipstick, powder, a comb, and an iron pin which she usually used to keep her hair up. Nearby, on a long peg, hung a cage in which a green parrot slept with its head buried in its plumage. The cage was full of pieces of guava and rotting orange peel. Small black insects were buzzing around these putrid pieces of fruit.

Near the bed stood a cane chair whose back was grimy from being used as a headrest. To the right of the chair stood a pretty three legged table, on which lay a His Master's Voice portable gramophone. The black cloth covering the gramophone was in a sad state. Rusted pins lay scattered not only on the table but in every corner of the room. On the wall directly above the table hung four frames in which were set pictures of different individuals.

At a little distance from these pictures, that is, in the corner of the wall that was to one's left as one entered the room, was a picture of a garishly coloured Ganeshji, heavily garlanded with fresh and dried flowers. The picture had probably been peeled off a bolt of cloth and framed. In a small greasy niche next to the picture stood a cup of oil used for lighting the lamp. Next to it was the lamp, its flame, in the absence of any air current, standing as straight as the mark on a forehead. In this niche lay also several twisted incensesticks, big and small.

When she began the day's work, she would hold out the rupees received towards this image of Ganeshji, and then put them to her forehead before stowing them in her blouse. As her breasts were full, the rupees she kept in her blouse stayed safe there. But, sometimes, when Madho came on leave from Poona, she had to hide some of her rupees in the small hole she had dug for this purpose under a leg of her bed. It was Ramlal the pimp who had suggested to Sugandhi this method of safeguarding her money from Madho. When he heard how Madho periodically descended from Pune on Sugandhi, he said: "Since when have you taken up with this rascal—I must say this is a strange kind of loveydoveyness. The scoundrel has fun with you but doesn't give you a paisa. To top it all, he even extracts money from you. Sugandhi, this appears fishy to me. You have fallen for something about this rascal. I've been in this line for five years. I know all the weaknesses of you girls."

So saying, Ramlal the pimp, who ran a business involving 120 girls ranging from Rs 10 to Rs 100, in different parts of Bombay, told Sugandhi: "Listen, dear, don't throw away your money like this. This motherfucker of yours won't leave a stitch on your body if he can help it. Dig a small hole under the leg of your bed and bury all your money in it. When this friend of yours turns up, say to him: 'I swear by your life, Madho, I haven't set eyes on a coin all day. Do get me a cup of tea and a biscuit. I'm so hungry that my stomach is growling.' Understand? The times are very hard, my life. This wretched Congress with its ban on liquor, has sent the market spiralling downwards. Yet I somehow manage to get hold of some. By god, when I see bottles emptied overnight lying in your room, and get the smell of liquor, I begin to wish I could change places with you."

Of all her features, Sugandhi liked her bosom the best. Once, Jamna had advised her: "Bind these cannon balls to keep them firm, or else wear a bodice."

Sugandhi began to laugh. "Jamna, you think everyone is like you. People pay you ten rupees and then tear you to pieces, so you think that's what happens to everyone. Just let any wretch try putting his hand anyplace he has no business to — oh, I must tell you what happened yesterday. Ramlal brought a Punjabi at two in the night. We decided on thirty rupees for the night. When we were going to bed, I put out the light and oh my, did he panic!

