

CHAPTER 1

OLD AMILAH AND HER CHILDREN

Unofficial people—unofficially, right then and there—named their area: the Freedom Zone. And they had good reason for choosing that kind of a name. After the Dutch and NICA landed the place became a real part of the movement for the defense of the new Republic and the People’s Army. So it was no mistake when they quietly, secretly called the place the Freedom Zone.

At this time the English had withdrawn from Java and the Dutch returned to take over again, changing the local situation drastically. One sudden, unnerving change came during the months after the invention of URI, the currency of the Republic of Indonesia, called silver money. When the Republic’s currency collapsed, the People’s Army movement collapsed too. The people grew confused and disheartened, and one after another lost the courage to identify themselves as freedom fighters. In the Freedom Zone, though, clandestine soldiers, who stayed out of sight during the daylight hours, kept right on with what was called “the struggle.” And that’s how things went, even after the first military action.

The Freedom District was located along a stretch of Middle Lane, in Jakarta.

In a little house of loosely woven bamboo located in an alley that crossed Middle Lane, lived Amilah’s family—Amilah’s, because she was the oldest—or Sa’aman’s family—Sa’aman’s, who they called Aman, because he was the breadwinner. The family had moved to the Freedom Zone just a week after the first military action. Yes, not that long

back. Even so the neighbors had already ventured to decide that Aman was the best possible kid in the world. And they had already made up their minds that his mother was a hellish old campfollower with no idea at all of how to behave herself.

Maybe that judgement arose from the contrast in personalities between mother and son, then again maybe it was just the truth. But it was clear that that was how all the neighbors felt about them.

Imagine it is night.

At night, under the cover of darkness, it is impossible to make out the shape of the house where Amilah and her family live. Only the gleam of light from the oil lamp, where they pierce the holes in the loosely woven bamboo walls, show passerbys that a house is there—and a human family.

This night was no different from many nights before, no different from the last night—really dark. And like other nights, normal nights, like last night and the night before, three months of nights, this night brought no consolation to Amilah. And she, Amilah, was only one of the millions of people who are tortured by their own anxiety and confusion.

Amilah felt like she was the one—only she—who endured the worst suffering on earth. And it seemed to her that no one on earth could help this human through her most recent and worst suffering. Because for Amilah, this was indeed her ultimate suffering.

She herself wasn't sure when this had become clear to her. It was 1949 already! But people said Amilah wasn't a modern person. She'd stayed the way she was ten or twenty years ago. The neighborhood thought her no better and no worse than an old-

fashioned rat, a nasty backwards barracks campfollower of the Dutch army. Only her appearance had kept up with the times, they said, because her skin was old and her beauty had faded. And people also said she was as useless as an old broom. If she had one purpose left, it was to enrich the earth as compost.

She couldn't read. She couldn't write. So she never kept a journal. She didn't even understand what a journal was for. Even at this point, in 1949, she still didn't completely understand what reading and writing was for—to keep track of events. And that was why she didn't know when she'd concluded that what she was suffering now was the worst yet.

Every night—three months of nights—after the thundering of the city died down, and all that could be heard was the sound of her sleeping children snoring and grinding their teeth, she would sit and brood again, facing the lamp on the table. In this position her mind would wander; she'd daydream and recollect, and think a little too. But for all her dreaming and imagining, she never really made up her mind about anything. So perhaps the only conclusion she had ever reached in her life was that now, she was enduring her ultimate suffering.

Amilah, the well-known Amilah, was tall. Look at her—marked by her life, but there are still traces from her youth—a good-looking woman! But she walks with a little difficulty now. And people say she stands like a question mark, hunched over, irresolute. Years of war have shattered her body, her life, and her living. And her neighbors and acquaintances agreed that the woman was getting more and more simpleminded before their eyes. She herself had never heard them say so, and like other people who have been

called stupid, she didn't know how stupid she was. This fact often irritated people, especially her neighbors.

People also thought she was incredibly hard-headed. So they stayed away from her. Her stupidity and stubbornness often resulted in little quarrels. Quarrels—this is what Amilah was famous for around where she lived, as famous as Stalin or Roosevelt, in this cockeyed world.

Amilah hardly ever appeared when she wasn't in a foul temper. For her to appear was to for her to provoke a fight. That's why she had become a solitary person. When she did have to go out, her face was so transparent it was easy for people to see what was in her heart: there was a pleading purpose hidden deep in her bosom. Yes, in her bosom, in her faded, pouchy, nearly flat breasts. And her breasts would never fill again. Put it like this: her bosom had slid down her chest the way the mountains of Kendeng collapse into the plain of Bojonogoro. Her breasts had been very attractive, but as they faded, so did her hopes of romance.

The night was quiet. No moon shone. And hopes were dark too. In this human family, hope was long dead. Any hope that remained was just a blind reflex. Sa'aman, Sa'aman, the family's young backbone and guide, had been gone for three months. And no news of him had come. No news, not even the worst news.

The lamp flared restlessly—a lamp like other lamps—a lamp that showed how poor this human family was. It flared red and yellow. And all the shadows in the house trembled as the flame was blown by the wind.

See Amilah now, sitting on the chair, the only chair the family had left, facing the door. Her clouded gaze clings to the door, the way in and out for all her empty hopes. And her clouded eyes are like the eyes of a dog howling at the moon.

The buzzing and commotion of the city outside was dying down. And ten minutes later she was still sitting in the same position. Then there was a sound from the big bunk behind her chair—feet moving on the mat. She still didn't move from her spot. Then a noise at her elbow.

“Ma,” said her daughter Salamah, nineteen years old. “Ma!” she repeated.

When this call went unanswered by Amilah, the girl Salamah spoke louder as she approached. “Ma!” she said.

With that, Amilah woke from her musing. She looked at Salamah blankly. “You, still up!” her voice jabbed.

“Ma,” said Salamah again, “my blouse is missing again.” And her cheeks reddened in the lamplight and her eyes glowed with irritation.

Amilah shifted her gaze from her daughter to the door. “You're always so careless,” she grumbled. And the girl started to defend herself from this judgement, but Amilah spoke again. “A child as big as you can't keep track of your own clothes, a child as big as you! Already after the boys...”

“Ma, I never go out with boys,” Salamah said back in defense.

“Can't even keep track of your own clothes yet,” Amilah sneered on, “And when your clothes disappear again,” she said harshly, “Where will you hide your tits?!”

The girl endured this heart-breaking jab. Her body shivered a little. Her cheeks, red in the lamplight, paled a bit, and her eyes shone with tears. She was moved to tears by her sorrow, even though her sorrow wasn't understood. By tenderness. Especially by the biting words that wounded her heart. And now she let her tears fall. She couldn't bear her mother's last remark. "I don't go out with boys," she said softly.

"I can't help what I see," her mother said indifferently. "My eyes are always open. But come on, you're old enough for it—old maid, cold little virgin. Maybe it's because you're a cold little virgin that your dress is missing."

Salamah didn't have the heart to answer and defend herself again. And one thing was certain, she couldn't defend herself without having to listen to more abuse from her mother. So she had to bear her pain.

"You brother Aman bought that dress with sweat scattered all over Jakarta. But you, you're so sweet on this boy, you don't have a brain any more. Can't even keep track of your own clothes," said Amilah tonelessly. Suddenly her voice became sharp. "I think, I think you've got some damned boyfriend. You! You! You!" And she confronted Salamah violently. "Where did your blouse go if you didn't sell it? You must have sold it. You must have given the money to that rat."

"I think there was a thief in the house," Salamah said falteringly.

"Thief?" said Amilah sharply, facing her daughter's eye. "Say thief again. Come on, say thief again." Salamah didn't reply. Then Amilah laughed bitterly. "A thief, you say. A thief coming here. A thief would have to be crazy to come here."

“Yesterday Hasan’s shirt was missing. The day before, it was Baby Mimi’s.”

Amilah stood, but was quiet. Then she sat again. Slowly her gaze moved back to the door. She was calm for a moment. Suddenly she glared angrily at her daughter again.

“Aren't you grown up? Aren't you a virgin? Old? A cold little virgin? A virgin? Old? Old-fashioned? Already after the boys? Aren't you capable of thinning out the kids' clothes a little?” said Amilah rapidly, fending off interruption. “Now see what happens! Who'll buy clothes for us? Aman? Oh, Aman, Sa'aman, my son”– unexpectedly her voice grew melancholy.

“Why haven't you come home yet? Why? Nobody here knows what's going on. There's no one to support us now.”

Her voice roughened again and she challenged her daughter: “You again! You can't earn anything. And this house is full of helpless people: Hasan, Mimi, Iman, you and I. Five people. And no one who can earn money. No one to buy us clothes now. You don't know how to work. You can't earn any money. All you can do is lose your clothes!” she ranted.

Then she stopped short. At last she continued, in a cadence of self-blame, speaking slowly as if to herself: “Ah,” she said, “Why didn't I learn to work while I was young? Why? And why did I become a barracks woman? Why did I always think that the barracks women had the best life of all? And now I'm old.”

She paused and thought awhile. Then her voice came low and slow like an angry cat. “Why did I always think that way, that the good life was just lazing around. And

why did I have to get old? Why? Old age is really hell. When you're old the world loses interest in you." Her eyes clenched, avoiding the gaze of this child on the brink of adulthood. And unexpectedly she felt envious of the child's youth.

"Ma," Salamah said carefully, "Things are very bad for us right now." Amilah didn't interrupt. "May I go to work tomorrow?"

Amilah lifted her face to meet her daughter's eyes. "What?" she said harshly. "What did you say? Come on, tell me again."

"Go to work," said Salamah.

"Go to work. Where?"

"In the Chinese man's print shop."

"You can't work," said Salamah with contempt.

"Maybe I can work there. I'd get lunch. I'd get a distribution of clothes and rice. And every week I'd get a salary. All right, not much at first. May I go?"

For a moment Amilah was transfixed by her daughter's words. But she wasn't really softened—distrust surged. She spoke ferociously, like a bossy shopowner being rude to customers. "You! she said, "if you go, it won't be to look for work... not to earn a living, but..."

"It would be good for us to have money coming in, Ma—"

"—to look for boys! You'll be having fun all the time—" said Amilah carelessly.

"—we could buy a few clothes. Maybe Hasan, Mimi, and Imah could go back to school," said Salamah.

“–keep fooling around with the boys,” Amilah kept on, “and come home empty-handed...”

“Ma, I always value the advice Aman gave. He said: ‘No matter how bad our situation becomes, Hasan, Mimi, and Imah must stay in school. If it wasn’t for that I would have joined our older brothers Mimin and Maman when they went off and joined the guerillas. But all our little brothers and sisters must stay in school, so I have to stay in Jakarta with the rest of the family, all of you.’ So, Ma–”

Amilah disregarded what her daughter said. Her voice went right on. “And you here, you’ll be coming home without money. You’ll come carrying nothing but a baby. Right?”

She opened her eyes wide and glared at Salamah. Skewered by her gaze, Salamah hung her head and shifted her feet.

“Right?” continued Amilah cruelly. “Right? Right? Right?”

Soft-hearted Salamah, who they called Amah, was shaken by the harshness of her own mother. Tears rolled down her cheeks again. Her head was bowed. In her mind’s eye, she pictured her oldest brother, Sa’aman. He had always valued her, valued Mimi, valued Imah, and valued Hasan, who was just eight years old. Sa’aman was always courteous, even to his much younger brother and sisters. Sa’aman always made clear to them what was good and right. His mother’s harshness had always melted away in the face of Sa’aman’s gentle refinement.

She wished Sa’aman could come home and live among his little brothers and sisters again. And the human drama played in the shadows of her mind, just for a minute. Then

it faded. And she saw with her eyes again—her mother. Her own mother who was so harsh to her. She sighed.

She glanced to the back of the house, to the big bunk where the whole family slept. Her gaze stopped at Patimah, called Imah, sixteen years old. Salamah loved Imah very much, even though she was three years older, even though a difference in age like that usually makes sisters competitive. Salamah loved her very much, and Sa’aman loved her too. Salamah wasn’t likely to forget her brother’s prediction, that Patimah would become an exemplary woman, because she was not just intelligent and quick-thinking, but also sensible, even-tempered and very humane.

Then her gaze moved across the only empty place. On to Salami, called Mimi, her ten-year-old sister. Last, to her youngest brother Hasan.

Meanwhile Amilah glanced sharply at her daughter. As she observed her daughter’s beauty her envy increased—it was her own beauty, snatched away by her daughter. And her voice exploded.

“Crying? Tcha, you should be ashamed. I never cried when I was as big as you are, you know? You know? You know?”

She paused. And Salamah looked back at her mother, her mother’s mouth, her vision blurred by tears.

Amilah was about to continue her explosion but she fell silent, spellbound by her daughter’s face. For the first time she really saw her daughter. Beautiful bluish eyes, in the hazy clear deep radiance of the lamp. Full, well-shaped mouth. Reddish hair.

“Those eyes, that hair, that mouth,” she thought to herself, “I don't have them. And they're not from Paijan, my husband. No.”

And then she remembered a happy time long gone by, about twenty years before.

