

Epiphany

Mudra Rakshasa

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: The Hindi original was published on pages 145–160 of the short story collection *Pratihimsā tathā anya kahāniyām* (Delhi: Vikās Paperbacks, 1992). Its background is based on an actual incident. This translation is © 2007 by Robert A. Hueckstedt. Revised 2025.

PAC refers to the Provincial Armed Constabulary. According to its website it “was created to prevent frequent deployment of the Army in grave law & order situations which the local police could not handle on its own.”

Sometimes even the most opaque darkness thins out before the eyes of a man who, at that moment, prefers not to see. Humdum saheb was not afraid of death, he was afraid of light, afraid of what he might see. The night was barely half passed. Growing on the bank of the canal, a large clump of long, bow-shaped reeds fanned out clearly between his eyes and the sky like the black light of pomegranate fireworks. The air was completely still, and Humdum saheb was able to see only two things – the thin, long, sword-like reeds with their black leaves, and behind them the sky, stretched out like the cold screen of an empty theater. He noticed the water, up above his ankles, his feet soaked. Then, as if he had dove underwater for a long time and had just broken the surface again, his lungs suddenly took in a long delayed or constricted breath, along with which arose nausea. This time it was not from the pain in his ribs or from terror. It came from a stink, the stink of blood, his own blood or the blood of others.

He had probably lost consciousness because again he felt the pain that burned and flared up from his ribs to his shoulder and ear. It was fortunate he had now only that one unbearable burning sensation because when the bullet hit, it felt as if someone had taken a heavy axe and split his body in two and then was wringing out his ribs. He had screamed. Immediately. In a voice dripping with pain. He wondered now if he had been the only one to scream. Many were there. In the darkness he had been unable to make an accurate count, but it was around a hundred.

Before death a man's body probably undergoes a number of transformations — his voice, for instance. He completely forgets his language. Not one word remains in his memory. His ears stop listening. Overwhelmed by terror, his blood screams so loudly he becomes deaf. Maybe that's what happened. Besides Humdum saheb other people must have screamed. But no one heard them. He couldn't even recall for sure if he had heard the sound of the bullet.

He wanted to stir. He did not. He could not. After all this thinking it felt as if someone was wringing out his ribs again and playing with his wound. A suppressed moan escaped from his throat, but he immediately became silent again. After a few moments of terrifying silence a scream arose as if from a strangled throat. Humdum saheb became even more frightened. He himself had already made a mistake by moaning, and if someone else was alive, then by letting out a scream, he was surely calling Doomsday down upon their heads. They'll come back, find them and shoot them again. Humdum saheb stopped breathing, closed his eyes in terror, and waited, but fortunately, no one returned.

Nevertheless, the terror did not abate. Nor was the darkness sufficient. If they were to come back and look carefully, they would be able to find Humdum or the other man who had let out a scream. An even more frightening situation, however, would materialize in four or five hours. Would it be possible to stay alive that long? He lost hope, lowered his head and supported his forehead on the reeds' sharp leaves. Both his arms, stretched out like those of the man on the cross, were entangled in the reeds.

His forehead leaning on the reeds, he was suffused by an even deeper despair. Or perhaps it was sleep or partial unconsciousness. The stink of blood became even sharper and more unbearable, as if he had been dumped on the bank of a blood river. His helplessness brought about a sudden spasm of weeping, but tears were impossible. Splinters pierced his dry throat, and burning seized his eyes. But there was no convulsion and no tears.

“My God, what is this? What harm did I ever cause anyone?” No sooner had that thought crossed his mind after again regaining consciousness than that other one moaned again, as if he were being strangled. That sound, amid a sharp stink of blood — it seemed to Humdum saheb as if death, his smelly white teeth glistening, were snarling into his ears. In order to save himself from the smelly jaws of Death he would have dissolved down even more against the reeds, if the pain in his ribs had not become acute again. He crushed his teeth together and drove his forehead even further into the reeds.

Police Superintendent Shyamlal also smelled the odor of Death's teeth. On his bicycle, he was coming along the side of the canal with two officers who were

talking loudly to each other. The Superintendent took another deep breath. This time he did not smell the odor. So he thought he had been mistaken. But just then one of the officers broke the train of their conversation and asked, “Abé, where’s that smell coming from, bé?”