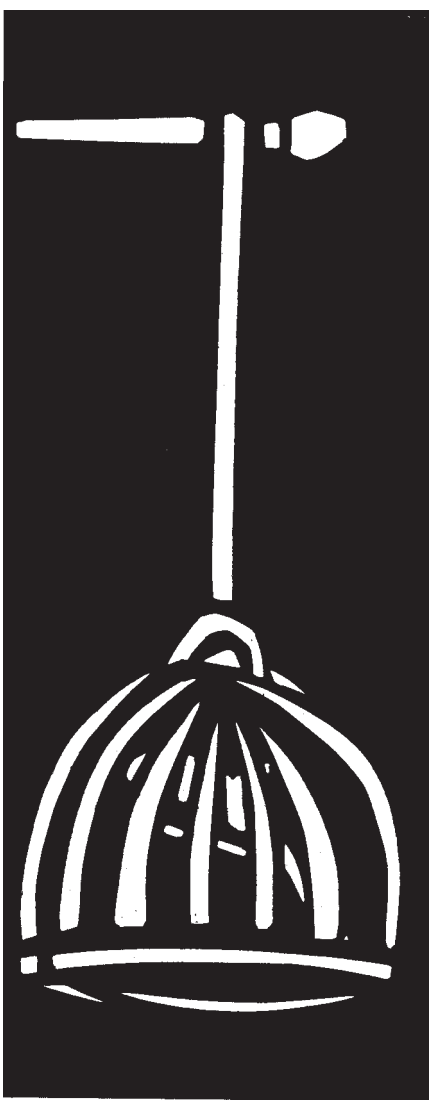
Are you listening, Jamna? I swear by you, all his macho dissolved in the darkness, he was in such a fright. I said, 'Hurry up, hurry up, what are you waiting for? It's nearly three, It'll soon be day.' All he would say was *'Roshni, roshni,'* I said, 'What is this *roshni?* He said, 'Light, light.' His voice was near breaking, and I couldn't help laughing. I said 'I'm not putting on the light.' And I pinched the fleshy part of his thigh. He sat up with a start, and put on the light. I immediately wrapped myself in the sheet and said: 'Aren't you ashamed, you manikin?' When he got into bed, I jumped up and put out the light. He panicked again. I swear, the night was great fun — now light, now dark, now light, now dark. When the trams started up, he put on his pants and fled. The rascal must have won the thirty rupees in a gambling bout to have given them away for free like that. Jamna, you are a simpleton. I know dozens of techniques to straighten out these fellows."

Sugandhi did know a great many techniques which she had also shared with a couple of her girlfriends. One technique that she fed just about everybody was: "If the man is a decent fellow, and not talkative, see that you act full of mischief. Talk without a pause. Tease him, pester him, tickle him, play with him. If he has a beard, run your ringers through it and pull out a few hairs. If he has a big paunch, pat it. Don't give him breathing space to take the initiative. He'll be pleased and you'll be safe. Sister, men who are silent and reserved are dangerous. If you let them get the upper hand, they'll break your bones and muscles!"

Sugandhi was not as clever as she made herself out to be. She had very few clients. She was a deeply sentimental girl. That was the reason why all the techniques she

knew slipped down from her brain into her stomach, on which several lines had formed after the birth of her child. When she first saw these lines, she felt as if her pet dog had made them with his paws — whenever a bitch scornfully walked past that mangy dog, he would scratch the ground with his paws, to conceal his embarrassment.

Sugandhi tried to live in her mind, but as soon as anyone said something soft and sensitive, some tender words, to her, she would feel herself melting and spreading in to the other parts of her body. Although her mind considered physical intercourse between man and woman an utterly useless exercise, yet her body was addicted to it. Her body desired exhaustion,



an exhaustion which would shake it up, kill it, compel it to sleep. How pleasant is the sleep which comes when one is completely exhausted, the unconsciousness which overshadows one after one has been battered and every part has become limp. You slide between awareness and nonawareness of your existence, and sometimes feel as if you are suspended high up in the air. All around you is the air, only the air, and even the feeling of suffocation in this air gives you a special pleasure.

When, as a child playing hide and seek, she used to hide inside her mother's big trunk, how she enjoyed the feeling of semisuffocation caused by the insufficient air in the trunk, and the fear of being caught, which made her heart beat loud. Sugandhi wished she could spend her whole life in just such a closed trunk, while the searchers wandered outside. Sometimes, they might find her so that she could have a try at seeking them. The life she was leading for the last five years was itself a kind of hide and seek. Sometimes she found someone and sometimes someone found her — that was how her life went on. She was cheerful because she had to stay cheerful. Every night, there was a man in her broad teak bed. And Sugandhi, who knew countless techniques to straighten out men, despite repeatedly resolving that she would not submit to any unwarranted demand made by these men and would be very cold to them, always got carried away by her feelings and became just a thirsty woman.

Every night, some old or new acquaintance would say to her: "Sugandhi, I love you." And Sugandhi, knowing perfectly well that he was lying, would become like wax and feel as if she really was being loved. Love — what a beautiful word. She wanted to melt it down and anoint every part of her body with it, massage it into her pores, or else herself merge with it, shrink into it and enclose herself into it. Sometimes, when the feeling of loving and being loved grew very intense in her she would feel inclined to draw the man lying near her into her lap and to put him to sleep by patting him and singing him lullabies.