“Eyes, nose, mouth, and hair,” she continued to herself, “and the skin and the shape of the body too, surely not from me and Paijan.” She smiled happily.

Clear in the shadows of her memory now was someone called Lt. Gedergeder—she couldn't quite get the name exactly—but the name wasn't that important. What was important was the person, his body, his flesh, white flesh that gave her pleasure. In those days Paijan, her husband, was detailed for two months to Pare Pare. And she herself was in the barracks in Sulawesi. So it was that Lt. Gedergeder brought Salamah, his child, into existence. And this Salamah was now in front of her, a woman, beautiful, virgin, and young.

Suddenly her smile disappeared. The pleasure of her memory disappeared. She frowned. The envy that scalded her heart returned. Youth—her face twisted—that fault irritated her. Slowly her hatred for Salamah grew.

“When I was as big as you,” she said cruelly, “you know? You know? I already had Aman. Right? Right, you old virgin? Cold little virgin? And Aman—.”

She was unable to go on speaking. Speaking the name of the one she loved so much, silenced her. She turned back to staring at the door, the way in and the way out for livelihood and empty hopes.

They were both quiet now. The breath of the sleeping children on the bunk in the back peacefully sounded back and forth. And the city around them was dead quiet now. It seemed the loneliness was greater than the quietness of a century ago.

Salamah's latest tears were dry before she was able to do anything. She sensed the confusion in her mother's spirit too. But she didn't understand that her mother's confusion rose out of a vision of Lt. Gedergeder, Salamah's father, and also from an her mother's awareness of Salamah's youth and beauty and her own old age. Sensing her mother's scrutiny, Salamah looked for a moment at her white skin, paler than the other children's, a fact she'd never been able to account for. Even now she didn't really know if she was the child of her lawful father, Corporal Paijan. She still didn't know that she was the child of Lt. Gedergeder, the illegitimate father. She thought back with pity to the voices of people who mocked her mother—barracks whore! The memory brought feelings of desolation and futility. But these feelings subsided when she recalled Sa'aman's words: "People aren't responsible for the birth of their children. When a baby is born, he's just God's creature!"

She sighed deeply. Then she said, "Ma," apprehensively.

Amilah wouldn't pay attention. She just mused at the door. From far off could be heard the clanging of the metal light pole being struck twelve times to mark the hour. Twelve o'clock. The old day was dead. The new day was beginning. But human suffering never changes. It's always in motion, like the wind. It's always powerful, like the sun.

"Ma," repeated Salamah in a lower tone.

Amilah gazed at her. Her face was sullen. She spoke harshly. “Fusspot!” she said. “What now? What now?”

“Ma,” said Salamah softly, “why are you always angry with me like this?”

She quietly waited for a reply, but none came. “If you understood what I wanted to do, if you’d given me permission to look for work when Aman was first taken away by the Dutch, maybe we wouldn’t be in such bad shape now.”

She paused, for there was a feeling of constriction in her chest. She waited for the tightness to ease, then spoke again.

“But you always get angry when I try to help. You’re always angry and nasty.”

Amilah kept musing at the door again. Impassively, she heard her daughter continue. She didn’t much care what other people said. Especially her own children, still wet behind the ears. What did any of it matter when all she yearned for was her son Sa’aman. Sa’aman, her extraordinary child, the best of them all. She didn’t know how it happened. All she knew—and only she knew—was that Sa’aman’s father was the only man who really truly loved her. That was why she’d surrendered her virginity, in the barracks at Kotaraja. So he was a barracks bastard, a child of the barracks. And for a barracks bastard almost nothing in this world is off limits. But the man who loved her, Private First Class Benni, had been killed, bludgeoned while on patrol in the district of Aceh.

Unheeded, Salamah continued to speak, her voice pitched in a supplicating tone that would have moved anyone to compassion.

“Ma,” she said, “My brother Aman tells me I have to respect and honor my parents—respect and honor you. If your own child can’t do that, who will? What other

person on earth would be willing? Who? But with us you're always angry the way you are now, you're always insulting us. And we take it from you, your roughness and your insults, even though it makes us sad and hurts us a lot. You don't act this way with other people. If you did, you'd just be looking for enemies. This much I know."

She was quiet, gulping big breaths of the night air. Then she continued, her voice even softer.

"Ma, I really want to keep doing what Aman wished for and worked for—the younger kids have to stay in school. And I can do it, I can. I graduated from public school. I can read and write. And I can speak Dutch too. And Aman has been teaching me too. Why couldn't I help support the family? It's only that I don't have any clothes. But good clothes aren't really necessary for that work, sticking on labels and folding paper. My friend Jaja already promised me the job. Or should I go to work at the soap factory? As long as you give me permission. Ma, give me permission. Just permission."

She was quiet again, waiting for a response. But Amilah still paid no attention to her. She kept staring blankly at the door. In the dress she'd made from a military mosquito net, she looked like an old woman. She was forty-one. But the war years had aged her fifteen or twenty years more—she was very old.

The girl tried again to get her attention.

"Ma," she said.

But her mother still wasn't listening.

"Ma," she said again.

Her voice quavered. There was still no response. Then she was past caring whether her mother acknowledged her or not.

“Ma,” she said, her voice constricted. “Just this once, listen to me. I’m trying to save the family, so listen. That’s why I’m going to work. Tomorrow I’m going to begin working. Jaja is in charge of the paper-folding and labelling department of the Chinese man’s print shop. And she says she can get me a job in her department.”

She paused again, listening. But her mother just stared at the door.

“Ma,” she continued forcefully. “I’m asking you, begging you, to stop being so rough, for no reason. I’ve always sided with you when you fought with the neighbors. But lately I’ve been thinking. I’ve been thinking hard. I think you’ve been at fault the whole time. Aman said so too. Aman also said that this family’s good name is in bad shape, destroyed. Destroyed by our father, destroyed by our mother. But that doesn’t mean we could ever hate our parents. No, Ma, no. On the contrary, in fact. It’s up to your children to regain the neighbor’s respect.”

She paused again. Nervously she looked at her mother. “Ma,” she said, “let me go to work tomorrow.”

Amilah gazed at Amah with a hostile face, but said nothing.

“Try to rein in your rudeness, Ma. We all beg you. All your children beg you, me, Imah, Mimi, and Hasan.”

“What?” said Aman cruelly. “You want to give me lessons? You? You? You? You, you were a snot-nosed kid just yesterday.”

Abruptly, she stood up. With her hand pointed stiffly, she growled, “Get in there to bed!”

Slowly Salamah stirred and started toward the bed. Her brothers and sister, awakened by their mother’s barking, watched them both with flickering eyes. After Salamah collapsed on the bunk, Amilah returned to the chair and continued her musing at the door in front of her.

Salamah reached the bunk, flung herself down, and buried her face behind her two hands. Her request had just been denied. Her mother’s coarseness acted violently on her refined feelings. She was agitated, hopeless, and exhausted.

Patimah, who had been sleeping on her side, rolled over next to her. For a while she watched sympathetically as her sister Salamah quieted herself. She waited for Salamah’s breath to calm and spoke.

“Salamah,” she whispered softly. “Amah, why is Ma so mad? Why?”

And Salamah couldn’t answer. She had stood up for her siblings, and she had been refused. She didn’t know any more. Her thoughts were dark. She couldn’t think any more. Her mind was dark, and her body wanted to run away. She took hold of her sister Patimah and hugged her tight. As they hugged, Patimah sensed Salamah’s feelings, and Patimah got upset too.

“Salamah?” Patimah whispered through her tight breathing.

As an answer Salamah pressed her cheek against Patimah’s.

“Salamah,” whispered Patimah again. “Wouldn’t it be nice to have Sa’aman back here with us?”

“Yeah, that would be nice,” Salamah faltered, “–arrested by the MPs, and no knowing when he’ll return–”

“Why can’t anyone find out where he is?” whispered Patimah reproachfully.

“Who knows? Who knows? Mas Darsono went to all kinds of offices looking for information–what a joke. Nobody really knows. Poor Aman. Patimah, Imah, it’s the way of the world. You need to know that. Yeah, you have to know. This is what your world is like, the world of all of us. Oh, I pray Sa’aman will always be safe, please God.”

“And what about brother Mimin? There still hasn’t been any news,” whispered Patimah.

“Leave that. Don’t ever hope for Mimin to come back. Let’s just hope he’s safe in the struggle. Patimah, we live in a peaceful city, though it’s no shelter from suffering. We should be ashamed to wish for Mimin to leave the struggle and come home. Let’s just pray he’s safe.”

“And pray for brother Maman’s safety too,” continued Patimah.

“Please let them all be safe, please God,” whispered Salamah with pity.

“Big sister, do we have permission to go to work?”

“Ma–well, Ma, Imah, I don’t understand her thinking. To tell the truth, she makes me nervous. The longer it goes, the more worn out our mother becomes, Patimah. Poor her. Poor her. Imah,” she hugged her sister closer, “let me think about it for a minute.”

“We won’t have to starve to death? There’s no need, right? And the little kids? Mimi and Hasan? Amah, you have to take our brother Aman’s place now. You’re the one who has to decide, only you,” whispered Patimah, pressing against her.

“We’ll just see tomorrow, Imah.”

“Amah, when do you think Maman and Mimin are coming?”

“When? Oh, Imah, don’t ask me that. I’m ashamed to think about it” whispered Salamah. “We can just pray for their safety in the struggle. Imah, it’s actually good if Sa’aman doesn’t come home. The thing is, he can’t do anything dangerous while he’s under arrest. And we know that Mimin and Maman are already guerrillas. We really should thank God Aman hasn’t come home.”

“Amah, but we are really at a point where we need help, right?”

“Who is there to help us? We only have ourselves, Imah. Other people have to help themselves first too. Mas Darsono is the only person who’s helped, with part of the money from his salary.”

“Mas Darsono is a good man. I pray he’ll make a good husband for you, sister.”

“All we can do is pray, Imah, just pray.”

The two sisters fell silent. And quiet feelings of lonely isolation ebbed and flowed over the two young creatures. And in the direction of their feet, Amilah, still deep in thought, her dreams ranging far, musing at the door. But she still hadn’t come to any conclusions.

The night dwindled all the more. Once or twice they heard a military truck rumbling through Middle Lane. It was war time. And in war time, all that is valued are the things connected with war. Humans and humankind become a jungle.

The lamp flared. Yellow and red, thick and thin. And now the sorrow of the two girls eased to a certain calmness. Salamah loosened her tight embrace and spoke low, as

if she was pondering her fate. “Ami and my other friends say they want to have children. But are we like this? Parents who love their children are so happy. And people whose parents are good to them are so happy too. What a happy thing it must be, to have parents who love you.”

Patimah considered her sister’s remarks carefully. She echoed them, her voice low, nearly like an oath.

“I won’t become a mother—I won’t be a mother who’s cruel to her children. I’ll love them, love them more than all the creatures in the world. I will teach my future children only what’s good, and I won’t allow them to bear the misery of the world.”

Once more Salamah embraced her. She said softly, “You’ll be a good mother, Imah. God willing you will become a good wife to your husband. And you in turn will get a good husband too. Imah, God creates good people only for good people. And wicked people for wicked people.”

She paused a minute and stroked her sister’s hair. She spoke again,

“Tomorrow we’ll go to work, Imah. You and me. And during your afternoon break, you must keep up with your studies. Remember what Aman says: ‘In this world there’s no place for stupid and sickly people.’ That’s why you must keep studying. And you have to take care of your body too.”

“Yes, sister,” replied Patimah respectfully. “God willing, your happiness will come. No, not ‘God willing’ again, you’ll definitely be happy.”

She paused and glanced at the corner. But Sa’aman wasn’t there as usual. His cot wasn’t there either. It had been seized by the MPs with Sa’aman. She sighed deeply,

then went on speaking. “And when the time comes that you’re happy, you’ll certainly remember your little brothers and sister, right? Isn’t that so, Imah?”

“Of course, big sister. Of course.”

“Patimah, you really must keep them in mind. Love them. Aman is still not back home. We can’t even hope for Maman and Mimin to come home. We’ve handed over two of our brothers to fate—to the struggle. I don’t understand why Aman, the only protector we have left, was arrested. And it’s even harder to understand, because he once said this to me, ‘Amah, a time might come when I have to leave you all. I can’t say why. But if that time comes, you, Amah, and our sister Patimah will have to provide for the little ones.’”

Then she paused to remember.

“That’s what he said,” Salamah continued. “You will follow his advice, right? You’re the only one of us who Sa’aman had ambitions for. Just you, understand?”

“I understand,” said Patimah, moved.

“And Aman also said,” she continued in a whisper to repeat Sa’aman’s words, “‘I know you’re going to get trouble from Ma. But don’t let it bother you, and don’t be afraid, Amah, you have to carry on. You and Imah. And don’t forget, always respect and value your old mother. Don’t hurt her feelings.’”

She paused again, held up by her own sobbing. She continued: “Understand, you?”

“Yes,” whispered Patimah respectfully.

“Thank God. Patimah, I know Mustafa loves you very much. He’s honest and sensible. But you’re just sixteen. You’re not planning to set up housekeeping with him, are you?”

Patimah shook her head weakly. “Not yet,” she whispered.

