

# Displaced

Mudra Rakshasa

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: The Hindi original was published on pages 104–112 of the short story collection *Merī kahāniyām* (Delhi: Diśā Prakāśan, 1983). Its background is based on the refugee crisis caused by the 1972 War for Independence in Bangladesh. This translation is © 2007 by Robert A. Hueckstedt.

He bent down, looked at his clothes, and spat. He always spat when things were good. His clothes were nothing special. In fact, not too long ago he had put a patch on one of the knees of his discolored pants. After getting up into the cart, he had wanted to assure himself that the patch was still where he had put it. It was. Oonchoo the horsecart man told him the train had come. He expressed disbelief. He knew when it was due. He knew the schedule of all the trains. Urging his horse on, Oonchoo challenged him and repeated, “It’s the truth, Kauwa; a train has come.”

Kauwa knew the arrival and departure times of every single train. Only five came. One of those came in the middle of the night, so he didn’t bother with it. But he was well acquainted with all the others that came from early in the morning till evening. He didn’t feel he needed to know where the train came from or where it was going. As it wise, only the morning train cost of a problem. It stopped too long, and its initial departure point was the station here, so it left an incredible stinking mess behind it.

A train really had come. A lot of commotion filled the station. But why did this train seem, even at first glance, so inferior even to the morning one? He rushed out onto the platform. What a ghastly looking train! The compartments were stuffed. At first, it looked like the carcass of an animal that maggots had taken over. Outside the train a lot of men in khaki uniforms were crisply dashing about. He easily recognized them and decided he would keep a safe distance away.

Even though few people usually got out at that station, Kauwa was quite astonished to see that no one was getting out; all those people were traveling through! As soon as he had reached the platform, his hand was already set to go, but then he put it back in his pocket. Usually he didn't steal or pick pockets; he begged. He spiked things to eat and drink, and that was it; he had no other concerns.

But that really wasn't the point. Often he didn't get anything when a train came. But just looking at this train made him feel queasy. One thing was that these khaki-uniformed men were not the usual sort; that is, they were different from the police who patrolled the intersections. Those guys you could talk with sometimes, but these looked like they weren't human beings but khaki bags that machines had been stuffed into. The other thing was that the passengers looked like real scum. No desire was evident on their faces either to leave someplace or to arrive someplace else.

The unusual arrival time of the train, on the one hand, and on the other, this atmosphere — Kauwa's heart shrivelled up. He bent over, looked at the patch on

his pants, and spent. Just as soon as he straightened up, a peculiar fear made his shoulders twitch. Somebody grabbed his shirt collar from behind and yelled, “Hey!”

Kauwa turned and looked. One of those in a khaki uniform. He became scared. And then another one of them came running over, “Sir, this man . . .”

“How did he get out of the train? Put him inside!” The one who had grabbed him by the shirt pushed him violently toward the other.

“But I . . . Sir . . . !” Kauwa wanted to say something.

“You!!!” the other one roared and practically dragged him toward the train. Near the train were two other uniformed men. They pulled him off the ground by his two arms like a hog and threw him in a compartment. Once inside, he landed very nimbly on his feet. After he had pulled himself together for a few moments, he decided he had to object, but just then someone bit him on the calf so hard he almost jumped off his feet. Immediately beneath his legs sat a filthy boy of about ten, gently rubbing his toes. Kauwa’s rather large shoes had probably landed right on them. The boy’s face was totally black, and a layer of grime was on top of that. Rubbing his toes, he continued to frown at Kauwa with his big white eyes.

“Are you the one who bit me?” Kauwa said with irritation. The boy didn’t answer, but he stretched out his lizard-like fingers, grabbed Kauwa’s pants, and sank his teeth in harder than before. Kauwa squirmed helplessly and began cursing. The boy again busied himself with his toes. When he finished swearing, Kauwa took a look at the compartment he was in. It seemed strange to him that everyone in the entire compartment sat there as if he didn’t exist.

“Whose kid is this?” Kauwa grumbled. No answer. Maybe they didn’t even hear him.

Very quickly he became familiar with the compartment’s sombre atmosphere. Overcome by curiosity, he started looking at every detail of the travelers’ faces. It seemed as if the skin had been flayed away. He couldn’t understand. While trying to guess if it was permissible to go outside the compartment or not, something else happened to him. Quickly, one after another, some men climbed into the compartment carrying heavy baskets in their hands. In those baskets were several things to eat and drink. The last man’s basket was too heavy. He yelled at Kauwa, “What are you doing standing there! grab it!!”

Kauwa didn’t need any more encouragement than that. He quickly grabbed it. It was full of hot, foreign-style white bread. He snatched up a piece. But then he was astonished to see that the bread was being distributed to everyone in the compartment.

