

A Soldier

Mudra Rakshasa

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: The Hindi original was published on pages 95–103 of the short story collection *Merī kahāniyām* (Delhi: Diśā Prakāśan, 1983). This translation is © 2010 by Robert A. Hueckstedt.

I ran away. I threw my gun into the valley and ran away from the war as fast and as far as I could. But now, in this village, hundreds of miles away, I can't sleep. I can't stand the frightening silence. I feel paralyzed, like my blood is freezing. In the middle of the war's continuous sound of bullets, like the terrifying clattering of the devil's teeth, there were occasions for sleep, and I certainly did sleep. But here there's no fear, no anxiety, no clattering of the devil's teeth, so I'm afraid. There is stillness when the guns go silent, and the guns go silent when men become quiet. Dozing off, I awake in a panic: maybe it's not just the killed who have died but the killers as well. That's why I'm afraid of the nights here without fear.

I did not run away in fear, however. I was so fearless, in fact, that I never hesitated to shoot any man who was dangerous.

The first time I killed someone was when I was on patrol on the canal side of the camp.

He was my friend, our cots were next to each other in the barracks. That evening he told me he was particularly on edge because his wife's home was

just on the other side of the canal. That night I was on patrol for four hours, so he was particularly solicitous. And while I watched, he jumped the wires and disappeared into the darkness. I continued my patrol and who knows why, but I felt particularly cold. Despite my warm overcoat my joints trembled. Holding my rifle close against me I walked softly as if I were not walking on ground but on the back of a horrible demon who might wake up at the slightest sound of my feet and kill me. The sound of the crickets was like that of the mysterious black birds who hang men. While groping for the stones in the darkness I saw a black shape. My friend. But I felt as if I had been startled out of my wits. It felt as if someone had run an iron rod through my heart, and it was beating hard against it. The shape raised his hands and signaled to me. But just as he was halfway over the wires, my gun went off. I had been afraid of the silence, and I killed my friend.

All at once and from all the watch posts guns roared. With the noise of whistles and men's voices in the background, the lieutenant praised me for having carried out by duty.

When my watch was over I slept soundly because I had become extremely tired. The next day I happened upon a young woman wandering outside the camp. She explained to me that her husband was in the camp and she begged me to call for him so that she could speak with him from her side of the wires, and she would give him a packet of homemade sweets and leave.

My buddy smiled and so did I. We took her away from the camp a little, under a bridge over the dried-up canal. It's perhaps far too easy to make a woman helpless. My buddy explained to her that her husband had deserted last night and

that if she resisted she'd be shot. Ignoring that helpless woman's tear-filled eyes we took her down under the bridge. And when we came out, we had already cleaned the blood off our bayonets with the dirt of the canal bed. She had been like a glass vial full of medicine we had broken open. We had injected the medicine into our veins, thrown the empty vial on the ground and crushed it under our boots.

The following evenings were spent the same way. As a prisoner about to be executed is allowed to have whatever he wants to eat, so before heading to the front a soldier is given permission to sow his oats however he can.

After a full week we were ordered into the trucks. In the army friends change but friendship doesn't. Sitting in the truck I hit a young man who was leaning against my shoulder, woke him up and then befriended him.

"Hey! Lean on your in-laws wherever they are!" I yelled.

"Where are any of our in-laws!" he shot back and broke into a laugh.

With the coming of daylight the soldiers' curses and the cawing of the crows competed with the rumbling of the trucks. For two-and-a-half hours there was only the sound of the trucks and the curses. It was impossible to think; otherwise this night journey to some unknown, frightening place wouldn't have been any less than traveling to hell with ghouls and cannibals.

Suddenly, our vehicle stopped. A huge cloud of dust mounted the truck from behind. All the trucks stopped. Morning had not yet broken through. The soldiers hurled out their curses.

We'd have to get down off the trucks immediately. Within the past half-hour

we had already slipped into the front lines.

PERHAPS we kill because we are afraid of war. After killing, the war stops, but then the fear gets even worse. After the enemy has died, I can say with absolute certitude that the soldier squeezes his gun harder, until he becomes exhausted with fatigue, and despite the enemy having been destroyed, he never puts his gun down. Every trembling of the soldier's terror manifests itself in a hail of bullets.