“Mustafa’s still in school. And you have to keep working too. You’ll be an educated family. And that’s very good.”

“Thank you, Amah. And Mas Darsono is good to you and good to all of us. God willing he can take Aman’s place,” continued Patimah, half praying.

“Yes, Aman gave us permission to get married. You know, Imah, I’m old enough to get married. I’m nineteen. Oh, I pray everything works out the way we want it to. Enough—it’s very late. Tomorrow we’re going to work. Sleep now, Imah.”

Patimah obeyed. She stretched out away from Salamah’s side. For a minute her eyes still flickered, checking on her mother musing at the door. Then her eyes began to dim. Her lashes fluttered and descended. At last the light in her eyes went out. Patimah slept.

Salamah stretched out by herself now. She felt isolated, lonely even here. For a moment she saw her mother, an old woman who waits at the door in case it might open and Aman come in with his wages as usual.

Salamah only thought about her mother for a minute. Then she turned onto her stomach, supporting her cheek with the pillow. She gazed thoughtfully at the dark corner, the place of Sa’aman’s cot, now empty. From that corner she had received Sa’aman’s teachings. But now the wonderful voice was heard no more. The miraculous

voice was dead. Dead to the ear. But it lived on in her thoughts. In her memory, in her spirit, in her being it would remain forever.

Slowly her eyes closed. Her memory wandered. She thought about the night Sa'aman had been arrested. With his mouth red with fatigue and his shirt wet with sweat he, Sa'aman, entered the house.

“Make a lot of money today, Sa'aman?” she asked.

Looking depressed, the twenty-four-year-old youth said softly, “Today wasn't so good, Amah. Maybe tomorrow we'll do better.”

Saying this, the youth lay down on his cot. And nobody went near him. He wouldn't be disturbed. As always he woke up fifteen minutes later and bathed with the hot water they got ready for him. And only now he was ready to join in the conversation. To start with he went to the table where Patimah, Salamah, and Hasan were studying.

“Imah,” he said to Patimah, “how was school today?”

And Patimah answered, “In Dutch I got a seven. English, nine. Algebra, eight. Are you pleased?”

Sa'man said cheerfully, “Oh yeah. After you graduate from middle school, you can go on to high school.” He watched Patimah lovingly.

“What do you want to be when you grow up, Patimah? You must have some ambition. Don't you?”

Shyly Imah replied, “My friends want to be officers, pilots, journalists, musicians, professors, doctors, get master's degrees—”

“And you?” Sa’aman interrupted.

Patimah became even more embarrassed. She said, “I don't know, myself, brother, I haven't figured it out yet. Just that I want to be a good person and do useful work, always.”

She still remembered the way Sa’aman’s eyes reddened from emotion, then. He came over to Patimah and stroked her hair. And he spoke like a priest giving a blessing.

“Yes, you will be a good person and be useful for doing good. But never forget you must keep studying until you know and understand the world, this world full of sin and despotism.”

“Yes, Brother, I understand,” replied Patimah.

Then Sa’aman approached his youngest sister Salamah, called Mimi. He said cheerfully, “And you, Mimi, did you still get a three in math?”

Embarrassed, Salamah answered, “Today I didn't even get a three, I went down. I went down to a two.”

Sa’aman burst into laughter, then he said affectionately, “How did that happen?”

“I don't know, brother, maybe... maybe it's true I'm stupid. Yes, maybe I'm really stupid.”

“No, you're not allowed to despair. Hear me? That's what is called despair. And despair isn't good. Maybe there's a problem with your eyes and you're getting headaches, so you can't read.”

Salamah's shyness disappeared. She said happily, "That's true, that's what it's like. I've been trying to tell my teacher for a long time. But the teacher says it's just an excuse."

"Maybe your eyes aren't good. Tomorrow you're not going to school. You'd better get your eyes examined at the hospital. Maybe you need glasses."

"Glasses, brother," said Salamah happily.

Suddenly Salamah's memories ended, extinguished. She heard the chair creak where her mother sat. From where she now lay, Salamah raised her head a little so she could see her mother.

Amilah was shaking her head. Her thin bun of hair had uncoiled down her back. Her two elbows were stuck on the table and her head weakly placed in her hands. Softly she lamented.

"Aman," she spoke painfully, "Aman, Sa'aman, my child."

She paused and her breath was labored. Then she started again, "Where are you? Where? Where? Where? When are you coming back? When?"

She paused again. And though her head drooped, there were no tears in her eyes. Her eyes remained dry. She was still the same old Amilah—hard as stone.

"Aman, Aman."

Her voice softened as she spoke, then became inaudible. And she went back to silently staring at the door.

Slowly Salamah put her head back on the pillow. She prayed in a whisper, “Let my good brother Aman be safe. Aman,” she spoke as though Sa’aman was really in front of her, half praying, “we’re keeping you in mind, your total goodness and your spirit, and we hope you come home soon. I pray you’re safe within the shelter of Almighty God.”

She was quiet. In the silence, recollections began to take over her mind again.

Look! Sa’aman going over to Hasan. Yes, on the night he was arrested by the MPs, three month ago.

“Hey, Hasan, champ,” he said with a laugh, “Why are your eyes swollen like that? You must have been fighting.”

Hasan became anxious. He spoke self-defensively.

“It’s not my fault. It’s not my fault. I was brave enough to swear an oath—until death, if—”

“Hey,” interrupted Sa’aman, “a child this little wants to play oaths. Don’t speak that way again. Hear me?”

“No, brother. I won’t, really.”

Sa’aman was quiet again. He corrected all Hasan’s notebooks thoughtfully. Then he smiled happily and said, “You’re a good kid.”

“Thank you, brother. But that stuff just now—it really wasn’t my fault,” said Hasan continuing his defence. “The other kids asked me to play war. Twenty kids makes ten to ten. They ordered me to be a NICA commandant. But I didn’t like it. I wanted to be made a guerrilla commandant.”

Sa'aman smiled happily.

“Why should I want to be made a NICA commandant? Why? Our big brother Mimin’s a guerilla commandant. And brother Maman is a guerilla private. And I want to be a guerilla too. Why did they make me a NICA commandant? It isn’t fair, is it, brother? It’s not fair, right?” And Sa’aman only replied with a laugh. “But they wouldn’t let me. They all wanted to be guerilla commandants. Only one wanted to be a NICA commandant, one of the MP’s kids from Iaan Trivelli. As soon as they beat me, I left. But they came after me and cursed me out. And they said ‘coward, coward.’ And then we fought. That fight was intense. Nobody could break it up but our teacher.”

Once again Sa’aman smiled to hear how the boy defended himself. He pinched Hasan’s cheeks and said cheerfully, “How would you like to be a general, Hasan?”

“I’d like it very much, brother. Like it very much. But I don’t want to be a NICA General. I want to be a guerilla general. NICA I don’t want. A guerilla General, brother. And I want to ride a horse and everything. A tall light brown horse. I’d wear a brown uniform. Have a rifle too. Oh, it would be great. Have two pistols, one on each side. Can I really be a General?”

“Why not? As long as you’re smart. As long as you’re brave. As long as you have convictions. As long as you’re healthy. Later when you’re grown up you can be General. You may command the troops. Thousands of them, tens of thousands—officers and privates. As long as you’re honest.”

“Honest too?”

“Of course, Hasan. If you’re dishonest, you commit lots of sins. If you commit a lot of sins, you’re afraid of death. You’re afraid of being wounded. You become afraid of battle.”

Hasan thought. Then he said, “Why don’t you want to become a General?”

“I’m a *becak* driver and I like it, as long as you all can keep eating and learning, and stay healthy. It’s all right for me to work hard as long as you all, Hasan, Mimi, and Imah, really study. Do you understand now, Hasan?”

Hasan frowned as he thought it out.

“Yes, brother,” he said then. “Brother...”

“Yes?”

“Maybe Mimin is a General now.”

Sa’aman laughed loudly.

“No,” he said.

“When he grows up?”

“But he’s still too young, just twenty-two. He has to be older. And people become Generals if they’re able to protect their people from invaders who want to conquer them.”

“Mimin and Maman are sure like that, right?”

“Yes, but they’re still young. And they’ve only been fighting for four years. To become a General a person must go to war again and again. The purpose of war isn’t to

destroy the other country, but to protect the people and their own country from the enemy's oppression.”

Hasan imagined it all with admiration: big light brown horse, very tall, two pistols, shining rifle, brown uniform, privates and officers by the thousand. And he there was in the lead, very much being the General. Then he spoke sadly, “But it'll be a long time until I can become a General.”

“A long time. Twenty or thirty more years.”

“And I'm not even ten. I'm just eight.”

“If you work and learn diligently, you're not still a little child anymore. And you might get to be a General. Later. When you are grown up, you'll know it yourself. Now, go study now. Study hard.”

Then Sa'aman went to the bunk to sit with Salamah and their mother, the three of them. As usual he handed the spending money to his mother. He said, “Ma, here's spending money for tomorrow.”

Salamah's recollections were interrupted again by the voice of her mother. Once again she lifted her head to look at Amilah.

Amilah leaned her body on the back of the chair. Her eyes, black slits, gazed at the smoke-blackened ceiling. She lamented again, “Aman, you don't know how miserable I am now. I don't understand why you don't come back,” she said.

After that she gazed at the door again. Then she shook her head. Finally she slumped down on the table. She stopped moving. She slept.

Salamah continued her recollections.

The night of her brother's arrest, her mother had only received ten *rupiahs*. But the old woman didn't have the courage to object. And Salamah herself was given only five *rupiahs*, half of what her mother got. That money would have to buy whatever her little brothers and sisters needed—whatever would be needed for study materials, and anything else of that kind.

Look! Look! The young man, sturdy Sa'aman, clear and tangible in her imagination. He went to the cot and lay down. He was wearing only an undershirt and shorts. The weak light of the oil lamp didn't reach his face. He didn't speak again. He was already sleeping, exhausted from wheeling a *bejak* pedicab for six long hours. And as usual he slept restlessly, with his face darkened as if something occupied his thoughts and pursued him as he slept.

Then 9:00 came. For a minute they could hear somebody sounding the hour by striking the metal electrical pole nine times. Hasan, Salamah, and Patimah went to the bed and slept. Mother went to the little bunk on the other side of the house. She slept too. Everything was calm. Then, while everything was quiet and they all slept tranquilly, suddenly everyone was awakened. A man could be heard trying to kick his way in the front door. Sa'aman leapt from his cot and went to the door. But he quickly drew back to pull himself together.

While this was going on Salamah herself was sitting on the bed, not knowing what to do. Tightly she hugged her brother and Sa'aman whispered quickly, "I knew this house was being surrounded. I can't run any more. Sister Amah, the moment has come. I'm arrested. Take good care, guard the kids well."

And he nuzzled her cheek.

Then Sa'aman went to the door and opened it. Calmly, he faced the MP.

“You're Aman–Sa'aman?” said one of the three MPs.

Calmly, as though he already foresaw what was to come, Sa'aman replied, “Yes.”

“Sa'aman bin Paijan?”

“Yes.”

“Where's your brother,” the MP opened a notebook and illuminated it with a flashlight, “Canimin bin Paijan?”

“I don't know.”

“You don't know?” The MP came close. He brought his face close to Sa'aman's. “Son of a bitch! Murderer! Rebel! Thief! We've been after you a long time. Where's your brother? You must know.”

“With the guerrillas,” answered Sa'aman.

“With the guerrillas. Yeah, tell that one in fairyland.” Then the MP aimed the flashlight at his notebook again. He spoke again, “Where is Kartijan, no, not Kartijan–Kartiman. Where's Kartiman bin Paijan?”

“I don't know. He's been a guerilla for four years.”

“Damn! Just tell it in fairyland. Got it, you? He's going to find a pole in his neck any minute now.”

Then the other two MPs examined and ransacked to whole house and contents.

Then the other MP shouted from the corner, “Hey, whose cot is this?”

“It’s mine,” answered Sa’aman.

“Where’d you steal it from, shithead?”

“Steal? Can’t you gentlemen speak a little more politely?” said Sa’aman.

“I already took the manners course. Where did you steal the cot? Isn’t it military equipment? Owned by a company of the Dutch Army?”

“It was given to me by an Indian Private.”

“That’s what you say. Fold it up!”

And Sa’aman folded the cot. And two MPs continued to ransack the whole house. He, Sa’aman, joined his sisters and brother and mother to watch the commotion with feeling of bereavement.

“Hey, murderer—where’s your gun?”

“I don’t have a gun.”

“You renegade devil, where’s your gun?”

“Look for it yourself!”

“Buffalo! OK, let’s go. Take that cot!”

She called to the MP, the MP taking her brother, and asked, “Where are you taking my brother, sir?”

“To be hung!”

And she, Salamah, didn’t ask any more. And she saw her brother get kicked from behind and stagger, crashing into the door. Her fear and apprehension increased. And at

the instant her brother began to step over the threshold she heard his voice, a shout of pure entreaty, “Amah, take care of the kids.”

This shout earned her brother a hard slap in the mouth.