The desire to love was so strong in her that she could love every man who came to her and then live by that love too. Was she not honouring her commitment to the four men whose pictures hung before her on the wall? She always had in her mind the sense of her own goodness, but she could not understand why men had no

goodness in them. One day, as she was looking in the mirror, the words escaped her lips: "Sugandhi, the times have not treated you right."

These times — the days and nights of five years— were entwined with every strand of her life, as if it was from these times that she was un-able to get the happiness her heart desired. Yet still she wanted her days to pass as they were now pass-ing. She was not avaricious — she had no palaces to build. Ten rupees was the average rate from which Ramlal took a cut of two and a half rupees. She managed to make seven and a half rupees a day, which was enough to support her, and when Madho, to use Ramlal's words, descended on her from Pune, she even presented him with a revenue of ten to fifteen rupees. This tax Sugandhi paid only because she was somewhat taken with him. Ramlal the pimp was right — there was certainly something in him which Sugandhi very much liked. Well, why make a secret of it, why not tell the story! When Sugandhi first met Madho, he said to her: "Don't you feel ashamed of selling yourself? Do you know what it is that you are selling to me? And why I have come to you? *Chhi, chhi!* Ten rupees and, as you say, two fifty commission. That leaves seven fifty, doesn't it? Now, for this wretched seven fifty you are promis-ing to give me something which you just cannot give me, and 1 have come to take something which I cannot take. I want a woman, but do you, right now, at this moment, want a man? I will get a woman, but do I understand you? What is the relation between us? Nothing. It is only these ten rupees — of which two fifty will go as commission and the rest be scattered here and there — which are ringing in our ears — you hear the sound and so do I. But you think differently, I think differently. Why not make an arrangement whereby you will need me and I will need you? I am a constable in Poona. 1 will come once a month, for three or four days. Give up this trade. I will pay your expenses. What's the rent of this room?"

Madho said much more in the same strain, and it had such an effect on Sugandhi that for some moments, she began almost to fancy herself a constable's wife. Madho began to tidy up the room, and, without asking her permission, he tore up the nude pictures which Sugandhi had hung near her bed. He said: "Sugandhi, I won't let you keep such pictures here — and look how dirty the water in this pitcher is, and how bad these rags smell. Throw them out. And why have you made such a mess of your hair — and —"

After three hours' talk, Sugandhi and Madho felt quite comfortable with one another, and Sugandhi felt as if she had known the constable for years. Until today, no one had bothered about the stinking rags, the dirty pitcher or the nude pictures in this room, nor had anyone ever given her a chance to feel that she too had a house which could be a home. People came and went, without even noticing how dirty the bed was. No one ever said to Sugandhi: "Look how red your nose is today — you may be coming in for a cold. Wait, I'll fetch you some medicine." How good Madho was. Everything he said had substance. What a good lecture he had given Sugandhi. She began to feel that she needed Madho. So a relationship was established between them.

Once a month, Madho came from Poona and when he was leaving, he never failed to tell Sugandhi: "Look, Sugandhi, if you start your trade again, everything will be over between you and me. If you let any man stay over at your place even once, I'll take you by your plait and throw you out. I'll send you this month's expenses by money order as soon as I reach Poona. Oh yes, what's the rent of this room?"

Neither did Madho ever send any money from Poona, nor did Sugandhi give up her trade. Both of them knew well enough what was happening. Neither did Sugandhi ever say to Madho: "What are you croaking away for; have you ever given me a penny?" nor did Madho ever ask Sugandhi: "Where do you get this money from since I give you nothing?" Both were fakes. Both were living a gilded life, but Sugandhi was happy. One who does not have real gold to wear, is content with gilded jewellery.

Right now, Sugandhi was sleeping, exhausted. The electric bulb, which she had forgotten to turn off, hung above her head. Its fierce light struck her closed eyes, but she was fast asleep.

A knock at the door — who could it be at two in the night? The knocking reached Sugandhi's dreaming ears as a buzzing. When the knocking changed to a loud banging, she sat up with a start.

The mingled flavours of liquor and of fragments of fish stuck in the crevices of her teeth had produced a stringy and bitter saliva in her mouth. Wiping her mouth with the end of her *sari*, she began to rub her eyes. She was alone on the bed. Bending, she saw her dog asleep with his head on the slippers, pulling a face at some invisible creature in his sleep; the parrot too was asleep with its head buried in its plumage.