Four of us were lying in the narrow crevice of a ravine. Ahead was a steep descent. Beneath that was the mountain pass and beyond that began the next range of mountains. Against the sky above those mountains flickered a smoky light: a village was probably burning. The hope was that our tanks would get through that pass. One of us was softly muttering curses and another was looking up into the sky and telling jokes about women. The third pointed out that if we happened to be cannibals, in two days we could dry out some flesh and easily get rid of our excruciating hunger. Which seemed to me a wonderful joke. Here we were unable to eat human flesh because it would go against our humanity, but the more human beings we killed the happier we were.

I was enjoying this war because no one troubles anyone else directly. On the slopes of this valley thousands have already been killed, but this is a battlefield where vultures and jackals never feed. One never hears the screams of the dying. This is a game where the lips of the wounded are clapping hands and dead bodies tell fairy tales. At night there is no darkness. Every moving person can be targeted from far away and destroyed. But we're having fun, because we're scared. We tell jokes about love because we're afraid and we even curse

simply because we're afraid of silence. We enjoy ourselves merely to suppress the fear of dying. Since no one's killed us, we're happy and we talk about foreign women. To overcome the fear of dying we also hum our favorite songs, but that humming sounds more like spitting the dust out of our mouths. When a soldier becomes fearless, he becomes absolutely silent. He can crouch down as still as a corpse, but when he's frightened, he moves, rolls over, hums and curses, to the point that he would even jump out in front of a blazing mortar. We are scared to death, and we are enjoying ourselves immensely.

We put our rifles aside and mounted bazookas on our shoulders. The silence of the night seemed to walk through the valley in thick black boots. Over that crunching sound arose a savage rumbling. Tanks were on the move, only two. I took aim and fired. The recoil almost knocked me over. For a moment I didn't know if the tank had been destroyed or if both tanks and I were on fire.

Now we had to surge forward. This took some courage. The second tank, though burning, was still firing rounds, ceaselessly and all around. He wasn't able to see our position perhaps, but he knew the general direction. For ten minutes the firing stopped. With a huge explosion the tank blew up. A stillness filled the valley and our hearts with fear. We moved on.

MY young companion had brought along some tins and slammed them on the ground. Then his curses grew louder. Another soldier took one and while lying on a broken cot told stories about his wife. With a rag the third one was wiping off two machine guns we had found.

Today was very long and boring. We were all hungry and had nothing but the

machine gun cartridge belts. My third companion got tired cleaning the machine guns, sat down, held up a hand grenade and said, “Imagine this is a coconut and we’re going to break it and enjoy its flesh.”

We knew he really wasn’t going to break it, but all the same I snatched it away from him. Coughing, he broke into a laugh.

The entire day passed. A very dismal day. Like a long, sharp, ear-piercing whistle, the daylight faded into the distance. The past few days we hoped that at nightfall a wild animal might come by the rubble of this destroyed village looking for food and we’d kill it and satisfy our hunger. But when night came nothing else came with it, not even sleep, and as the night grew my third companion again pretended he was going to pull the pin on the coconut-hand-grenade. The second soldier grabbed the grenade away, gave him a hard slap on the cheek and sat apart from us. I couldn’t tell if the one who had been slapped was laughing or crying. The faces of all of us had become sour; they could become distorted but they couldn’t laugh.

Standing, leaning against an outer door, I was looking absently at the darkness. From behind someone put a hand on my shoulder. I was so startled I almost fell. It was the young one. I was so angry I could have hit his forehead with my rifle butt. Except for my face contorting with anger, however, nothing happened.

“They’re not going to come,” he said.

We had nothing to inspire much conversation. All we had, in fact, was waiting. Waiting for a wild animal or waiting for the enemy. Should the enemy return to retake their lost territory, perhaps then we could shake off this harsh

cover of uselessness. We weren't afraid they would return; the most frightening thought was that perhaps they would not return. Even if we were to yell out to them or send them a respectful invitation, they still wouldn't come.

All night long, to fend off the boredom the four of us probably carried on a conversation but not with each other, only with our own hearts. We turned from one side to the other, cracked our knuckles, coughed, rubbed our eyes with our palms and kept talking to ourselves. We didn't even sense anyone else was there because being had no significance. There were four of us, but we were depressed, starving, frightened and terribly insignificant.