Finally Sa’aman had vanished. He vanished into a night full of secrets. Ten minutes later, everyone in the house was crying softly together, the crying of people whose government is their enemy. And the tears of wartime were added to that night—tears that are shed with pain and completely vanish with peace and safety and happiness on earth. And nobody regrets the situation. But human tears are futile. They don’t fertilize the earth as do springs, a mountain’s tears. Then those in the house returned and lay back down on the bunk, thinking about their missing Aman.

In situations like this, when a place has just been ransacked by government troops, there isn’t a neighbor family who dares look in. The safety of each household rested on all of them, especially in a place where they aren’t protected. This is wartime. What happens is only the business of soldiers and government troops.

Salamah rubbed her eyes. Her bluish eyes filled with tears again. Quietly she cried. At this moment she was only concerned with herself.

“Brother,” she whispered, “I’ll do what you ask of me with all my spirit’s strength.”

Then there wasn’t a voice in the house. All slept.

An hour later Hasan woke up. For a moment he sat rubbing his head. Then he got off his side of the bunk and went around to the other side where Salamah slept. The girls’ feet were intertwined. Salamah woke up and attended to the little one.

“What, Hasan?”

“Salamah, I have to pee,” he said sleepily.

Salamah got down from the bunk and the two went to the back and vanished from the scene. Ten minutes later they came back. And soon the two lay down on the bunk, and the quiet of the night came on again.

CHAPTER 2

red dawn

At the moment that Salamah, her little sister Patimah, and her little brother Hasan slept in the big bunk, at the moment that Amilah, their mother, wearily mused and dreamed and dozed at the table, at that very moment Corporal Canimin and Private Kartiman of the guerilla troops were standing guard. The place where the two soldiers watched wasn't far from the big bed where Salamah, Patimah, and Hasan slept. Not far, either, from their mother's little bunk. They were only a little less than forty kilometers southeast of their family. Not far—really not! But there had been no contact between them and they had no news of each other.

The two soldiers stood guard in a certain front watch post on the edge of a large street under a large tree. The two tended a water-cooled machine gun. Dark night concealed their shapes. Only the radiance of the stars in the middle of the night revealed them standing guard.

Though they'd only arrived two hours before, the two soldiers already knew the area well. They'd passed through here many times, earlier, before the military action of reoccupation by the Dutch had ever been heard of. Now that the military action and the guerilla soldiers' defensive actions were common knowledge, the two were evacuating, along with their somewhat disorganized unit, to a spot several thousand meters away. They planned to return here later sometimes to ambush convoys.

Negotiations between Indonesia and the Dutch had produced a name to identify these guerillas. They were called "pocket soldiers," which was quite an insult. But what could the soldiers say if their own government was happy to approve the name? And

because these two soldiers were known as “pocket soldiers” like the rest, they joined their comrades in the evacuation.

These two brothers were experienced soldiers by now. They’d both been involved in the successful military initiative sent to put out the fire of Communist revolt in Madiun. Afterward, they’d come back to where they’d been before, now known as “the pocket.” So here the two were again, back in their old sector—back in the “pocket.”

The area around them was calm enough. There were almost no sounds, no voices, except the twittering of the birds and animals. It seemed lonely, quiet, and deserted. But though the situation was calm, at that very minute there were dozens of soldiers on guard a few hundred meters in front of them. Behind the two, another section of fully-armed soldiers stood guard. And two kilometers further behind them, a regiment was in the process of escorting three or four thousand guerilla families away from the big street. On either side, one kilometer to their right and left, were two more guard posts. And behind the troops for several kilometers the families being evacuated, along with the regimental staff, and all: supplies, from food to dynamoes, from radio transmitters to medicine.

Then came Corporal Canimin’s voice, speaking to his brother Private Kartiman: “These families are a bother.”

“Damn right!” cursed soldier Kartiman. “The useless things we worry about—that’s what we prize most. Just think. Troops can move easily. But look at all this, half-dead grandmas and grandpas, useless babies who might as well never have been born. Sending them all off. And us? We’re worn out trying to take care of them, Just think, Mimin, Jogja or Purnokerto not more than 800 kilometers from here—only two months of campaigning. Damn! It’s a damn shame.”

“Maman,” said Corporal Canimin softly, “You *are* angry tonight.”

“Hmm, I don’t know why. I just feel gloomy and annoyed. I don’t know. Damn! I ate too much. Now my stomach hurts. But that’s not it. That’s not it. That’s really not it. I feel—maybe my time has come.”

“You’re not thinking nonsense, are you?”

“Either nonsense or the truth,” said Kartiman more roughly. “I don’t know. And I don’t care, either. You know? But,” his voice became a little softer and compassionate, “I feel like today, or tonight, or right now, is when I’m meant to die. Hey, don’t argue with me! My heart is just shaking right now, and I’m sick to my stomach. I’m shaking, Mimin—shaking! Shaking out of control. I can’t control it. Damn.” Then his voice lowered, sounding solitary and depressed. “Maybe I’m going to die young.”

“Die young! That’s what our brother Aman said.”

“Yeah, I’m repeating what he said. But right now, Kartiman, right now I feel this time those words are meant for me. Die young! Yeah, maybe I’ll die young.”

“Maybe you’re just sick, Maman. You’ve got a long life ahead of you. You could live to be sixty. Maybe more. Your body is strong and everything is intact,” said Corporal Canimin comfortingly.

Then soldier Kartiman spoke seriously:

“Mimin,” he said deliberately, “The idea of dying doesn’t bother me. If I die young, so be it. I can’t endure. Hmm. Right now I yearn for my death. Death! I used to fear death, and now I yearn for it. I’ll finally be free of this guilt that’s been oppressing me for so long. At least I hope so. Even if I don’t get a chance to say goodbye to the

people I love, so be it. Ratni... Hmmmm. If my blood must be spilled here, no, Mimin, I won't regret it."

"I understand. But Maman, don't let yourself get discouraged. It's me who's been disabled. My face is done for, since I got hit by that Molotov cocktail in Madiun. I even can't eat on the left side of my mouth. I just hope I go before you do. You're in one piece. Maman, just try to get back on track. Think good things and good things will happen. Alright?"

"I can't help these feelings—they come whether I want them to or not. Hey, Mimin, don't be angry. You never did like it," said Kartiman seriously. "And it's exactly what's torturing me.?"

"What?"

"This. This. This thing that's always on my mind." He paused. Then in a low voice like a sick and frightened scream, too short, "Father!"

Hearing that word, Corporal Canimin was shocked too. Kartiman spoke again.

"Father," he said very slowly, almost inaudibly. "It's coming back to me—his dishevelled face. That's when—hey, wasn't that when he was half dead from drinking whiskey? He looked like a big fried banana, rolling around on the floor. Whiskey—the big reward from the NICA."

"Hey, Man, you better not talk about that any more."

"There it is, though, disturbing me. I can't get it out of my head. Maybe memory now. Maybe my time has come. Hey, don't interrupt me. Hear me out. I just remember that bridge, and under it too: the bank of the Ciliwang! You must still remember. Damn! And it was me. I had to be the one who shot him in the head. Think about it. Why me?"

Why not you? Why not our brother Aman? And it was me who kicked him into the water. Why was it only me? And now these horrible memories. Damn!”

“Yes but before that, we all respected him, me, you and Aman, right?”

“Respected him! True, we respected him. But it was me who shot him, and then I kicked him into the river. I have no peace. He always haunts my memory. But right now it’s so strong. The truth is I can’t stand it any more. Let me die too. Let me.”

“I said to stop thinking nonsense.” said Corporal Canimin. “You’re a good soldier, well-disciplined. If your own father sided with the enemy, and that enemy aims to kill us—all of us—who better to deal with your father than you yourself? You have to think of it that way, Maman. Look, say your father was killed by another soldier. He could have suffered much more, he could have been run through with a bamboo spear...”

“Brother, even though he was our enemy, no matter how you look at it,” the voice came more faintly, “in the end he was my father despite all that. Your father. Aman’s father. Nobody can deny it.”

“Right. That’s true.”

“So now what? He was my father. He was your father. And we were his sons. You were his son too. Maybe the sin is so contemptible that... God, if You’re able to forgive all our sins, can You forgive this one too?”

“God always forgives his sinners. And everyone sins.”

“Yes, I know.” Abruptly, with his hands rigid as if an electric shock were running through them, soldier Kartiman grabbed his brother’s shoulder. “But—but—but—but—the way I feel... Brother Mimin, I feel it so much, it’s the worst sin anyone can ever do. To murder you father! To kill your old parent! Maybe for him it was an act of mercy. He

would have died by being run through with a bamboo spike, and we kept him from that or some other torture. Maybe that keeps it from being a sin. You know what happened to some of these NICA corporals... But I did it. I did it, it's my sin. To kill your father... Oh!"

Corporal Canimin responded the only way he could. He said persuasively:

"But Maman," he said, "The man you killed, Corporal Paijan—the NICA corporal, the KNIL corporal—wasn't exactly your father. He was also not my father, or maybe he was my real father. But you? Your father? No! Definitely not. I've been thinking it over for a long time. And here's what I think. I could be his child. Yeah, I probably am. Because, because with me there's a similarity. But you? No, Maman. I'm sure I'm right. You look like an Ambonese. You don't look like Corporal Paijan. In my case there's a resemblance with him. Just think now—Aman looks like a Manadoan. He has that yellow skin like a langsung fruit, and slant eyes. And Amah—she doesn't look like Corporal Paijan either. She also really doesn't resemble Mother. She's Eurasian—Indo-Dutch. Her skin is white! And you—black as a crow." Corporal Canimin paused for a minute. And Soldier Kartiman listened to his brother's revelations. "Think it over. Take your time. Amah's hair is wavy red. But you? Your hair is kinky as a sheep. Just remember that. What's more, Amah's nose is pointy. And yours? Flat! Snub-nosed like a revolver. No, Maman, you're not the child of Corporal Paijan. But you're still my little brother."

"If that's true," said soldier Kartiman hoarsely and nervously, "even if that's true, I've thought of him as my father for a long time now. Ever since I was little I called him Father. And I think of him as Father even now. And isn't the truth partly what you believe it is?"

“All this sounds like you’re influenced by the way Aman talks.”

“How is that influenced by Aman?”

“Well,” said Corporal Canimin under his breath, “As usual, it’s just talk.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean—I don’t like hidden meanings. Easy things become complicated, difficult. I don’t like it. You just said that if you think something is true, that makes it partly true, But I don’t like to look at things that way.”

“I spent a lot of time with our brother Aman,” Kartiman replied slowly. “I can’t help being influenced by him. He’s such a good person. And he thinks deeply about things. Not like you, hey? And I think it’s true: our belief makes up part of the truth.”

Abruptly the calm in his voice was gone. He became angry again.

“This vision from hell! I keep seeing the bank of the Ciliwung. The body that I kicked into the water, and the water with waves breaking in it. Hey, wasn’t there a full moon?”

“Yes.”

“Brother Mimin, I can’t get this evil vision out of my head. I can’t make it stop. Maybe it’s really come to this.”

“Alright—try not to think about it. Only God knows when you’ll die. And we exist only so God can make use of us. Believe me, you’ve got fifty or sixty years more to live. Isn’t that what he said too?”

Private Kartiman didn’t reply. The two composed themselves. The area around them fell silent. The chirping language of the small creatures nearby filled the night. The stars twinkled in the clear black sky. It was quiet, despite the thousands of human souls

nearby. Once or twice far-off shouts were heard, orders carried by the night wind. And the two soldiers resumed their usual thoughts.

At that very same time, the little brothers and sisters and mother of the two soldiers were sleeping safely in their flimsy bamboo house, in the area called by the people informally the Freedom Zone. The stars twinkled over their heads too. Yes, the very same stars.

The silence of the foremost guardpost was finally broken by shouted orders, repeated frantically. Then one or two shots sounded from the middle of the guard area.

“Maybe some prisoners escaping,” said Corporal Canimin.

“Hmm. If the guard lets them get away, I’ll hang him. He’ll be sorry. Yeah, he’ll be sorry when I hang him by the feet until he’s dead...”

“That’s an evil way to think.”

“If the prisoners have the nerve, well, I know this is too close to Jakarta. They’ll find a way to get there.”

“You shouldn’t be so brutal. I’ve told you that over and over again.”

“If all this time I’ve been brave enough to murder a man I considered my father, why not them? They are bound and determined to escape. I know that for sure. They run away so they can shoot at us,” said Kartiman furiously. “And you can’t change my mind about this. I’m going to die. Let me! Who knows, if I don’t? You know what I want right now?”

He listened for a response. Then he continued savagely, “I want to kill as many enemies as I can. However I can. I don’t care any more.”

“That’s cruelty, not nobility.”

“Hmm, not noble? What do I care if it’s noble or not? And anyway, I don’t believe there ever was nobility in the world. Aman always said, ‘Our family was born in a trash-heap—the Dutch East Indies army barracks—and we’re just compost. And now all we’re good for is to head the trash up higher, to make the compost pile bigger. So it can fertilize the earth and humanity.’”

“But this isn’t about humanity. It’s about the right of one prisoner to run away. And everybody has to sleep sometime, even a guard. They just run out of energy. And they can’t keep going. You’re being cruel.”