There was a knock at the door. Sugandhi got up. She had a splitting headache. Taking a bowl of water from the pitcher, she gargled; then drank another bowlful, and then opened the door a crack and said: "Ramlal?"

Ramlal, worn out with knocking, said crossly. "Had a snake bitten you or what? I've been standing outside a whole hour banging at this door. Were you dead?" Then he lowered his voice. "There's no one inside, is there?"

When Sugandhi said "No", Ramlal's voice rose once more. "Then why didn't you open the door? This is really the limit. Talk about sound sleep! A fine trade I'll run if I have to spend two hours rousing each girl. Now what are you gaping at me for? Wear that flowered *sari* on quick, put some powder, and come with me — there's a Seth sitting in his car outside, waiting for you. Hurry, hurry, get a move on."

Sugandhi sat down on the armchair and Ramlal began to comb his hair in front of the mirror. Sugandhi stretched out her hand to the triangular table, picked up the bottle of balm and, opening it, said: "Ramlal, I'm not well today."

Ramlal replaced the comb in the niche, turned round, and said: "Why didn't you say so in the first place?"

Rubbing balm into her forehead and temples, Sugandhi dispelled Ramlal's

misconception: "No, it's not that, Ramlal. I'm just not feeling well. Had too much to drink."

Ramlal's mouth began to water. "If there's any left over, let me have it. It'll sweeten up my mouth."

Sugandhi put the bottle on the table and said: "If any had been left over, I wouldn't have this wretched headache. Look, Ramlal! Bring the fellow who's waiting in the car in here."

"No, no, he can't come in", replied Ramlal. "He's a gentleman type. He was nervous even about waiting outside the alley in his car. You get dressed and come to the top of the alley. You'll be all right."

It was a question of seven and a half rupees. With such a severe headache, Sugandhi would never

have agreed to go, but she was in dire need of money. In the room next to hers lived a Madrasi woman whose husband had got run over by a car and died. This woman and her young daughter wanted to return to their land but they didn't have the fare, so they were in a pitiable state. Yesterday, Sugandhi had consoled her, saying: "Don't worry, sister. My man will soon be coming from Poona. I will take some money from him and arrange for you to go." Madho was due to come from Poona. But it was Sugandhi who had to arrange for the money. So she got up and quickly began to change her clothes. In five minutes, she had taken off the cotton *sari*, put on the flowered one, rouged her cheeks, and was ready. She drank another bowlful of cold water from the pitcher and set out with Ramlal. The alley, which was wider than marketplaces in small towns, was absolutely silent. The gas lamps, on their posts, sent forth a dimmer light than they used to. Rust had beclouded their glass panes. In this blind light a car could be seen standing at the end of the alley.

The shadowlike black car in the dim light, and the mysterious silence of the last watch of night — Sugandhi felt as if the ache in her head had spread out into the atmosphere. She felt a bitterness in the air, as if it too was heavy with the smell of brandy.

Ramlal went forward and spoke to the men sitting in the car. As Sugandhi approached the car, Ramlal stepped aside and said: "Here she is — she's a very good girl. She has been in the trade only a short while." Then he addressed her: "Sugandhi, come here. Sethji is calling you."

Twisting the end of her *sari* around one finger, Sugandhi came forward and stood at the car door. The Seth held his lighted cigarette up near her face. For a moment, the light dazzled Sugandhi's sleepfilled eyes. Then came the sound of a button being pressed and the light went out. The Seth snorted. Then, suddenly, the car engine started up and the car sped away.

Sugandhi had scarcely been able to collect her thoughts when the car took off. The sharp light of the cigarette was still in her eyes. She had not even been able to see the Seth's face properly. What was the meaning of that snort that still resounded in her ears? What? ... What?

She heard the pimp Ramlal's voice. "He didn't like you. OK, then, I'm off. Two hours wasted for nothing."

At this, Sugandhi's legs, arms, hands, suddenly came alive. Where is that car — where is that Seth — so the snort meant that he didn't like me....

An abuse rose from the pit of her stomach and stopped on the tip of her tongue. After all, whom could she abuse? The car had gone. Its red tail light was receding into the darkness of the marketplace, and Sugandhi felt as if the red spark was that snort, which was descending into her breast like a dagger. She felt like calling aloud: "Oh Seth, Oh Seth! Stop your car a minute." But the censure delivered by the Seth was all that was left; he himself was far away.

