



The Power of One

More than 40 years after her family fled persecution in Uganda, **Rakhee Ghelani** reflects on the life-changing power of compassion.

“THERE’S NO ROOM in Uganda for the 80,000 Asians. If I see any of you in Uganda after 90 days I will make you feel as if you are sitting on fire!” announced Idi Amin, President of Uganda, on 5 August 1972. And just like that, Uganda embarked on a campaign of ethnic cleansing that changed the course of my family’s life forever. While my parents had migrated to Australia earlier that year, my father’s many siblings, their young families and my terminally ill grandfather were all suddenly stateless because they were Ugandans of Indian descent.

As refugees, my large family was scattered across the world. Where they landed was dependent partly on the goodwill of foreign governments and partly on luck. Something that still holds true for many refugees today. Only one of my father’s brothers managed to make it to Australia. So, I grew up close to my Uncle Pravin. Over the years, he’s regaled me with stories about how he fled Uganda. One story, in particular, has had an enduring impact on me.

While fleeing Uganda, Pravin’s older brother Jagdish was stopped by guards. They searched his wife and their four teenage daughters and ordered them to remove their jewellery or risk missing their plane. Indians were only allowed to take about \$50 with them when they left Uganda. This was barely enough to feed them for a few weeks, let alone set up a new home in a foreign country. Unable to bear the thought of handing over the

precious jewellery his mother had left him just before she passed away, Jagdish turned the car around, took them to Pravin and asked him to smuggle their things out of the country. It was the last time Pravin saw his older brother for almost two decades.

The next day Pravin went to work, but his own pending departure weighed heavily on his mind. Sensing Pravin’s distress, a young African man named Musoke asked him if there was anything he could do to help. They had politely worked side by side, but Pravin knew nothing about Musoke. It was risky, but Pravin felt like he had nothing left to lose, so he suggested they meet for a coffee.

Over coffee that evening, Musoke talked about how helpless and sad he felt looking at what was happening around him. His colleagues, cricket mates, and friends were all being forced to leave the country. Listening to Musoke speak, Pravin decided to tell him about the valuables Jagdish had entrusted him with and his fear he would also be caught trying to smuggle them out of the country.

Then Musoke had an idea. As he was African his movements were not restricted, so he could carry jewellery across the border into Kenya. It was an incredible offer – both knew that anyone who was caught helping Indians flee the country was never seen alive again.

Reflecting back on that moment, Pravin would say, “It was the first time since Amin’s announcement that

someone had made me feel like I was more than just the colour of my skin. Musoke saw me as a human being and was willing to risk his own life because he valued mine.”

The next night, Pravin booked two first-class railway compartments from Kampala to Nairobi, drove Musoke to the station, handed him a nondescript black bag and watched him walk away.

Musoke entered one cabin and placed the bag under the seat, then settled into the booth next door. Musoke and the bag each had a cabin all to themselves.

At every station between Kampala and the Kenyan border, burly guards brandishing semi-automatic rifles entered Musoke’s carriage. They roughly ran their hands over his body, opened his luggage and questioned him about his trip to Nairobi. But they never found the bag.

When the train finally crossed the border into Kenya and arrived in Nairobi, Musoke collected the bag and, clutching it close, walked towards the main entrance. His eyes locked on a young Indian woman wearing an emerald green kurta. She fitted the description Pravin had given him of his younger sister. He walked up to her and quietly asked her name. As soon as she said “Usha”, Musoke smiled and handed her the bag. Her hands trembled as she took it. Before she could even say thank you Musoke had disappeared back into the crowd.

No-one in my family has heard from Musoke in more than 40 years, but he still holds a special place in our memories. Some of the jewellery he smuggled was like a life-raft to my aunts, uncles and cousins. It was melted down and traded in return for food and shelter when money was scarce. This helped keep their heads above water as they struggled to build new lives in India and the UK. Other pieces were handed down from generation to generation as family heirlooms, much like the story of Musoke. Whenever I look down at the ring that was given to me, I’m reminded of how important it is to pay compassion forward; how there is nothing more powerful than letting another person know they’re not alone.

» *Rakhee Ghelani is a freelance writer and Director of Legal Writers.*