The Superintendent smelled it again, stronger than before.

The other officer suggested someone might have dumped the body of a dead animal in the canal, but even after saying that he, too, tensed up in fear. All three felt this was not the smell of a dead animal but of fresh blood. And right then they heard a man moan. In the stillness of the night the Superintendent shivered. All three immediately stopped their cycles and dismounted.

The Superintendent growled, “Who’s there, bé? Who is it?”

In response an even more frightening silence fanned out over them.

One officer switched on his flashlight and said, “Abé, who are you? Why don’t you speak?”

The other officer said, “Saheb, the sound seemed to come from the bank of the canal here.”

The odor became even stronger, and they were sure the source of it had to be nearby. They also realized the ground was wet. Just then, almost screaming, the first officer said, “Saheb, dead . . . dead bodies!”

The Superintendent turned the beam of his flashlight toward the sloping bank of the canal. There, in that thin ray of light, smeared with blood that was flowing down into the canal, were bodies, all tangled up with one another — ten, twenty, twenty-five, fifty, a hundred — in his life he had never seen so many bodies and

so much blood. He immediately turned away. He thought he would scream, but instead of letting out any sound at all, he jumped away from the slope back up onto the street and quickly ran off toward the city. He ran as if Death had noticed him, had left the corpses behind, and had sprung out after him, flexing its terrible claws. When he came to the wide street that crossed the bridge over the canal, his running became much easier. His station was straight through the large round intersection, but he didn't go there. He turned right, took two immediate lefts and came out running, without breaking pace, onto a narrow road.

At the end of that road was the Police Captain's rather large house. Outside the gate was a small shelter, for the watchman.

Had it been any other day the Superintendent would have certainly stopped at the shelter and spoken with the guard on duty. After some pleasantries he would have then asked about the Captain saheb. Now, however, he tore through the darkness, jumped past the guard and went straight through the gates.

Stunned and shocked, the guard yelled, "Aré! . . . hey! . . ."

The Captain had just returned from a dance performance at the Ghaziabad Art Centre. He had just set one foot down out of the jeep when the half-crazed Superintendent appeared before him. The officer driving the jeep jumped out and stood behind the Superintendent.

The Superintendent said nothing. He merely gave a mechanical salute as if he were wiping sweat off his brow with the back of his hand. He did not put his hand back down. His joints seemed to lose their hold. He wavered. The Captain frowned at him intently and asked, "What is it?"

After much effort one word came twice unclearly out of the Superintendent's mouth — “Sir . . . !” That form of address was so fractured and halting it was as if it had been squeezed for a long time in his sweaty fist.

The Captain quickly understood the reason for the Superintendent's nervousness. One of those held in custody at the station had died at his hands. With firmness but still with some softness in his voice he said, “Speak clearly. What happened?”

“Sir” came out again unclearly. The Superintendent began to sway as if he were about to faint.

“What happened? Come right out with it! Stop all this nonsense,” said the Captain. “You want some water? Bring him some water.”

The officer raced inside, but the guard returned first with a brass lota full of water.

To calm down, the Superintendent took some time. Meanwhile, both officers, along with the Superintendent's bicycle, arrived at the gate.

The Captain simply could not believe the description the Superintendent gave of the corpses. Again, he studied the Superintendent's face carefully. He wasn't drunk. He wasn't high from drinking bhang.

The Captain still couldn't believe it. “Are you sure there are that many corpses?”

“Yes, sir. Hundreds.”

“Where? Where are they?”

“On the border, sir. In the canal on the Meerut-Ghaziabad border.”

“In the canal? In Ghaziabad?”

“Yes, sir.”

The Captain quickly entered the room in his home he used for an office. Along with the harsh static coming from the radio someone kept delivering the same message over and over again in a loud voice. The Captain sent word of the corpses to the Control Room, and taking the still-unsteady Superintendent with him, he set out for the canal bank.

In his confusion the Superintendent had not remembered to fix in his mind the location of the bodies. Nothing was on the canal bank where he had the jeep stop. But for the sharp chirping of the crickets in the far-flung darkness all was still. The water in the canal was flowing slowly and silently.

Had he experienced a nightmare? Was he wrong? The Superintendent was beside himself. Once again his voice failed him. This second jolt was about to take away his consciousness when a groan came to their ears, as if someone were vomiting.