She was standing in the deserted marketplace. The flowered *sari* which she wore only on special occasions was fluttering in the light breeze of the last watch of night. The *sari* and its silky rustling seemed intolerable to Sugandhi. She felt like tearing it to pieces because, as it fluttered in the breeze, it seemed to be snorting at her.

She had powdered her cheeks and put on lipstick. When it came to her mind that she had dressed up in order to be liked, she broke into a sweat from shame. She tried one thought after another to rid herself of this shame: "I didn't dress up in order to show myself to this wretch. To dress up well is my habit — not just mine, everyone's — but — but — two at night and Ramlal the pimp — this marketplace — that car and the light of the cigarette." At this, blotches of light began to swim in the atmosphere wherever she looked, and the rumbling of the car engine came to her with every gust of wind.

The layer of balm on her forehead which had seemed so light when she was dressing, now, because of her sweating, began to sink into her pores and Sugandhi felt as if her head was not hers but someone else's. When a gust of wind touched her distillation laden brow, she felt as if a cold piece of tin had been cut out and stuck there. The ache in her head still persisted, but the din of her fast crowding thoughts seemed to bear down and bury the pain beneath it.

Sugandhi made several attempts to extricate the pain and make it rise above

her thoughts, but she failed. What she wanted was that somehow or other, every part of her should start to ache. She wanted pain in her head, pain in her legs, pain in her stomach, pain in her arms — such pain that she should be able to think of nothing but pain — and should forget everything else. As she thought thus, something caught at her heart —- was it pain? Her heart contracted for a moment and then expanded — what was this — shame! It was that snort which kept contracting and expanding in her heart.

Sugandhi had just started for home when she paused and began to think: "Ramlal the pimp thought that he hadn't liked my face — but then he didn't mention my face. What he said was: 'Sugandhi, he didn't like you.' He — he — didn't like my face — so what? I too don't like the faces of so many men — the one who came last moonless night, what an ugly mug he had — didn't I find him disgusting? When he came to sleep with me, didn't I feel sick? I barely managed to stop myself from vomiting. Fine. But, Sugandhi, you didn't decide him.

You didn't reject him — this Seth, with his car, spat in your face. What else did that snort mean? It meant: 'Jasmine oil on the head of this mole? What cheek! Ramlal, where did you get hold of this lizard? This is the slavegirl you were praising so highly — ten rupees for this woman — wouldn't a donkey be a better bargain...' "

Sugandhi stood, thinking, and hot waves ran through her from top to toe. Sometimes, she felt angry with herself and sometimes with Ramlal the pimp who had disturbed her rest at two in the night. But immediately she would find both of them blameless, and would think of the Seth. At the thought of him, her eyes, her ears, her arms, her legs, all yearned to catch sight of the Seth— the wish grew in her with increasing intensity that all that had happened might happen once more—only once more. She would slowly approach the car, a hand would emerge from the car and light up her face with a cigarette. A snort would be heard and then she — Sugandhi — would savage his face with her two hands. She would pounce like a wild cat and embed in that Seth's cheeks all her nails, which she kept long in accordance with modern fashion; she would grab him by the hair, drag him out and shower blows on him with her fists, and when she tired — when she tired she would begin to cry.

The thought of crying came to Sugandhi only because four great tears of anger and helplessness had formed in her eyes. Suddenly, Sugandhi asked her eyes: "Why are you crying? What's made you start dripping?" The question swam in those tears for some moments. The answer quivered on her lashes. Through her tears, Sugandhi stared a long time at that void into which the Seth's car had vanished.

A rumbling sound — where had it come from? Sugandhi started, and looked around, but saw no one — it was her heart fluttering. She had thought it was the car engine rumbling. Her heart — what had happened to her heart? Why of all days had it today fallen prey to this annoying malady of suddenly pausing and fluttering just like that old record which got stuck under the needle while singing: "The night passes and we count the stars", and began

to repeat: "stars, stars."

The sky was studded with stars. Sugandhi looked at them, and said: "How beautiful they are" — she wanted to divert her attention — but the word "beautiful" caused the thought to flash into her head: "These stars are beautiful, but how ugly you are. Have you forgotten that your face has just been derided?"