“Cruelty is sometimes the way for people,” Kartiman said fiercely.

“That’s just what Aman says.”

Private Kartiman grew uncomfortable as the conversation touched on more and more areas of disagreement. Retreating, he shifted to a new topic.

“Mimin, there’s something else on my mind—our little brothers and sisters—
“Amah, Imah, Mimi, and Hasan. Amah’s all grown up now, isn’t she? She was just a little girl. When we left she was just sixteen. Now she’s nineteen. She could be even be married. Nineteen, that’s old enough to marry.”

He was silent. Then he prayed:

“Please, God, let her find a husband.”

“Amen,” Corporal Canimin concluded the prayer. “Amah is a good girl. She loves our brother Aman so much. And she’s beautiful too. Sometimes I wonder how our sister can be so beautiful. I just don’t like it when she cries! And whoever sees her tears, they fall in love with her. I don’t know why.”

“I slapped her once.”

“Maman, you are unbelievably coarse.”

“That’s right. I sure am coarse.” His voice lowered. “Mimin, I keep imagining Aman. I feel his calm eyes watching over me. Maybe he’s thinking of me right now. It’s just my imagination. I’m confused. I want to die.”

“There you go again. Listen to you!”

“Don’t start that again, trying to make me feel better. It’s meaningless. I don’t want to hear it.”

“I’m telling you the truth.”

“Why should I listen?”

“Listen!” said Corporal Canimin. “You don’t hear the sound of a truck, or a tank, or a gun-carrier, do you? There’s no convoy. You can hear for yourself. There’s nothing going on here. And you’re safe, really safe! You’re going to live fifty or sixty years more. Maman, stop dwelling on these visions of death. You should think about your wife instead—sweet Ratni. You’re too rough with Ratni too. The orphan you picked up in Madiun and wandered off with—even though she’s so important to you, you’re still rough with her.”

“Maybe you’re right. I’m not really thinking about Ratni. My mind is full of shadows—yes, shadows, brother Mimin! Maybe this is what they mean when they say your life passes before your eyes before you die. And shadows alternating with something like a hand coming to put everything in order. Mimin, in case I fall, please take care of Ratni for me. She’s a good, devoted girl. And an orphan too. Poor thing! If I hadn’t married her, maybe things would have been even worse.”

“Quiet, quiet.”

“What?” said Private Kartiman harshly. “Because I can’t stop thinking this craziness? I’m not enjoying it. But the feelings keep coming. Damn. And it’s getting stronger and stronger. Oh, I’m going to die before the sun comes up. I know. I already feel it. I know. I know.”

“Nonsense.”

“Fine, I’m talking nonsense. Fine, I’m crazy to feel this way. But it’s the truth. Look, why am I yearning like this? And why am I yearning for my father? I want to meet him and ask for his forgiveness. Forgiveness! Just to ask for forgiveness. And why? I know why. I can feel death coming. The hand of death is griping my spirit.”

Corporal Canimin allowed his brother to pour out his feelings, without agreeing or disagreeing. Kartiman repeated, “Why am I yearning for everything? Do you know why? It’s the hand of death. I’m yearning for Ujung Krawang too, for the ships with silvery white sails in the heat of the sun. For the guards there too. I’m sure you still remember—when the Dutch ships landed there and our company rushed to be sent. You must still remember.”

The private fell silent with his memories for a minute. Then he continued in a listless voice:

“I still remember the red sky at sunrise there. And the ocean and sky, rippling red. But at the time I hardly noticed. Red sea. Dawn in the east. Sun just peeping over the horizon. And the ships facing the still-invisible beach—red too! Red, almost as red as blood. Finally, I can feel their beauty. Why only now? Why, Mimin?”

He paused for Canimin’s reply. There was no answer. Then Kartiman said half insultingly:

“I guess you wouldn’t understand. I may be coarse—yes, I’m coarse, but I can feel beauty. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. You’re very civilized, refined, but you’re slow-witted about beauty.”

Corporal Canimin still remained silent.

“Ujung Krawang! I can’t forget that year of my life. It was a hellish place, really. Millions of mosquitos! And the crocodiles! But the scenery was so beautiful! Red sea. Red sky. Even the sails were red. But blood is red too. Only bad people have white blood. You know! So I want to experience the beauty of Ujung Krawang again. Waves, sea, sky and sails—all red. I want to be amazed by the dawn there. The red dawn.”

“Maybe you’re sick, Maman!”

“Sick? I’m fine. I’m as healthy as you are. Maybe more.”

“Maybe you need a rest.”

“Maybe,” conceded Private Kartiman unexpectedly.

“If you really need it—really—we can send you to headquarters, and from there to the brigade at Purwakarta. The climate there is good. What’s more, you could get a place in Plered.”

Private Kartiman was delighted by the idea of a rest. “Now you’re starting to be good to me,” he said in a friendly tone.

“Yes, I’ve always been hard on you, Maman. Harder on you than on the other soldiers. Please forgive me for being so rough. Yes, maybe you’ve been needing a rest. You’ve been in combat too much. Especially the period in Madiun. And from chasing the Communists out of Madiun until we got to Kudus, along the coast, you always went

strong. Our section moved and fought the most, I'm sure. And between Purwokerto and now you've been in combat more than nine times."

The two guerilla soldiers sat and leaned on the trunk of a large tree, invisible to each other.

"So you think I can get a leave?" asked Privated Kartiman hopefully.

"The section commandant trusts me. Don't worry!"

"You're good to me now, Mimin!"

"Yeah, as long as we've been in the army, I've always been hard on you," said Corporal Canimin regretfully. "And the truth is I've kept you down too much. Maybe if you weren't in my group, maybe you'd already be a corporal. Why not? You used to be in the indigenous militia opposing the Dutch. You have a lot of experience of warfare in Asia. You might even have been a sergeant or sergeant major by now. But because you're in my group, I've deliberately held you down. Do you know why?"

"No..."

"Well, it should be obvious, Maman! So the rest of the men wouldn't have anything to talk about!"

He paused, and heard his brother shift closer to him.

"Maman, you will forgive me, won't you?"

Private Kartiman didn't reply. The he said slowly, as if to himself, "It's true, I'd love to lead a section."

"Well..."

"And if I die as the head of a section..."

"Well..."

“Someone would remove my insignia. And it would be you who’d have to carry me home to Jakarta.”

“Yes.”

“And you’d have to put the insignia in our glass cupboard at home, along with my picture. You understand, don’t you...”

“Yes, I understand.”

“And this insignia would show how hard and earnestly our family worked to pile up trash and compost it, for fertilizer.”

“Yes...”

“But...” said this Private Kartiman, disappointed, “I don’t have that rank. I’m still a private first class, like I have been since I started in the Japanese militia.” Then he cheered himself up. “But I don’t mind. I’m willing to fall in any position. Let me.”

“Maman, if you really have to fall, it shouldn’t be until you’re promoted.”

Quiet. Only for a moment, then Kartiman’s feelings exploded.

“Damn!” His words came harder and harder. “Now I see. You’re lying to me again. You’re trying to please me with your pretty talk! But why should I believe it? Why? No reason! None!”

“Your rudeness is shocking. You’re barely human. You have to hold yourself in a little.”

“If you weren’t my own brother, I’d shoot you!”

Hearing this, Corporal Caniman burst out laughing.

“You have a Lee Enfield?” the Corporal said bravely. “Great—just great! I’d like it if my own brother split my skull. After all, I’m done for, Maman! I’m old and injured. No woman would come near me now.”

“Tchaa. You’re trying to make me feel guilty talking like that. Bah! I’ve had it. I’m fed up, really fed up.”

“The truth is, you’re just a good talker, Maman.”

“Damn!” swore his little brother.

“That’s enough, don’t be so angry. Tomorrow I’ll ask for a leave for you. And you can be with Ratni for a couple of weeks. And remember, don’t be rough with your wife, the orphan. Now keep quiet. We’re on guard.”

His voice took on a tone of surprise. “Hey, where are the two men who went for water?” Then to his little brother, he said again, “Tomorrow we’ll ask. Really!”

Private Kartiman had lost interest in his brother’s blandishments. He was now praying to his God.

“God! he said humbly. “—let me be dazzled once again by the red dawn. Yes, God, I understand the sign You’ve sent me. I’ve sinned greatly. I know it. And You are all-knowing. You alone can forgive the sins of the world. And You’ve taken tens of millions of souls already, sacrificed for the new nation. You’re creating my land. You’ve build this nation on my sins—on the sins of all of us. And on the sins of my nation’s enemies, too! Yes, I know, I understand this sign of Yours. The hour of my death is coming...”

“Maman, enough. You have to rest.”

“...maybe all these sins aren't sins against You. Because You have created this new nation. You alone created it. And because we—because I'm on the weaker side, fighting in self-defense. Yes, we're on the weaker side. But all my sins, I feel them as sins. I sinned against myself. I sinned against mankind. I sinned against the families of the the enemy soldiers I killed. I sinned against the love of those who will never be born now...”

“Maman...” Corporal Canimin interrupted with pity in his voice.

“And when I return to You,” Kartiman continued praying as if God was actually there in front of him, “if You don't agree to pardon Your humble creature, I'm willing that my soul should stay covered and spattered by the blood of the enemies I destroyed. I'm willing, if you don't pardon me. And I beg You, shelter my Ratni, the orphan child. I brought her here from a long way off. Finding her was a sign from You. After my hour comes, shelter her. And if I'm a sinner in Your eyes too, I'm willing to be shut out of Your heaven, to wander as an evil ghost.”

He was silent for a moment. Then he spoke again, and his words were addressed to his brother.

“Brother, remember Ratni.”

Suddenly he stood and the hazy stars faintly lit his body. He saluted. An answering figure loomed upward too, illuminated by the midnight stars, and returned Kartiman's salute.

“Squadron Leader,” said the private. “Permission to perform my prayers, Sir.”

“Permission granted.”

He saluted smartly one more time. Then in his military uniform, the dark beret with the insignia of two grains of rice, a round of ammunition worn like a necklace, the Lee Enfield rifle strapped to his shoulder, Private Kartiman prostrated himself in prayer beneath the tree. He had no water for the ritual ablution.

Corporal Canimin sat back down, disappearing into the darkness again.

“No sign of approaching enemies yet,” whispered the Corporal to himself. Then he was silent.

Night was fading. The sky, black throughout the night, was becoming dark blue. And everything around them became dark blue as well. The two forms showed dark blue, becoming more and more visible as the night faded. Gradually the increasing light revealed the scene. Private Kartiman and Corporal Canimin were wearing helmets on their backs; backpacks too. There was a machine gun in front of the pair.

Slowly Corporal Canimin rose and looked searchingly to the left and right. He complained to himself:

“Where are those two, Ahmad and Kosim? It shouldn’t take them this long to get water, not disciplined soldiers like them. Maybe they got lost?”

He paused again. Then he went on, trying to encourage himself.

“Impossible! He knows this area by heart, that Ahmad. And Kosim too.” He paused.

“Yes, God,” his little brother prayed on, having completed his prostrations, “give me one dawn more—a red dawn like the ones You gave me in Ujung Krawang. Grant me a red dawn, here on land. Oh, it was so beautiful! And I feel its beauty only now.”

He got up and said to his brother:

“I’m finished.”

Corporal Caniman was silenced by his brother’s strange behavior. He had never known Kartiman to act this way. Kartiman pulled him down next to him, and the two sat there—peaceful and quiet. The two joined hands. And the corporal recalled a time three and a half years before...

The English had landed to take over from the Japanese. Everybody was making a big noise about this NICA, the occupying army—children, adults, old people, babies just learning to talk—everybody was talking about it. Just as they’d been talking about rice, which was very scarce then. A month after the English landed violence erupted all over Jakarta. And one day, a day he would never forget, his father, Corporal Paijan, came home. He had a handtruck with him, and there were many things in it.

“Hah!” he shouted happily, “good times are here again.”

Everybody in the house, already suspicious of the prosperity of the Japanese occupation, emerged. Yes, prosperity was selective in those times. The markets were deserted, because of gunfire, because of Japanese soldiers running amok, because of the Gurkha soldiers in the British army and Ubels chasing women, because of violent and arbitrary revenge and the distrust that surged between neighbors. And Sa’aman, Canimin, Kartiman, Salamah, Patimah, Salami, and Hasan, along with their mother, were shocked at all the things.

“Guess what! I’ve been promoted to corporal,” he said.

Then he brought everything in—three soldier’s uniforms, two pairs of shoes, a pair of insignia with a black triangle and one yellow bar, an inner sash, an outer sash, a cap with a visor, a handkerchief, and more.

Kartiman's face darkened. He caught his brother Sa'aman's eye and spoke.

"Aman, look at this! That damned rascal! In Aceh they murdered the Acehnese. In Bali they murdered the Balinese. In Sulewesi, in Borneo—damn! Now here he is with the murderer's gear! Who'll be murdered next? Now? Later? Who knows! Me? You? All of us—all his children And him, himself."

Canimin bowed his head in thought. Kartiman too. Sa'aman too. Then the three moved away. At last Sa'aman whispered:

"It would be better to get rid of him. If not—our whole family could be killed with bamboo spears by the revolutionary youth, the pemuda."