It was Humdum saheb. He had held down the nausea for a long time but finally, it suddenly burned through his dry throat and came out. On top of the frightful stench of blood and the helplessness of his situation, he was not at all prepared for this disgusting event, but it, too, he accepted. The wrenching of his gut intensified the pain that coursed from his ribs to his shoulders. To fight it off he tried to vomit again, but the only sounds that came out of his throat were a frightening *gon-gon* and a whimper of despair.

Then, what he feared happened. Many heavy footsteps came running nearby.

Then a vehicle. On the dark bank of the canal the flashlights and the headlights of the jeep produced an explosion of harsh, dazzling light. He caught a glimpse of a policeman's uniform. Ignoring the muck, he gritted his teeth and buried his forehead deeper in the reeds. Not for very long, however, was he able to hold himself in that position. This time he wanted to see clearly everything leading up to his death.

“He's alive!”

The sound of those words sent a shiver into the cold water and into his even colder ankles. But he did not close his eyes. Seeing his bloodshot eyes in the light of the flashlight, the Captain bent over him and said, “Don't be afraid, come on out.”

Still, he did not move a muscle. He didn't so much as blink. In order to see him better the Captain placed one foot down on the sloping bank of the canal. His foot never held. He slipped, as if on smooth mud. When he could finally get his legs under himself again and stand up, his boots, uniform and palms were covered with thick, dark red blood mixed with black dirt. And in the light coming from his jeep he saw that all along the slope, down to the water, were a large number of corpses all tangled up with one another.

“What has happened?”

An officer said, “Sir, bullets. They've been shot.”

In all there were seventy-eight bodies. Seventy-six. Two were still alive. Their eyes wide open, the dead stared in disbelief at the officers pulling them up. Only after getting the bodies and the wounded to the hospital did the Captain

sense the stink of blood. Leaving two Senior Superintendents at the scene, the Captain returned home. He wanted to bathe immediately. For the first time in his life he bathed in full uniform. He watched intently as the streams of water from the showerhead slowly loosened and washed away from his uniform those reddish-black spots. When he finished bathing and stepped out, he felt a peculiar chill.

The wounds of the two survivors were not very serious. Humdum saheb's bullet had entered between his shoulder and his second rib and had come out of his body obliquely. The second rib had been badly broken, and the flesh below his armpit had been ripped apart and hung out of his skin. He had lost a lot of blood, for sure, but his lungs were unscathed. The other man had been hit by two bullets in the hip and upper thigh. Both men had been operated on, and by the afternoon of the next day, they had regained consciousness.

The Captain himself took their statements. First, that of the other man. His pain had lessened, but he struggled for breath when he spoke. Nevertheless, he spoke with firm conviction. "Saheb, Allah is Lord, and I swear by His name, if I ever stashed weapons, or, or, participated in any riot . . . !"

"Fine. That's for later. First, tell me your name and where you live."

"Saheb, that's what I was explaining. I'm a poor man, saheb, always minding my own business. They shot me by mistake. I'm innocent."

"Tell me your name — what's your name?"

"Abdul Rauf."

"Where do you live?"

“In Maliyana. The vegetable market. I fix punctures.”

“What happened?”

“Saheb, as Allah is my witness —”

“Fine, but tell me what happened.” The Captain was losing patience. “How did you arrive at the canal? Who shot you?”

“The PAC, saheb. The PAC shot us and dumped our bodies. I was innocent, saheb, but they surrounded us, they surrounded all of us.”

“Where did they surround you?”

“In our homes. There were thousands of them, thousands of the PAC officers. They threw everything we owned out on the street. They hit our women and children with their rifle butts till we came out from our hiding places. They gathered all of us together outside. All the men of the neighborhood, young, old, it didn't matter — they didn't leave anyone behind. They herded us all outside the city. Then their commanding officer said, not here, take them to Ghaziabad. That's all, saheb. They took us to the canal, made us all line up and boom boom boom, started firing. One by one they gunned us down, saheb. One-by-one. They killed us all, saheb!” He couldn't hold back his tears any longer. Tenderly, the Captain held his hand.

The whole thing was both terrifying and head-spinning. Soon after dark the PAC forced people out of their homes in Maliyana, took them to the border of Ghaziabad, and shot them all. According to Abdul Rauf they numbered three to four hundred, but if no corpses had floated away in the canal, then along with the two survivors, the number was seventy-eight.