If we'd only see a small enemy party come by here. They wouldn't know we were here, so we'd tie a piece of white cloth onto one of our rifles. We would talk with them. And I can say this, too, that waiting for them all day and all night was just as difficult as climbing a mountain. How we yearned, all night long, with our eyes wide open, that you would come and break the silence of this rubble and become our new buddies. The stories of our lovers that we've told over and over again and by which we've become bored, we would tell you with renewed enthusiasm. Then all of us would agree how "hungry" we were, but we'd get through the day by singing folk songs together. Then just as a lover would say to his dearly beloved not to leave him so that he wouldn't have to suffer again through a miserable night of waiting, so I would take you by the hand and say to you, no, my dear, I could never leave you. I couldn't bear the loneliness. So all of us should swear we will never leave each other and we should embrace each other and throw each other up in our arms, my dear.

If only a small band of the enemy would come by — yes, the enemy, but people with whom we would have much in common and whom we wait for very impatiently.

One of my companions yelled. Through a broken wall I looked inside. My god! The third, middle aged buddy of ours was staggering around with the hand grenade again. The other two quickly rushed toward him. In no time he pulled the pin out with his teeth. In the blink of an eye the thought of a horrible impossibility flashed through my head. My eyes squinted and tingled. Whatever my body could do by itself it did. Then I opened my eyes. I didn't believe I would be able to see but I could. A large billowing mound, nothing more. Even the machine guns were gone. The night resumed its silence. A wide, loose tail of smoke and dust fluttered up into the sky. I couldn't say if the explosion had thrown just me far away or all of us. About twenty-five yards away I saw two bodies. I could tell they were already dead but I still wanted to see them up close. I was unable to get up.

I still wanted the enemy to come. I probably had no injuries at all, but I still couldn't get up, not because of broken bones but because the arms of my heart were broken. I was still waiting for the enemy.

One of the bodies was moving. My face became distorted. The enemy, though alive, doesn't come even when called, and this body, though already dead, is moving. Will I end up with a ghost for a companion? The ghost of the body was moving it a lot, and I became terribly afraid so I tried to get up however I could to go to it. And I did so. It wasn't a ghost but truly a live person — my young friend

and injured companion. He recognized me and groaned.

I suddenly jumped up with joy. Very far away I could hear the faint sound of firing — tuk tuk tuk tuk tuk. Like a much-awaited beloved knocking softly on her lover's door. Truly, that very vague, softly heard sound of bullets was exactly like the sound of the winks of her who was the apple of my expectant eyes.

I pulled the young man's wounded body to a near-by half-standing house and sat down. He asked for water, but I only got upset with him for not being happy that the chains of our nighttime waiting were about to be broken. I looked at and handled the dream of my well-known, yet-to-arrive guest like a poor man stares at a gold coin in his hand and turns it over and over.

But the night passed, and my dear guest went back without visiting. I wanted to cause that merciless enemy as much pain as he caused me by not coming. I did nothing for my fellow soldier's wounds. With every one of his groans I felt for the magazine of the Sten gun I still had. As the day passed, its acridness intensified. Now I thought I could no longer love the enemy, he should only be killed. And night — it was exactly the same as before, and that corner of my heart where my love for the enemy had arisen I thought of cutting out with my bayonet.

And just then my young companion stopped groaning. He jabbed me and directed my attention to a crack in the door. I was startled to see a soft, faraway light. A squad of about ten soldiers was carefully advancing. Was I afraid? Was I happy? Was I ready to hate and kill?

Yes, all of it. The hair on my neck stood at attention. The young man whispered, "Kill them."

“Yes!” Not one of them would escape the aim of my Sten gun. I took aim and I was thrilled. A few seconds must’ve passed. My buddy jabbed me again — “Kill them!”

Their dark shadows silently crept nearer, and I felt — I felt —

I turned around, threw my gun aside and strangled the young soldier. He gasped for breath, but with savage force I finished him off.

“No! I can’t kill them!” These shadows have come to the door to show me where to meet my beloved; they’re not the enemy. They are the dark letters of my beloved’s message; they’re not the enemy. I can’t kill them. Turning around, I saw that those shadows had arrived.

Maybe everyone has gone. My young friend, my buddy who had wanted to satisfy his hunger by cracking open a coconut, the letters of my beloved’s message, and afraid of loneliness I must run away, I must run away.