Then he looked at Kartiman.

And Kartiman nodded. He, Canimin, nodded too. Then the three looked at Paijan.

"I was promoted again!" said Corporal Paijan drunkenly. "Look at that! They gave me all this stuff. The Japanese! Huh! You'll never get anything but insults from them."

He looked at the faces of his children, one by one. Then he spoke again:

"These clothes are from Her Royal Highness the Dutch Queen. They are fitting to my high rank."

But his children were not as happy as he was. War was raging between the Indonesian people and the Netherlands and England. And a cold war had attacked the foundation of this family. Hasan, the youngest, just five years old, was shocked by all the things. His mouth turned up in loathing scorn. The boy had been trained by his brothers to oppose the Dutch and their allies.

“Thirty years in the Company!” said Coporal Paijan with self-righteous pride. “Thirty years, and they didn’t get me for free! Pretty soon I’ll get my pension. One of these days I’ll be taking it easy. Hooo! Life will be sweet then.”

He looked at Kartiman.

“Heiho? Native militia? Bah! How much do you make? Cut-off pants, not short, not long, just a mess. Japanese pigs—feed you corn and snails! Tchaa!” Then he turned to him, Canimin, “Japanese volunteers? You must tremble facing those Acehnese squirrels. You two-bit soldier! Huh? There you are, out on patrol in the jungle in Aceh, sabre in your right hand, rifle in your left hand, scrambling after the Acehnese whores! Right? Plus going over those bamboo bridges—tchaa, volunteers!”

He turned to Sa’aman and continued his insults.

“You, you work for the Japanese! You’re making eight rupiahs in this chaotic time. Huh! Tomorrow the three of you are coming with me to sign up for military service! You’ll get official uniform clothes from Her Royal Highness the Dutch Queen. Don’t worry. We’ll all live nice. Here comes the army of the empire! Here’s the company! All of us must, must have the good life! And they’ll pay as good as we get from the Japanese. Who knows how much—ten, twenty, thirty thousand rupiahs! Count it yourselves! Oho!”

The memories faded. Two soldiers approached carrying a water bottle. Taking turns, the brothers drank and filled up their own water bottles. Then they poured water through a bamboo tube into the water-cooled machine gun. And overhead, the starry host flickered more softly. The sky had turned clear blue by now. Very clear!

“Sir?”

“Ahmad, you were gone too long.”

“I was held up in the battalion. There’s a warning I have to pass along. Sir,” he whispered, “the battalion got news. From the spy.”

“From the military corps spy? What did he say?”

“There was a message on the radio. In about half an hour a light convoy is coming by from Jakarta.”

He paused. His breath was excited, upset.

“That’s all,” he said again.

“O.K. We’ll wait here.”

“We’re hoping there’s a capstan along with it.”

“Maman,” said Corporal Canimin.

“Yes.”

“Move up to the troops in front,” ordered Canimin. “And get this machine gun thirty meters off to the right of the road. Repeat--“

“We’ll take care of it. In about half an hour, a light convoy is coming from Jakarta. Corporal Canimin’s machine gun is to be mmoved thirty meters to the right of the road. That’s all.”

“Yes. Go on.”

Privated Kartiman hoisted his rifle back into place. Then he ran, disappearing into the dimness of the landscape.

“Hey Kosim,” called Corporal Canimin. “What do you think? When a man is about to die, are there signs? Does he feel something beforehand?”

“Sometimes. Not often.”

“Yusuf,” Private Ahmad chimed in. “When he was about to die, you remember, don’t you? Yusuf, Chinese Indonesian, from Depok, outside Jakarta.”

“You mean the one who got shot to death playing with Dullah?”

“That’s the one,” said Ahmad. “The guy with the slant eyes! He had signs that he was going to die. He was depressed for a while. For awhile he was smiling, like a kid in love for the first time. Then he got depressed again for a while and sang that song “Farewell my mother” very slowly. Then he died stupidly--shot as a joke.”

“And Diran,” continued Kosim.

“Diran from Mustafa’s battalion, you mean?”

“Yes, sir. Before he died he got very quiet. The day before, he didn’t even speak once. In the mess hall he ate silently. He ate one very small, very hot red pepper. And if anyone came near him, or tried to tease him, he would just move away, without saying anything. Then he was hit by a mortar fragment in the battle of Cibarusa and his chest was shattered, split open. It hit him right in the chest. But not everyone has signs.”

“Maybe you’ve come across other kinds of signs? How about anger, for example? I never noticed it, myself. Are there omens like that?”

They were quiet. Then Ahmad answered,

“Yes! That Karim was so angry, just before he died.”

“Karim? You mean that Karim in the telegraph regiment? Yes, I remember him. He was a good friend of mine. But I didn’t notice any omens.”

“The rest of the guys said he was really angry beforehand. The telegrams he sent out were full of mistakes. The code section corporal cursed him out good. After that he stopped working and went to sleep in the dorm. Then his dorm mate came in to clean his

gun. He didn't think the gun was loaded, but apparently there was one bullet in it. And it was that bullet that burst out, hit Karim in the jaw, and came to rest at the back of his skull."

"Poor guy..."

"No chance to speak, because he was asleep. He just made a little choking sound. And he died right after that."

"Do you think people get very emotional when they're near death?"

Nobody answered. It was calm again. Weariness and listlessness hit them hard. Two or three times the chilly wind came hissing. And Corporal Canimim shut his eyes. He was filled with violent feelings. Anxiety. Regret for the harsh way he oppressed his own brother. Pity, which unexpectedly struck, overflowed and swirled around in his breast. Regret for all the obligations he'd neglected. And memory of the sins against his own father—Corporal Paijan of the Dutch Royal Army. There was bitterness and a feeling of defeat, too, from the injury to his ruined face, roasted by a Molotov cocktail in Madiun. He felt regret for his indiscriminate love, scattered wherever he'd set foot. He felt for his wicked sexual desires, always looking for an outlet. He felt everything. He felt it all.

Then the silence was broken.

"Why are you asking about that?" asked Kosim.

"No reason."

"We're safe here. We must be!" said Ahmad. "Because we only attack when the enemy is being careless. And if the enemy attacks us, we always run away. We'll stay safe, until we get to Tanjung Priok."

“Pray God you’re right.”

“Why are you asking about it?”

Talking about death again. Now fear came over the young corporal. Suddenly he was afraid of death. He became horrified. He opened his eyes. His body was motionless. And the vision in his head—a chest without breath, a mouth a little agape, frozen blood, hazy and dull eyes: the end of a man! And it was his own brother, Private Kartiman, that he imagined thus.

He was lost in these swirling feelings when Private Kartiman came to report on the duty he’d carried out. Quiet returned. Then Canimin heard a whisper in his ear:

“Brother Mimin, give my love to Mother afterward. To Amah. To Imah. To Mimi. To Hasan. And Ratni—take good care of her. And forgive me. And I forgive you. I’m sure my premonition is true, brother...”

Corporal Canimin, touched by these waves of emotion, felt his own feelings surge as well. He grasped Kartiman’s arm. He was unable to speak. He was miserable because the harsh military system made it impossible to acknowledge a blood relationship—and because duty had made him keep his own brother down. And he grappled with his feelings.

Suddenly the feelings were gone. There was an explosion in the distance.

“Damn...” said Ahmad.

“Let—” said Corporal Canimin as he relaxed his hold on his brother’s arm, “let the Military Police Corps do its work.”

It was calm again. A few minutes later, the sound of shooting burst out wildly. With it came a volley of automatic rifle fire and grenades exploding. The four soldiers who made up the machine gun group listened calmly to the chaos.

Afterward, Corporal Canimin's mind wandered back to his memories...

"You must sign on as soldiers," said their father. The Company is looking for lots of soldiers now.

But Sa'aman didn't answer.

"Don't play innocent. And you too—" he pointed his finger and Canimin nodded.

Then his pointing finger moved to Kartiman.

"You too," he said again.

Kartiman, the young hothead, lost his temper. He pounded the table with his fist until the military gear on the table started vibrating.

"You can be a corporal until somebody murders you," he shouted savagely.

Then he ran into the back room and shut himself in.

The Dutch Army Corporal ran after him in the confusion, but he couldn't get into the room. He kicked at the door while Sa'aman and he, Canimin, tried to calm him.

"Maman!" shouted Paijan. "You son of a bitch! You want to be a freedom fighter too? Ha ha ha. Wait, my good child. You want to get rid of your own father? Wait, my friend! I can take you away to the battalion, you know? They ordered me to bring you there so they could stone you to death."

Then he, Canimin, pulled his father away from the door.

“Father,” he said. “Try to keep it down. The pemuda controls this whole zone. Remember! Remember! If you can’t control your mouth, you’ll suffer for it, right? They’ll run us all through with bamboo stakes!”

Sa’aman, deathly pale, hearing his father threatening Kartiman, quickly covered his father’s mouth with his hand. He was terrified. He was afraid that the revolutionary youth would suddenly lose faith in them and descend. And his whole family would be murdered, even the little brothers and sisters he loved so well. “Maman is telling you the absolute truth, Father,” said Sa’aman.

And Corporal Paijan didn’t disagree. He allowed himself to be pulled back out front by Canimin and his brothers.

“Maman is going down to sign up later on,” he, Canimin, said reassuringly.

“That’s right. All of you have to sign up to be soldiers. I already have. You have to, Aman! And Mimin, you too. Maman too. We’ll just move into the barracks.” And his face was bright red from the whiskey.

“Sure. Sure,” said Sa’aman. “I completely agree. And you’ve been an official for so long...”

“Thirty years! Thirty years is a long time. Pension! Taking it easy!”

“Taking it easy!” said Sa’aman as if he were enjoying himself. “Pension! Have a drink!”

“Hurrah! Let’s drink some more whiskey. Whiskey. Pension! Hurrah! We defeated Aceh! We defeated Japan! Whiskey and the barracks, hurrah!”

“Hurrah,” shouted Sa’aman.

“Hurrah,” he, Canimin, joined in.

“Hurrah! Pension! Barracks! A corporal isn’t just anybody.” And his face flushed even more with pleasure. Salamah, Patimah, Amilah, and Hasan began to keep their distance and look at their father with the disgust he evoked in them. But they didn’t have the nerve to approach him.

“Pension!” shouted Corporal Paijan one more time. Again. And again. As if the word could produce a miracle. He focussed his eyes on Sa’aman, who pleased him the most. “You’ll sign up to be a soldier, too,” he said.

Sa’aman nodded. “Of course,” he said.

“Ha, ha, ha, ha,” laughed the Dutch Army Corporal, his mouth wide open, nothing visible but his yellow teeth, “we’ll all live there in the shelter of the Crown. Hurrah–hurrah--hurrah–whiskey! Pour another shot of whiskey!”

Sa’aman got a full glass of whiskey and poured it into his father’s mouth. All the way to the bottom. And the Dutch Army Corporal, who had been an official for thirty years, swallowed greedily. With large swallows, too.

“Pension! Hurrah,” he shouted cheerfully. “Her Royal Highness the Queen is still rich. Long live Her Royal Highness! You must all sign up to be soldiers!” His voice and movements became weaker and weaker. “Sa’aman, Canimin, Kartiman, Salamah, Patimah, Hasan, Amilah too--hurrah--hurrah--hurrah.”

He continued to weaken. He began to slide down from his upright position. The he staggered and fell on the floor. He nearly stopped moving. Nobody in the house could help him now. Corporal Paijan was permitted to enjoy the peak of his happiness. Then the Dutch Army Corporal began to vomit: rice, chocolate, meat, various cakes, whiskey with its stink–his big present from Her Royal Majesty the Queen.

“Pension! Hurrah!” cried the Dutch Army Corporal weakly.

Suddenly Corporal Canimin’s dream died. He heard a voice just behind him.

“What do you know about that! I laid the cowshit out!”

The voice was answered by roars of laughter. Then it died again. And morning drew near. Canimin sighed deeply...

Corporal Paijan rolled around on the floor. After he vomited up his present from Her Royal Highness the Queen, he slept. Night fell. Once more, twice more, Sa’aman poured whiskey into the mouth of the Queen’s loyal slave. Finally he and Sa’aman and Kartiman carried him to the banks of the Ciliwung, under the bridge. It was the night of the full moon. There was no witness except nature itself. Paijan was drunk on new whiskey. And Kartiman shot him with his horse-cap revolver in the head. Afterwards, they kicked the body into the water. Then Sa’aman whispered:

“Father’s a genuine human being now. He’s become a corpse. Let’s show him some respect.”

He and Kariman and Sa’aman bowed down their heads. They stayed motionless, the way Japanese slaves bow down at the court at Tennoo.

“Father died drunk—he was happy. There’s no reason for us to feel sad.”

At that, the brothers went home. And...

His dream snapped abruptly. He heard car engines in the distance. “It’s here,” said Corporal Canimin, recollecting himself. “The convoy.”

The four soldiers of the machine gun group resumed their positions on the ground. Kartiman, as the leader or first machine gunner, opened the safety on his Lee Enfield.

And Corporal Canimin handled the machine gun. Ahmad and Kosim got the ammunition ready.