Next, it was Humdum saheb's turn. For a long time, though, he didn't speak. Sometimes, when asked, he gave his name and address. Then he went silent again.

"Is the pain too much?" Asked the Captain, about to give up.

"No, huzoor, I'm much better. Quite well." Then he fell silent again. He stopped staring at the Captain and turned his gaze toward the ceiling. When his eyes perhaps grew tired, he closed them and recited a poem very softly:

Oh tongue, trouble not a man of peace;

Say nothing to cause distress.

Then he fell silent again. When he still refused to speak even after much cajoling, the Captain lost hope and stood up. As he started to leave, Humdum saheb raised his right hand slightly and said softly, "Listen, please." The Captain stopped, returned to his bedside, and said, "Tell me, please!"

"Do me the honour, please, of taking a seat."

"Okay, I'll sit down, but I wish you would give your statement. Are you in a lot of pain?"

"Yes. In my heart. With humility, sir, I say that this country is being made the victim of a huge conspiracy. I know, sir, that you are an honest and trustworthy officer. You yourself must be knowing. This is the pain that's in my heart."

"Fine, but please tell me in detail about this massacre."

"Massacre! Exactly! Look, at this moment our country's Prime Minister the Honourable Rajiv Gandhi saheb is being attacked from all sides. The opposition

has become the puppet of foreign powers and wants to remove him. They want to divide the country. That's why they've started leveling vile accusations against him. You know, sir, that he is the heir of a very wealthy family and he is the entire country's leader — what business could he possibly have with a commission on howitzers and submarines.”

“You're exactly right, sir, but what I want to know is who shot all of you?” asked the Captain, again mustering his patience.

“By the will of Allah, huzoor, a pure-hearted soul such as yourself knows full well.” Humdum saheb took a little breath and in a weak voice began his story.

“Sir, people say that the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, Virbahadur Singh, may Allah give him long life, was behind the riots in Meerut, and he did that to divert people's attention from the Bofors controversy and so that by means of martial law he could stop the traitorous demonstrations of Vishwanath Pratap Singh. I ask you, huzoor, where's the evil in that? After all, this is politics, huzoor, it's not fun-and-games. If, in order to save the country from splitting up and in order to strengthen the hand of Rajiv Gandhi, who is dear to everyone's heart — if that requires some sacrificial victims in Meerut, what's the harm? It's the citizen's duty to sacrifice whatever he must for his country. Huzoor, the poet said, ‘First of all, be a man.’”

Losing patience again, the Captain ran his fingers through his hair and shook his head as if he were getting the dust off it — then, with some irritation, he said, “Look, bhai, please tell me what I'm asking you.”

“Sir? Yes, I'm well. I'm well, huzoor.” Humdum saheb became quite

despondent.

“Is it true that PAC officers were the ones who took you and the others to the canal and shot you?”

“May I humbly state, sir: secessionist powers and groups who would break up the country — where all aren’t they, huzoor?”

The Captain took a deep breath and said, “Humdum saheb, I think you should rest now.”

“Sir? Yes, sir. Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.” The despondency written on Humdum saheb’s face deepened.

He did not remain many days in the hospital. Bandaged up from his shoulders to below his ribs, he took the bus to Meerut. By the time he reached Maliyana he had decided that after visiting his wife and children there he needed to meet with the Governor saheb as soon as possible. Many newspapers had already been shouting that it was the PAC who had killed seventy-six men on the Ghaziabad border. It was his responsibility to act decisively.

Maliyana was not as he had left it; it wasn’t even as he had lived it. PAC officers were stationed on both sides of the bridge that crosses the border on Maliyana’s main street. The rattletrap let him off before the border on the corner of the street going to the right. From there it was not a long walk, but he had not at all expected that officers would confront him on the outskirts of town. Despite himself he became afraid. Turning back, however, was impossible. He strengthened his heart and with even steps set out toward the bridge.

The officers were of an odd, unethical-looking type. Instead of minding their

own business, they started staring at Humdum saheb. Pierced by those eyes, he continued walking as if someone had shot him full of arrows and taken his life away. Perhaps because of curiosity, they were particularly restless. When Humdum saheb reached the place that was exactly the middle point among them all, one of the officers said, in a particularly impolite way, “Hey, mianji!”