Sugandhi was not ugly. As she thought of this, all those features she had seen in the mirror over these five years began to come, one by one, before her eyes. No doubt, her looks were not what they were five years ago when she lived a carefree life in her parents' home. But she had not become ugly. Her looks were like those of any woman at whom men tend to stare when they pass by. She had all the qualities which she thought every man considers essential in a woman with whom he spends a couple of nights. She was young. Her body was well formed. Sometimes, while bathing, when her eyes fell on her thighs, she herself would find their roundness and softness attractive. She was sweetnatured. In these five years, scarcely any man had been displeased with her. She was very sociable, very kindhearted. Some time ago, at Christmas, when she was staying at Golpith, a young boy had come to her. In the morning, when he took down his coat from the peg in the next room, he found his purse missing. Sugandhi's servant had made off with the purse. The poor fellow was greatly distressed. He had come from Hyderabad to Bombay for a holiday. Now he didn't have the money for the return fare. Feeling sorry for him, Sugandhi returned him his ten rupees.

"What is it that is bad in me?" Sugandhi asked every object that came before her. The blind gas lamps, the iron posts, the square pavingstones — she looked at each one in turn and then raised her eyes to the sky that bent above her, but Sugandhi found no answer. The answer was within her. She knew that she was good, not bad; but she wanted someone else to endorse this. Anyone — anyone — anyone to put a hand on her shoulder right now, and say only these words: "Sugandhi, who says you are bad?

Whoever says you are bad is himself bad." No, it was not even necessary to say that. It would be enough if someone said: "Sugandhi, you are very good."

She began to wonder why she wanted someone to praise her. Never before had she felt this need so urgently. Why, today, was she looking even at inanimate objects as if she wished to impress upon them a sense of her goodness? Why was every atom in her body turning to a "mother" — why was she ready to be a mother and take everything on earth into her arms? Why did she feel like embracing the iron gas pole, laying her cheek against its cold iron surface, and drawing all its coldness into her warm cheeks?

For a little while, she felt as if the blind gas lamps, the iron poles, the square pavingstones and all the objects that surrounded her in the silence of the night, were looking at her with sympathy and that the sky, bending above her like a thick mudcoloured sheet with numberless small holes in it, also understood all her thoughts. And Sugandhi too felt that she understood the twinkling of the stars — but what ailed her? Why did she feel in herself the kind of weather which develops before the rains — she longed for all the pores of her body to open so that all that was boiling in her could come gushing out. But how could that be?

Sugandhi stood by the red letterbox at the end of the alley. The strong gusts of wind rattled the iron tongue which hung at the open mouth of this box. Sugandhi's eyes rose towards it and then in the direction where the car had gone but she saw nothing. How inten-sely she longed for the car to return once more — and —

"Let him not come — to hell with him — why should I upset myself — I'll go home, stretch out and have a good sleep. What good do these useless quarrels do — they are nothing but a headache for free. Come on, Sugandhi, let's go home — drink a bowl of cold water, apply a little balm and go to sleep — you'll have a first class sleep and everything will be all right. Good riddance to the Seth and his car."

With this thought, Sugandhi's burden was lightened, as if she had

just emerged from a bath in a cold pond. Her body felt light, as it did after she had offered prayers. As she walked home, her steps faltered more than once, because she was free from the burden of thought.

As she approached her house, the whole incident once more rose up in her mind with a pang, and spread like a pain into every atom of her being. Her steps grew heavy once more and she began to feel very deeply the fact that a man had just dishonoured her by calling her out of the house and slapping her face with a light in the open market. As she thought of this, she felt that someone was pressing her muscles with a hard thumb, as if examining her like a sheep, or goat to see if she had any flesh or was all hair and hide. That Seth — may god — Sugandhi wanted to wish a curse on him, but then, she thought, what would a curse achieve? She would get some satis-faction only if he came before her and she could write her contempt on to every atom of his being, could hurl such words at him as would trouble him all his life, could tear her clothes, stand naked before him, and say: "This is what you came to get, didn't you? Here, take it without paying the price — but neither you nor even your wretch of a father can buy me, what I am, that which is in me."

New ways of taking her revenge kept coming to Sugandhi's mind. If only she could confront this Seth just once—she would do this—no, that—take revenge in this way, no, like that—but when Sugandhi realis-ed that it would be hard for her to meet the Seth again, she was ready to settle for just one small abuse— a small abuse which would settle on his nose like a persistent fly and remain forever stuck there.