He forgot his anger at being mistakenly thrown inside the train. As it was, he tried to get tea twice, but the tea boy noticed him. Kauwa wasn’t without hope. He himself began to help distribute the bread, and thus he was able to swipe three more pieces. He tried to swipe some cookies that were being given to the children, but it didn’t work out. The kid who had bitten him began by eating the cellophane that covered the little packet of cookies. Kauwa stared at him closely, and the kid looked at him with his big white eyes. Kauwa put out his hand and wanted to tell the kid not to eat the wrapper. Suddenly the boy let out a scream and crept like an irritated animal toward the area beneath the bench.

Kauwa turned his attention away. He didn't want to eat the stolen bread right where he was standing. He came as far as the door and looked out. The khaki-uniformed men were not far away. He didn't want to get down on the platform right in front of them. He made his strange, off-key whistle and got down. A uniformed man yelled at him as soon as he saw him out of the train. This time Kauwa didn't give them the chance to push him around, he pushed himself back up into the compartment. Behind him one of the khaki uniforms came inside, silently investigated the compartment, and stood there blocking the door. Seeing that that way out was blocked, Kauwa fretted. After thinking about it a little, he gathered his courage and decided that, no matter what, he would have to raise his objection. He had just slipped over toward the khaki uniform when the look in that man's eyes made him hesitate. Then Kauwa smiled a little. He felt that smiling wouldn't be enough, so he even laughed a little. Then he said, "Sir, my respects!"

Irritated, the man in the uniform asked, "What is it?"

Kauwa couldn't figure out how to answer him. Becoming a little serious he said, "The thing is, I mean, this compartment is very crowded, and, I mean, if the train starts now . . ."

"So?" The uniformed man growled.

"Oh! No, what I mean he is . . ."

"Why don't you just sit down, okay?" This time the man in the uniform was almost out of control when he spoke. Kauwa fell silent and slipped a couple steps backward. Then he remembered that that despicable kid was sitting right behind

him. When the kid saw Kauwa looking over at him, he spread out his two lizard-like paws and made his mouth as wide as possible. Kauwa nervously pulled his legs back a little.

A little commotion occurred at the far end of the seat in front of him. An extremely thin girl was startled a bit. Then she loosened somewhat the knot of her shrunken legs and arms. Between her legs was a little baby. An old man sitting near the girl bent over and looked toward her. She kept looking for a while at the baby. Then she loosened the dirty cloth that the boy was wrapped in.

“What are you doing?” The man sitting nearby interrupted her. Without giving an answer, she kept loosening the folds of the cloth. The man said again, “what are you doing? He’ll get hurt!”

This time the girl stopped. The baby was already almost out. He wasn’t dark-complexioned, but the area below his waist was covered with black, oozing scabs as if with hundreds of patches of thick, black leather. And the cloth that had swallowed him there was covered with big spots. Probably blood. The girl kept looking at him closely, then mumbled to herself, “There it was fine . . . !”

“But . . . !” The man was saying and then stopped, as if something had sprung up inside him.

Kauwa didn’t understand. All he could make out for sure was that the baby was probably hurt. A man sitting across from the girl bent toward the baby, and then he said to the old man, “You didn’t have it bandaged up?”

“Bandaged?” The old man sitting near the girl became even more out of sorts. “He started crying and . . . and on top of that . . . ”

“Yeah, that’s the way it goes.” The man across from her was silent for a moment; then, noticing that Kauwa was looking toward him, he said, “Just look, sir, I’m telling you . . . I should tell you how I killed them. They came with cannons; such a big cannons I never saw in all my life. And do you know what the sound of those guns is like, mister, do you? How can I describe it to you? Imagine that someone had hurled a rice pot into your ear!”

As he kept on, he got excited. Kauwa, too, was enjoying it. The description of the cannons was fascinating. He had seen an ungainly cannon set up across from the Commissioner’s Office. It was the canon of Alauddin Khilji. He’d heard that from someone. But he had never seen it move. What sound would it have? He imagined the sound of a pot of boiling rice entering into his ear. Just then he remembered that kid who had bitten his calf. He turned and looked. Strange to say, the kid was still staring at him with his big white eyes. Seeing Kauwa look at him, again his jaws opened slightly. Kauwa was afraid, but he still shouted, “Is this a boy or what, I’d like to know!”

The man who had been talking didn’t appreciate being interrupted, but he said, “Oh, him, I don’t know where he came from. He’s always biting somebody. I think his family was probably finished up over there.”

“Over there? Over there where?” Kauwa asked astonished.

“That’s just what I was telling you about. Those people sent in their cannons, right? The whole military was there. One cannon was so big that in its mouth . . .”