“Call him mullahji, mullahji. Where do you think you’re going?”

Humdum saheb stopped and asked in his most polite manner, “Did you make a request, sir?”

The officers laughed. “Abé, you recite poetry!”

When they finished their laughter, one of them said seriously, “Where are you going?”

“Sir? I am going home, sir.”

“Where you coming from?”

“From the hospital, sir. I had an injury.”

“So? Don’t you know there’s a curfew?”

“Curfew, sir? But I’m only going to my own home, officer.”

“Didn’t you hear me say there’s a curfew? How would you get home? Do you have a pass?”

“No, sir, no, I do not have a pass, but I’m only . . .”

“Mianji, take my advice and go back; you’ll just get in trouble. I’m treating you with respect now, but if you persist, I’ll speak with my stick.”

“Officer!” Humdum saheb was beside himself. “If I – I mean can I get a pass here? Look, I am . . .” Humdum saheb wanted to tell him that he was a famous

national poet. So famous in fact that he had sat face-to-face with the Governor saheb Bahadur and recited his poems to him, but he refrained.

Perhaps the officer wasn't so bad. He explained, "Mullahji, passes were processed here before but not anymore. Now you have to do it in Meerut. Appear before the DM; it'll be done. The fact that you were in the hospital gives you a strong case."

Humdum saheb looked at the officers again. It seemed he had no other choice.

Things weren't any better in Meerut. Way before even reaching the bus stand on the Meerut-Ghaziabad line he was stopped. "Who are you? Where are you going? Do you have a pass?" He was thus surrounded outside the city line as if he were an escaped convict.

After showing many times, with utmost despair and disgrace, the bandages covering his ribs, all he got was the officers' permission to go back. But back where? After country and patriotic duty, for the first time he thought of home. This year he had had the painters mix in yellow clay with the whitewash, and after they had finished, he himself had painted the door panels with a blue oil-based paint. The doors glistened. No matter how his irritable wife treated him, whenever she spoke with a neighbor she always showed her superiority by mentioning his poetry and his meeting with the Governor saheb.

Last year, on the occasion of the twenty-sixth of January, after much effort on his part, he had received an invitation from the Information Department to the gathering of poets to be held at the Governor's Mansion. He was also invited to the tea party at the Governor's at four in the afternoon the same day. He will

never forget the pride he felt at being present at that tea party. So many very important people! the medals on the police officers' chests shining! high-ranking leaders! servants standing nearby with dignified attention! magnificent sweets set out decoratively on beautiful tablecloths! carpets underfoot as thick as grass!

Humdum saheb's children interrogated him mercilessly about the appearance and taste of each and every sweet. Then, armed with that information they made sweets out of clay and stones, and they made tables by stretching paper over bricks, and for many days they played the Governor's Tea Party.

Munna the meatseller now considered Humdum saheb a particularly important and honored gentleman. Whenever he shopped there, Munna forced him to sit on the fly-covered platform and drink tea.

In one way or another Humdum saheb related the whole incident at the Governor's Mansion to the shopkeeper from whom he bought rationed goods. The shopkeeper wanted a ration-store license. Twice, he stopped Humdum saheb and treated him to a bottle of cold sherbet.

Now, he didn't remember any more than that. It seemed as if, in the meantime, outside the house an entire age had passed and much haze had occluded his memory. Even against his will he made a huge decision. He'll meet the Governor. Granted, the kurta he wore over his bandages and naked body was not at all appropriate, but it would have to do. The Captain had certainly been kind to give him a kurta and pajama when he was about to leave the hospital. And, be it the government's money or his own, the hundred rupees he had given him he had so far barely touched. Meeting with the Governor saheb to solve his current problem

was sort of like using a cannon to kill an ant, but Humdum saheb saw no other way.

The Governor's Mansion did not seem as attractive as before. The guard at the large gate did not even notice him, but before he reached the small pond two men stopped him.

Fortunately, they behaved with some civility and showed him the way to the welcome room. There, a handful of people were discussing something very animatedly. Humdum saheb greeted them very politely and stood in a corner.

The topic of their discussion was someone's vacation, whose personnel file had gone missing. When they grew tired of their debate, one of them noticed Humdum saheb and said, "Yes?"