Caught up in this tangle of thoughts, she reached her room on the second floor. She took the key from her blouse and stretched out her hand to open the lock, but the key turned in air. There was no lock in the bolt. Sugandhi pressed the door inward and it made a slight scraping sound. Someone unbolted it from inside and the door yawned. Sugandhi went in.

Madho laughed beneath his whiskers and, closing the door, said to Sugandhi: "So you've followed my advice today—a morning walk is very good for the health. If you get up and go for a walk every morning, you'll get rid of all your indolence, and that backache of which you keep complaining will also disappear. You must have gone up to Victoria Garden at least?"

Sugandhi didn't answer nor did Madho seem particularly keen on an answer. In fact, when Madho talked, it was not necessary for Sugandhi to participate and when Sugandhi talked, it was not necessary for Madho to participate. They would say something or other, merely because some small talk had to be made.

Madho sat down on the cane chair whose back carried a large grimy stain from his oilsoaked head. And, crossing his legs, he began to stroke his whiskers.

Sugandhi sat on the bed, and said: "I was waiting for you today." Madho was slightly taken aback. "Waiting? How did you know I would come today?"

Sugandhi's compressed lips parted. A yellow smile appeared on them. "I dreamt of you at night. When I awoke, I was alone. So I felt like taking a walk. And..."

"And I came", said Madho, pleased. "The wisdom of our elders never fails. How truly has it been said—the heart finds a way to the heart. When did you have this dream?"

"Around four o'clock", reliepd Sugandhi.

Madho got up from the chair and sat next to Sugandhi. "And I dreamt of you at exactly two'o'clock. I saw you wearing a flowered *sari*—oh, exactly this one, and standing beside me. In your hands—what was in your hands? Ah yes, a bag full of rupees. You gave me the bag and said: 'Madho, why do you worry? Take this bag. What's the difference between your money and mine?' Sugandhi, I swear by you, I immediately got up, bought a ticket and came straight here. How am I to tell you what trouble I am in? Out of a blue sky a case has come up against me. Now I can get away only by warming the inspector's hands with twenty or thirty rupees. You're not tired, are you? Here, lie down, I'll press your feet. When one is not used to taking walks, one does get tired. Lie down with your feet

towards me."

Sugandhi lay down. She pillowed her head on her arms and said in a manner that was not her own: "Madho, who is this wretch who has filed a case against you? If there's any risk of going to jail, let me know. In such situations, even if one gives the police fifty or hundred instead of twenty or thirty, one is not a loser. Life is worth far more than money. That's enough—I'm not particularly tired. Drop the massage and tell me everything—the mere idea of a case has set my heart beating faster. When do you go back?"

Madho smelt the liquor on Sugandhi's breath. He decided that this was an opportune moment and said at once: "I have to return by the afternoon train. If I don't give the subinspector fifty or a hundred rupees by this evening—no need to give him too much, I think fifty will do the trick...."

"Fifty!" So saying, Sugandhi, got up slowly and, very much at her ease, went up to the four pictures that hung on the wall. Madho's picture was the third from the left. He was sitting with his hands on his thighs in front of a curtain with large flowers on it. In one hand he held a rose. On a triangular table nearby were two fat volumes. The idea of having his picture taken had so overwhelmed Madho at the time it was taken that everything about him seemed to emerge from the picture, shouting: "I am being photographed! I am being photographed!" Madho was staring with all his might at the camera and it seemed as if he was suffering acutely when the picture was taken.

Sugandhi burst out laughing—her laughter was so shrill and sharp that Madho felt as if needles were being run into him. He got up from the bed and went to Sugandhi. "At whose picture are you laughing so loudly?"

Sugandhi pointed to the first picture on the left, which was that of the municipal sanitary inspector. "His — that municipal inspector's. Just look at his snout. He said a queen had fallen in love with him." She snorted. "What cheek!" And Sugandhi wrenched the frame off with such force that the nail too came off the wall along with some plaster.

Madho had not yet recovered from his surprise when Sugandhi hurled the frame out of the window. The frame fell to the ground from the second storey and they heard the crash of the glass breaking. As it crashed, Sugandhi said: "When the queen sweeperwoman comes to collect the rubbish, she will take along this king of mine too."