Just then the young girl sitting near the old man screamed. The old man didn’t

appreciate that. She held the baby out toward him. Again the man pushed the baby back to her and said, “It’s okay. I said, didn’t I, that you should keep him wrapped up for now. When we reach the camp, will get him bandaged. Now you tell me, okay? The kid was hit by a bullet. Scurrying all over the place. In that situation, what do you think, they’re handing out medicated bandages? And another thing. If some photographer were to come now, you bet your life he’d take a picture, wouldn’t he! But if the kid were bandaged up, then who could tell whether he’d fallen and scratched himself or been hit by a bullet! Over there, when we were near the border, we were delayed a little. They were making a film then. When we ran away, we left our clothes behind; and on the way they even snatched our pots and pans away from us!”

Kauwa had heard that on the other side of the border a lot of confusion was going on. He asked, “Are you people refugees?”

“Of course, what else? We were supposed to have gotten a blanket, but now I’ve heard we’ll get it when we reach the camp. There giving us a pot and a blanket.”

“Everyone’s getting a blanket?” Kauwa asked astonished.

“Sure. Everyone. We may even get some rice and fish. And if they give us a little mustard oil, then that would be good. You, ah, work at the station here?”

“Me? No . . . no, I’m a refugee, too!”

Outside, an unusual sort of commotion could be heard, some fairly quick running around. One could hear some police-like whistles far away. This time Kauwa wasn’t worried much at all, because now that he understood the situation, he was



quite happy suddenly to have been forcibly pushed into the train. He had been thinking about a blanket. He could get through the day with no problem, but the winter nights caused him a lot of trouble.

The old man had just resumed his story when a lot of men came inside the doorway of the compartment one-by-one. Two uniformed officers were with them as well. The men were wearing very clean, well-kept clothes.

One of men in clean clothes asked a uniformed man, “All of these are refugees?”

“Yes, sir,” a uniformed man said. “Question them quickly, the train’s about to depart.”

“Where are you going?” one of them asked Kauwa.

“Me? I’m a refugee, re-fu-gee. They ran their cannons at us, sir. That baby was hit by a bullet . . . that one, over there . . . in that woman’s lap. They ran their cannons at us. The sound was like, like someone had hurled a rice pot into your ear!”

By then the old man was on his feet. He said, “You people are reporters, right? I heard the sound of the cannons.”

“Yes, he heard it, too, and I heard it, too,” Kauwa said.

“Where are you from?” the reporter asked.

“Me? I’m from over there, right. I was telling you about the cannon.”

“Why don’t you ask me, sir!” the old man broke in. “The baby hasn’t even been bandaged yet. A bullet struck its thigh. You can see for yourself . . .”

“Ow!!!” a reporter screamed suddenly. That black kid had sunk his teeth

into the man's calf. The reporter was incensed and slapped the kid a number of times. Suddenly a lot of noise came from the platform. Some people were demonstrating against the excesses of that country's government against the refugees. The demonstrators were holding a big flags and placards.

The old man didn't appreciate this interruption. But a sudden transformation came over the black kid. Instead of crawling around on all fours like a beast, he stood up on his two legs and rushed to the door. Kauwa nimbly gone out of the way. The reporter didn't get out of the way, so the kid grabbed the man's wrist with his two paws and was about to sink his teeth in when he, too, helplessly got out of the way. The kid arrived at the compartment door. In order to make the refugees feel better, the demonstrators got as close as possible. Seeing such a small boy at the door, one demonstrator, who had a flag in his hand, bent inside and petted the boy's cheek. The boy swiftly turned and sank his teeth deep into the man's palm. The demonstrator was beside himself with rage. The flag fell out of his hand. The boy picked it up. With the flag in his hand, he was inexpressibly happy. Raising the flag up by the door of the compartment, he jumped up and down like a monkey a few times and hollered, "No way! No way!"

For the reporters this was an important the scene. Kauwa and the old man lost all hope. In a final effort to attract the attention of the reporters, the old man suddenly grabbed the little baby out of the girl's lap, and holding it out to the reporter, said, "You won't believe it, sir . . ."

But, as if someone had muzzled him, he was unable to continue. His eyes widened. For a moment he stood speechless, holding the baby out for the re-

porters to see, then he held him tightly to his chest and burst into tears. The baby had died.

The reporters weren't ready for this. Right at that moment the train whistle blew. The men in uniform were getting the reporters out. The boy kept on chanting his slogans as before. Kauwa looked carefully in the direction of the old man and the reporters, and to one reporter he said softly, "Listen . . . blankets . . . what do you think, all the refugees are going to get a blanket, aren't they? I'm a refugee, too!" Kauwa assured him.