"Greetings, huzoor. I am Humdum Maliyanvi. Last year, on the twenty-sixth of January his Governorship invited this worthless one to his poets' assembly."

"Yes. Right. Please have a seat."

Humdum saheb sank onto the chair in a rather awkward fashion, and with a smile ruined by the pain that shot up from his ribs he said, "Sir, I am coming from the hospital. A strange incident occurred."

The men became somewhat wary. "What happened?"

"What can I say, huzoor. Call it my own misfortune. It is in this context that I wanted to request the grace of his Governorship Hazrat Arif saheb."

"Oh!" The man thought Humdum saheb was asking for help in getting treatment. Sympathetically he said, "The Governor saheb is going away. You should meet with the Health Minister."

“Sir?”

“If you would like, I’ll give you a slip.”

“Yes, sir, thank you. But the issue I wish to see his Governorship about – what I mean is, you know, I have a request.”

“Regarding what? You may tell me.”

Humdum saheb hesitated a little, then he slowly began to explain. “Huzoor, the thing is I’m a resident of Maliyana — exactly, the same Malilyana where a curfew is now in force. What’s more, sir, what can I say, I am one of those two who, along with the other hundred to a hundred-and-fifty, were taken to Ghaziabad and gunned down by the PAC.”

“What? You mean you — that is — I mean —”

“Huzoor, I am one of those. By Allah’s grace I survived.”

But the man had already stopped listening. In a flurry he changed his tune and said, “If you would just wait a moment, I’ll be right back.”

“Excellent, huzoor, excellent.”

“We’ll be taking tea?”

“No, sir, thank you. If I might have a glass of water, though —?”

“Water?” The man ordered water and tea to be brought, and he disappeared into the mansion.

After some delay he returned. In the meantime Humdum saheb had been given a glass of water but no tea. While re-entering the room the man said, “His Governorship was just about to leave, but he has decided to give you a few minutes.”

“Allah be praised!” said Humdum saheb, his eyes raised to the ceiling. “I am most grateful!”

The Governor saheb was in his office. Very respectfully he had Humdum saheb sit next to him on the settee. Humdum saheb was choked with emotion. How could people say such things against the government when its highest ruler was so compassionate and kind? For some time, without saying a word, he stared at the Governor saheb with tearful eyes. The Governor realized his emotional state. After waiting a few moments he asked tenderly, “How are you?”

“By your grace, kind sir, I’m alive. And that too, huzoor, I attribute to the grace of Allah that I have been granted a few more days of life so that I might raise my voice against the secessionists and the enemies of the country. Just look, sir, the responsibility even for this incident in Ghaziabad they’re trying to pin on the government when everybody knows, sir, that nowadays there is an open conspiracy against our country’s leaders.”

The Governor carefully placed a newspaper in front of him. In it was printed the Chief Minister’s speech regarding the incident in Ghaziabad. In that speech he maintained that the murder of seventy-six Muslims was an out-and-out lie.

Reading, Humdum saheb responded excitedly, “He did the right thing, sir. That’s exactly the kind of response needed to quell this conspiracy.”

“Did you read further?” asked the Governor.

Humdum saheb started reading the rest of the article. The more he read the more unsettled he became. When he finished, his bloodshot eyes just stared at the Governor. After some time his voice burst out all on its own, “Sir . . . I . . . as

Allah is my witness, Sir . . . this is all a lie! A complete lie! I . . . I mean . . . two years ago some Pakistani poets came and of course I met with them, but as Allah is my witness I've never had any contact with a Pakistani spy — but huzoor, listen, do you yourself believe what's written here? You know, I, sir, I know Rauf myself. He can't even fix a puncture in a bicycle tire, how's he going to make illegal weapons? I . . . Sir . . . this is all too much, huzoor — sure, it's perfectly fine that . . . but huzoor, you know me, sir, last year you yourself praised my poems for their national unity, huzoor, believe me, sir, this is all a lie, a complete fabrication”

The Governor put his hand out and softly squeezed his shoulder. Had it been any other time Humdum saheb would have been overwhelmed with emotion at this show of kindness and for months he would have expounded on the Governor's sense of human dignity and respect, but this time, the Governor's hand being on his wound, Humdum did not feel dignity but a deep pain all the way down to his heart.