Once again that shrill, piercing laughter burst from Sugandhi's lips, as if she was sharpening a knife on them. Madho gave a forced smile. Then he too laughed: "Hee hee hee..."

With one hand Sugandhi removed the picture of the man in a turban and her other hand went towards the next frame. In a second the frame and its nail were in Sugandhi's hand.

Laughing loudly, she snorted and tossed both frames out of the window. When the frame fell from the second storey to the ground and they heard the sound of glass breaking, Madho felt as if something inside him had broken. Yet, somehow, he forced himself to laugh and say: "I too didn't like that photo,"

Slowly, Sugandhi came towards Madho, and then she said: "You didn't like that photo — but I ask you, what is there in you for anyone to like — your bulbous nose, your hairy forehead, your swollen nostrils, your crooked ears, your stinking mouth, your grimy body — you didn't like your own photo." She snorted. "Why would you like it? It had hidden your vices from view. That's what the times are like. One who hides others' vices is termed bad—"

Madho kept retreating before her. Finally, when he came up against the wall, he said, trying to sound forceful: "Look, Sugandhi, it seems to me that you have started your trade again — now I'm telling you for the last time..."

Sugandhi took him up and carried on: "If you start your trade again, everything will be over between you and me. If you

let any man stay over at your place again, I'll take you by your plait and throw you out. I'll send you this month's expenses by money order as soon as I reach Poona.. Oh yes. what's the rent of this room?"

Madho was stupefied.

Sugandhi went on: "I'll tell you — the rent of this room is fifteen rupees, and my rent is ten rupees — and, as you know, two fifty goes to the pimp. That leaves seven fifty, doesn't it? Now, for this wretched seven fifty, I promised to give you something which I just could not give and you came to take something which you could not take. What was the relation between us? Nothing. It was only those ten rupees which were ringing between us. So we made an arrangement whereby you would need me and I would need you. To begin with, there were ten rupees between us. Today, fifty are ringing between us.

— you hear the sound and so do I. And why have you made such a mess of your hair?"

So saying, Sugandhi flipped Madho's cap off with one finger. Madho was much upset by this gesture. Very sternly, he said: "Sugandhi...!"

Sugandhi took Madho's handkerchief from his pocket, smelt it and threw it on the floor. "How bad these rags smell. Throw them out."

"Sugandhi!" Madho shouted aloud.

"You son of Sugandhi", said Sugandhi fiercely. "What did you come here for? Is it your mother who lives here, who you expect will give you fifty rupees? Or are you such a handsome young bridegroom that I should fall in love with you?

You dog, you cheapster, you dare try to bully me! Do you think I'll be pushed around by you? You beggar, who do you think you are? A thief or a pickpocket? What are you doing in my house at this hour? Shall I call the police? Whether or not there's a case against you in Poona, I can certainly file one against you here —"

Madho grew alarmed. All he could say in a submissive way was: "Sugandhi, what has happened to you?"

"Your mother's head — who are you to ask me such a question — get out of here or —" Sugandhi's loud voice awakened her mangy dog who was sleeping with his head on the slippers. He got up in a flurry and began to bark at Madho. As he barked, Sugandhi began to laugh loudly.

Madho was frightened. He bent to pick up his cap but Sugandhi growled at him: "Don't you dare! Let it lie there. Go ahead; as soon as you reach Poona I'll send it to you by money order." At this, she began to laugh even louder and, still laughing, sat down on the cane chair. Her mangy dog barked Madho out of the room. After chasing him down the stairs, when the dog returned, wagging his stump of a tail and sat near Sugandhi's feet, his ears twitching, Sugandhi started. She saw a terrible stillness all around her — a stillness such as she had never seen before. She felt as if each thing was empty — as if a train loaded with passengers had unloaded them at railway stations and was now standing, all alone, in the iron shed. This void which had suddenly appeared within Sugandhi distressed , her sorely. For quite a while, she tried to fill the void but in vain. She would stuff her mind full of countless thoughts but it was like a sieve. As fast as she filled it, it emptied itself out.

For a long time, she continued to sit on the cane chair. When, after much thought, she found no way to engage her mind, she picked up her mangy dog and, lying down on the broad teak bed with him in her embrace, fell asleep.

(translated by Ruth Vanita from the original Urdu in Devanagri script)