“Brother Mimin, don’t forget, give them all my love. And Ratni. I know I won’t live to see the dawn. It’s the right thing, too.”

Nobody replied. All they heard was the sound of the approaching convoy, filling up the quiet of the night. Then...

“Maman, I hear the truck. Shoot at the gas tank. I’ll take care of whatever’s in behind it.”

“Yes.”

Quiet again. They heard the truck come close. Then shots erupted wildly from the guard closest to the front. The attack had begun with the lead truck in the convoy. One of the trucks in front was visible in the lantern light, recklessly determined to break through the blockade. They could hear the guard passing. Other trucks reversed direction in a chaotic way. Canimin vomitted bullets. And Kartiman too. Fire sprayed out. Bullets flew like bursts of lightning. And the car they were running off sprayed bullets back at them. It all took about five seconds. Then they saw the truck burst into flame, crashing into the dike of the rice paddy. Its engine died, and finally came to a halt in the middle of the road. Shots continued insanely. The truck burned brighter, lighting up its surroundings.

Then came a sound from just beside him. Kartiman had stopped shooting.

“Mimin, brother, I’ve been shot.”

Corporal Canimin stopped shooting.

“I won’t last until the new dawn, the red dawn.”

The shots from across the road ceased.

“Ahmad,” shouted Corporal Canimin. “Kosim! Order those bastards to surrender. If they won’t, break their heads! Take Mamans’ Lee Enfield.”

The two men disappeared. And Canimin went to his brother. The air was full of a putrid smell. The gunsmoke from the closest soldiers rose in the air. In the middle of the road, the truck burned more intensely.

“Little brother—my little brother—where are you hit?”

No answer. Only desperate gasping for breath. Desperate! The two brothers were face to face. And between them the authority of nature!

The guards in front began to slow down their shooting. A high scream was heard from the middle of the road.

“Kat-ta-ngannnnn!!”

An answering scream of fear and hopelessness came from a man paralyzed by the danger of death

“Motthheerrrr!”

“Katangaaannnnn!” the battlecry came again.

“Daddyyyyy!!” came the scream of death.

Corporal Canimin cupped his hands around his moth and shouted, “Bring them here!”

“Freedom! Freedom!” sighed a dying man in the distance.

The fire burned on in the truck. Six men were led over to the Corporal, their hands held high over their heads.

“God is great!” said Canimin. He bent, bowing over his little brother. “Say it, Maman, say it—allahuabkbar—God is great.”

No answer. Only jerky breathing.

“Come on! Quick,” barked a voice from the middle of the road. “Quick! I’ll smash your heads if there’s any fooling around.”

The six captives advanced quickly. They were escorted by Ahmad, behind them with the Lee Enfield at the ready. Bringing up the rear was Kosim carrying the looted weapon.

“There’s no—red dawn,” moaned Private Kartiman weakly.

“Say it, Maman—Allahuakbar—God is great.”

There was no reply, just nervous panting. Corporal Canimin removed his shirt and tried to bandage the hole in his brother’s chest.

“The red dawn...” in a broken voice.

“Yes, dawn is on the way.”

“Ratni—you’re a good girl.”

“Yes, Ratni was always faithful to you.”

“Mimin, where is my face?”

“Here, brother,” and he touched his little brother’s face, which was dripping with sweat. “Say it, Maman, my little brother, say it: Allahuakbar, God is great. Allahu--“

“Bastard!”

“Oh,” said Corporal Canimin, and hugged his brother’s neck. “Brother, my brother, pray to God for forgiveness. Just say it, brother, just say it: Alla-hu-akhbar. God Almighty. Say it, brother!”

“Rat-ni. Red...dawwwn. Mi-min. Corporal Pai-jann. Forgive. Oceannn...”

His voice died. And Private Kartiman’s breath grew more ragged. Then it stopped. He didn’t breath again.

“Al-la--hu-akbar!” cried Corporal Canimin into his brother’s ear. “Allahu Akbar!” again.

The prisoners came.

“Maman-how is Maman, sir?”

“He’s fallen. Allhu akbar.” Then the corpoal spoke in Dutch, “Raise him. Two men, quick! Carry the machine gun, quick! Two men.”

They took the confiscated Thompson from the hand of Kosim. And when everthing was ready, the red dawn came, too late. The red sky. Red treetops. Also the land and the faces of the soldiers. That morning no cock crowed. A hissing wind caressed creatures intimately. A mysterious tint reddened the atmosphere, the sky and clouds. Lines like blood were etched on the sapphire blue in many places. The brighter the morning became, the more the shadows disappeared, and finally the red dawn was gone.

“The red dawn,” whispered Corporal Canimin.

Then he shouted:

“Run!”

Everyone ran. They crossed the road. They rushed through the rice paddy to the spot that was already secured by the commendant of the sector. And their disappearance came with the coming of morning.

Silence returned to the scene. The only traces were a clot of red blood and a fragment of red flesh. And there—in the middle of the road, red fire continued to burn the truck's metal skeleton. Above, a still-red sky.

CHAPTER 3

VISITOR AT DAYBREAK

Amah and Hasan went back to sleep. All the houses in that alley, the Freedom Zone, were quiet now. A quarter of an hour later Amilah woke up. Bad dreams woke her—dreams of evil pursuit and vicious animals. She straightened up and began to stare at the door again. And as she had for the past three months, she waited for the door to burst open and Sa'aman to come in with his earnings, a lot of money. Maybe six or seven thousand rupiahs all at once. But the door never opened.

Immersed in her waking dreams, she often smiled to herself. Her mouth muttered and mumbled. Sometimes she laughed low or harshly, also to herself. As the night passed into day, she laughed more often. Alternately, her face beamed or was gloomy or frowned angrily. And there were times when she cursed too—despicable curses.

Look! The barracks woman beginning to smile happily. The lamp in front of her still burns as if it was night. Then her mouth mutters and mumbles. Finally her old voice sounds, low:

“Yeah, Aman, Sa'aman, my child! Maybe you're rich by now.”

She laughed happily.

“I know you'll be back in just a little while. Hee hee. When are you coming home?”

But abruptly her radiance vanished. Her face became a dark picture of disappointment. She gnashed her teeth brutally.

“Tooooo much. Tooooo much,” she said.

And now she shook her head quietly. Eventually she turned her gaze back to the door in front to her. It didn't move. And Sa'aman was gone from her memory. Pictures from her youth drifted into her head, pictures from when the world was younger, twenty or twenty-five years ago. Yes, the time of her beauty, the time when many of the young men in the barracks and outside too had been crazy about her. Her happy times. Her easy times. She could hear Benni's voice, the young man from Menado whom she'd loved more than anyone in her whole life.

“Ami,” he said. Benni was the only one who called her that. And hearing him say that, feeling it, was too sweet.

“Ami,” he said again, “We have different beliefs. I'm Christian and you're Moslem. Maybe it would be better if we separated. No good can come of us, Ami. What do you say?”

Hearing Benni say that, she stiffened.

“Ami, my father will never approve. Mother neither.”

Then she spat out vengefully, “I know what the problem is. I know what it is,” she said. “Your parents are bad people.”

“No, Ami, no,” Benni disagreed softly. “Definitely not. My two parents are completely good. Not just to me, but to everybody. The problem is between us. We're of different faiths. You're Moslem and I'm not. And neither of my parents is going to approve.”

Amilah's lip curled and stiffened. “Religion?” she said derisively. “What do I care about religion?” she repeated stridently. “Just try to make me understand. What

good is religion? Tell me! Tell me! I'm telling you to answer me. What good is religion?"

Benni looked at the sky and folded his hands in prayer. He remained silent, as though he was praying.

"Answer, answer," she insisted. Then she laughed bitterly. "Why didn't you you bring this up before? Why?"

"Ami, don't you care about religion?"

"Hhh. You're a man, aren't you? And I'm a woman. Answer me. Isn't that all we need in this world?"

"Only that?"

"Only that. That's all there is to it. What else?"

And for a moment they were both quiet, each thinking their own thoughts. And she saw Benni's face constrict as though he were sick. He prayed to his God. Amilah observed him with controlled irritation. Prayer—the strangest thing in the world to her. Her patience came to an end. She tugged Benni to her with all her strength. Then words leaked from her mouth:

"Coward. What a weak coward you are."

"God forgive you, Ami."

"I say you're a fool. Aren't you a man?"

"Yes."

"Yes. So what's the problem? That's all that matters."

"God forgive you," Benni prayed again.

“Bahhh, you weak fool!” she abused him again, and she tightened her embrace as if she was afraid ever to be free.

Benni's eyes lost their focus. Yes, she saw it happening. She could feel his body tremble in her embrace. His breath, his lips. And she couldn't be firm any more. She clutched Benni's body randomly. And so it happened for the last time—a repeat of the classic barracks story, a story that is quickly told. And the months passed. At the time, Amilah and Benni were in the Kotaraja barracks. And the two of them were still very young.

Then came the orders. Benni went on patrol. He was sent far away. Before he left, the two met in the dark of night. It was their final meeting, just to say goodbye. They met, never to meet again. Young Benni was sacrificed for his Queen, killed by a spear in Aceh. And she, Amilah, waited and waited. But the man she waited for was already dead and buried. It was Paijan who came into her life. Even though he was much older, fate gave him to her. And so her small history went on, until the fall of the Dutch East Indies.

Dozens of romantic experiences played in her old memory. Like a newsfilm. They were blurry, yes, blurry. Her memory was so old, getting ancient with the rest of her. While she dreamed, her eyes stayed fixed on the door, staring at it as she'd stared for the past three months.

The newsreel in her memory died abruptly. She woke with a jerk. There was a soft knocking at the door, the door she'd been brooding over for the last three months.

“I knew it, Aman is coming,” she whispered happily.

She stood and walked to the door. She hesitated for rather a long time. Then the knocking came again, softly.

“Aman, it's you, isn't it?” she asked.

“A friend of Mr. Aman's, ma'am,” replied a voice from behind the door.

“Oh, it's not Aman.”

“May I come in?”

“Who are you?”

“May I come in?” repeated the voice.

Amilah narrowed her eyes and looked hard at the door. Then she said,

“What do you want so early in the morning?”

“May I come in?”

Amilah paused. She was worried. She calculated a little and worried a little, but her hand moved to open the door before she had really decided anything. The dim light of daybreak filled the area in front of her.

“Where are you, man?” she called out into the darkness.

Then a man revealed himself in front of the door.

“Here, ma'am.” he said.

The weakening rays of the oil lamp revealed a sturdy Dutch Royal Army sergeant. He was less than five feet tall. He was still young, maybe twenty-eight or less. On his uniform no unit badge was visible. And fastened to his head was a thin old lion emblem. He was armed with a pistol.

“What is your name, sir?”

The sergeant ducked his head a little, respectfully. Then he said softly but urgently. "It's an important matter." he said. "May I come in?"

"What is it? What do you want?" Amilah looked down at her guest's feet. "What do you want?"

Then she whispered to herself:

"It must be about Aman. He must be coming home."

With that, she raised her voice:

"Is it about Aman, sir? Is it about Aman? Oh, it must be about Aman."

"Yes, it's about Aman, ma'am."

And Amilah swiftly took her guest's hand and pulled him inside. "Please come in," she said happily. "Please come in to this contemptible hut."

The guest allowed himself to be pulled by old Amilah. Slowly he entered. And just as slowly he sat in the solitary chair. With a respectful and gentlemanly attitude, the guest looked around him, just for a minute. Then respectfully he looked at her and spoke gently.

"Ma'am, I came on Aman's behalf," and he resumed examining his surroundings.

"This is Aman's house, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir, this is his house."

"So I've come to the right place."

"What do you need so early, sir?"

"It's important, ma'am. My name is Kasdan. Sergeant Kasdan."

"Sergeant Kasdan," Amilah repeated, fixing it in her memory. "Sergeant Kasdan. I won't forget."

“Ha? You don't remember me? You must have heard my name.” His eyes circled back to the row of children on the bunk. “Apparently you've already forgotten me.”

“Forgotten? I never heard your name before. I've never seen you before.”

She paused, startled. Then she said hoarsely:

“Where is Aman? Where is Aman, my son?”

But the man she addressed as Sergeant Kasdan didn't answer the question. He said:

“Evidently you've really forgotten. The time when my friend Aman and I when we were still in the barracks, when we were children? Then I went into the army, and Aman went on to go to school in Molu in the afternoons. You must remember. Don't you?”

“No,” Amilah shook head head. “I don't know you. Really, I don't know you. Where's Aman?”

“Aman? Oh, that's a small matter. Don't worry. Really, ma'am, you don't have to worry. I know exactly where Aman is now. Only me. No one else knows. And no one else is allowed to know. You see, ma'am, we have to be careful. It's a government secret. You understand, don't you?”

“Government secret,” Amilah repeated.

Then she nodded without understanding.

“You have to understand this. What I'm about to tell you, it would be very dangerous for anyone else to know. So you can't tell anyone. You won't have any trouble understanding. You used to be in the barracks, right?”

But all this explanation was lost on Amilah. She repeated emphatically,

“Where is Aman?”

Sergeant Kasdan went on, without really expecting to be heard:

“Aman is healthy,” he said. “Just as healthy as he was when we were in the Palembang barracks. You must remember that.”

He smiled a little, a pleased smile.

“I think Palembang is one of the nicest places in the world. But it was a shame, just before the Japanese invaded,” he stopped, thought, then went on with his tale: “I was forced to leave there. If I'd been there, I would have wiped out the Japanese army. Whatever it took. But I was only a soldier then and I had to bow to orders. The Japanese appeared here just after that, though, and my battalion was sent to Java. When Sumatra fell I was on board a ship heading to Bali, Hollandia, all the way to Australia.”

He stopped again. He looked at Amilah, but the old woman was staring straight ahead to the slightly-open door. It wasn't clear that his story was making any impression on her. She had furrowed her brow. His gaze moved around the whole room. He looked disappointed. Finally his eyes stopped on Amilah.

“Australia, ma'am.”

Amilah was still not paying attention. “Aman,” she moaned softly.

“Aman is all right, ma'am. But for the time being his location still has to be a secret.”

Amilah swung her head around to him. “Where did you meet Aman?”

“Where? Palembang. I told you that.”

“Palembang. I still remember Palembang.”

“Yeah. But you and Aman left there for Java and I went to Australia.” He lowered his voice. “Australia.” Then the sergeant who answered to Kasdan continued his tale about the greatness of his life.

“In Australia, for six months I was trained to be a spy. Spying isn't an easy trade. Then I was sent to various frontiers. To Timur, Ambon, Aleut, Tarakan too. Do you know how I travelled, ma'am? All kinds of ways. Warships, submarines, airplanes. Once by river craft. Parachuting. On foot. Horseback. However.”

He paused again, watching the impression on Amilah's face. But, as before, he saw no sign that she heard him. Amilah still stared at the door. And as long as her guest kept droning on about himself, she went on dreaming. He was disappointed again, seeing on the face of the lady of the house no reaction to his whole grand life. Abruptly he changed the subject.

“Aman is fine.”

And Amilah's attention snapped back.

“Where is my son Aman?” Amilah asked quickly.

“He's fine. Where is Mimin, ma'am?”

And only with that question, did Amilah remember that she had a child named Canimin.

“Mimin?” she asked. “Canimin?”

“Mmm-hmmm. Where is he, ma'am?”

She considered for a minute.

“Oh, I don't know.” she answered briefly.

“You don't know?” her guest answered vacantly. “Strange.” Then he paused, thinking. “And Maman, ma'am?” he asked again.

“Maman?” And with that Amilah remembered she also had a child named Kartiman. She thought a minute longer. At last she answered short and soft:

“I don't know.”

“You don't know that either?” asked the man who called himself Sergeant Kasdan, with amazement.

Then the guest said to himself in an ominous tone: “She doesn't know about Mimin. And she's his own mother. Strange—very strange. Is he missing? She doesn't know about Maman. Missing too? Strange. Wartime is strange indeed. So many people missing, and no one knows about them. And Aman arrested.”

Suddenly he faced the lady of the house and said with a voice she couldn't ignore.

“And Amah? Where is she?”

Without opening her mouth Amilah pointed her finger to the pair of feet near the edge of the sleeping platform.

“Amah? That's Salamah? She's all grown up,” said the man who called himself Sergeant Kasdan respectfully.

“Grown up,” Amilah echoed. “And that's Patimah, that one is Salami--Mimi--and this,” she pointed to a foot next to Patimah's backside, “this is Hasan.”

“They're so big now. Well well. Time flies, and we never feel it. And your husband? Where's your husband?”

“I don't know.”

“Don't know that either?” said the guest full of concern. “Strange.”

“A little while back he was promoted to corporal. Right after that he disappeared. Disappeared just like that. There's been no news. There's been no report.

She looked at her guest and tried her luck at making an appeal.

“He went just like that. Not a thought for the ones he left behind. And he never came home. And you can see for yourself, I have many children. Not just one or two. Try counting for yourself–Sa'aman, Canimin, Kartiman, Salamah, Patimah, Salami, and Hasan. You can count them up yourself. And he went just like that.”

“He said nothing about where he was going?”

“No.”

“No? Strange. Strange. Very strange. Strange indeed. I don't understand. Really! I don't understand,” said the guest.

His face brightened because Amilah seemed about to reveal something.

No, Amilah was only concerned with Aman. She asked harshly:

“Sergeant, you said you know where Aman is. Tell me now. Where is he? Where?”

“Where is he? Oh, you're impatient, aren't you?”

At that Amilah's attention faded and she went back to gazing at the door.

“Aman,” she moaned hopelessly.

The man who called himself Sergeant Kasdan proceeded to make things worse:

“Yes, ma'am. It's true that Maman is very good man. It amazed me when the MPs arrested him. A good boy like that. He never caused anybody any trouble. He also tried to do good. Strange. All strange.”

Then his voice became low, deep, and significant:

“Ma'am, I can bring Aman home here.”

At these words, Amilah's attention snapped back. She asked passionately:

“Really? Really truly, Sergeant?”

“Of course really. But, ma'am, it's a dangerous, complicated business. And we can't act randomly,” said the guest warming up to his speech. “We must go very slowly, as slowly as the ant walks. If not, misfortune will follow. Mark my words, ma'am, misfortune will follow. And not just for me, but for all of us.

Passionately Amilah looked her guest in the eye and asked just as passionately:

“What's the meaning of coming here so early in the morning?”

“I'm on duty now. Duty, ma'am, military duty. Night duty. As I came through this alley, I remembered Aman's message. It was he who gave me your your address. So I stopped in here. He sent me, he told me to come. I told you that already.”

He spoke to Amilah a little hesitantly.

“Forgive me, ma'am, I peeked in your keyhole a minute ago, and I saw you were already up. Thank God. I don't have much time. I'm always working, and the work goes on for so long. The military has a lot of work now. And that's the real reason I came this early. It's not really polite, but what can I do? I'm not sure I could ever get such a good opportunity again. I'll give you the message.”

Amilah's voice exploded,

“Message? What message?”

“What, ma'am?”

“Stupid! Stupid! Stupid sergeant, you're a stupid sergeant,” Amilah scolded.

“Just a minute, ma'am. First hear me out,” the man who called himself Sergeant Kasdan interrupted quickly.

Amilah frowned:

“You come so early in the morning, and what for? Well, can you imagine! Only to give a message. Just a message. No money. No nothing.”

For a minute the man who called himself Sergeant Kasdan was quiet. His thoughts were in confusion. Amilah's outburst had thrown him off. But he calmed himself and continued.

“Money, ma'am?” he said then. “Money isn't hard to get. Spending money is easy to come by, very easy, for any adult. The important thing now is to contact Aman. And I've worked hard for that.”

Then he said sincerely:

“Ma'am? You need to have a little patience. A little, that's all.”

Amilah released her pent-up frustration.

“What? Patience? Patience? Imagine, he's saying patience again. I dare you to say it again!”

“Well, you need a little patience.”

“Patience? When it's been three months...” Amilah's eyes bulged with amazement. “No money. No clothes. Patience, he says. Patience. Well, patience. Everybody talks like that. Patience! Patience! Who'll reward the patient? Who?”

She laughed mockingly to herself.

“And who's going to pay the rent for this rat pen? Who? Answer!”

Then her voice lowered as if surrenduring:

“Patience? Patience? Patience?”

And once again confusion clouded Sergeant Kasdan's train of thought. Once again he was obliged to struggle with his emotions. He realized he shouldn't let Amilah rattle him. Then he smiled bitterly, smiled at a brain with insufficient contents. Finally he responded aggressively:

“Enough! If you don't want to be patient, what else do you want?”

Amilah's voice now trembled with apprehension.

“What is the message?”

“For that you have to have a little patience. Patient people prosper, ma'am. Being angry is completely useless, nothing gets accomplished that way. Aman is coming home.”

Amilah was caught. “What?” she breathed the question.

“Soon.”

“Soon,” Amilah sighed. “Soon. Why not now? Why?”

Her eyes reddened, staring. And her feeling erupted in a stony hard voice:

“Answer. Come on, quick. Answer. Come on! If you don't answer me fast, then clear out.”

Once again the man who called himself Sergeant Kasdan became confused. He could've spoken harshly to her again, but instead he smiled a little, and lines appeared in the hollows of his cheeks. Then he calmly lit a cigarette.

“What do I care?” grumbled Amilah. “Go ahead, Sergeant. Go ahead, General. Go ahead, poxy devil. Everybody says to be patient! Patience! Patience! Everybody says, just a little while longer! A little while longer!”

Sergeant Kasdan smiled again. He shook his head. He didn't speak yet. His hands were clasped behind his back and pulled back in imitation of the way his captain stood when he was belittling people.

“You bastard!” hissed Amilah angrily.

Sergeant Kasdan, startled, stood up. He watched Amilah with astonished eyes.

“Hhhh?” he said tonelessly.

“Yeah, you're a little bastard! Hear me? Hear me? You're playing with me? Me? A woman of my age?”

She rose and approached her guest. She jabbed a finger at him. “You too? Huh? Bah! As if you were the same age as me! You should be respectful, you should be on your knees to me. Got it, you? Got it? Answer me!”

Patently Sergeant Kasdan exhaled his cigarette smoke. Slowly he rose and went to the door. Before stepping over the threshold, he stopped close to Amilah and asked softly:

“Ma'am, I came here to try to help you. That's the only reason I came so early. But if you...” He paused and regarded Amilah calmly. “If this is the way you respond to help, thank you very much. Thanks a million. If you don't want my help, well, that's your own business. I take no responsibility. And about Aman, the hell if I care anymore. So you're really not willing to take my help?”

Amilah didn't answer. Then he continued to speak, discouraged by the ferocity of the woman of the house.

“Fine,” he said.

Slowly he lifted his feet to step outside. Amilah's face was in shock. Her anger and harshness immediately vanished, fell with a crash, like a silk-cotton tree in a sudden storm. Her harsh expression disappeared. She looked mild now, really. Her eyes fluttered. She ran and grasped her guest's hand. Her mouth trembled. Quietly she pulled the man who called himself Sergeant Kasdan back inside. And she sat her guest on the chair as before. And the lamp was still burning.

“Sergeant,” she pleaded.

But the man who called himself Sergeant Kasdan ignored her appeal.

“Fine, fine,” he said carelessly. “If you treat me like this, fine! Very good. Why not? I don't need any more trouble and difficulty. And I can go out for fun whenever I want, in my free time.”

“Sergeant,” said Amilah sweetly.

The guest didn't appear to hear her. He quietly sat in the chair and continued to smoke. His eyes declined to meet Amilah's. And outside, roosters began to crow. Dawn started to approach the world. The world around them was slowly coming back to life. One or two cars rumbled by crazily.

And meanwhile, forty kilometers southeast of the bamboo shack in the Freedom Zone, Corporal Canimin of the guerilla forces was blasting bullets from his machine gun. And here, old Amilah, his mother, was begging for mercy from a stranger. And the stranger was her children's enemy.

“Ma'am,” said the guest beginning his speech, “in my entire life, I've only been spoken to so abusively once. You've insulted me. And the very person who has insulted me is an old woman I'm trying to help. Well, strange. Very strange.”

“I'm sorry, Sergeant,” Amilah pleaded humbly.

“Of course I forgive you, ma'am,” continued the victorious guest. “I just hope next time you'll be a little more considerate of me. Think first, ma'am. Patience?”

He paused. And this time he met Amilah's gaze.

“Patience? Yes, you have to be patient. If you're not patient, what more do you want? Think it over, ma'am.”

Amilah didn't answer. Quietly she sat on the bunk again. Her head bowed down.

“Look, what more do you want?” repeated the guest.

“What more do I want? asked Amilah to herself. “What more do I want? Well, what more do I want?”

“I came here to help you. I'm not looking to be paid. Or praised. It's human obligation to help each other. And you've already given it a great deal of thought, the help I'm offering you. Don't bother trying to puzzle it all out again. There's no need to exert yourself. Leave it all to me, Sergeant Kasdan. Ma'am,” he paused, calling for her attention.

And Amilah attended. “Yes,” she said softly.

“Ma'am,” said the guest quietly. “What good would it be for me to be a sergeant if I couldn't straighten things out? Understand, ma'am?”

“Yes, Sergeant.”

“Ma'am, here I'm only a sergeant. Previously, during the Japanese opposition, I did intelligence. Not in a very important position, but I was obviously ranked like an

officer, a lieutenant or captain. I was in the Serikat troops before, the combined troops. I've been an instructor too. And American and Australian officers have bowed to me."

"Yes, sergeant."

"Fine. Now I want to ask, do you really want my help?"

Amilah nodded. "Yes," she said.

"Fine. Now you just listen to me."

His voice rose.

"Do you know why I came here so early?"

Amilah didn't answer.

"Because nobody can know about this," the guest went on. "Nobody at all must know. That's the reason I came so early."

"So, where is Aman now, sergeant?"

"Oh, I can't say the name of the place. It's too dangerous. Later—remember this! At two o'clock this afternoon, send Amah or Imah to my barracks. You know my barracks?"

"No," answered Amilah submissively.

"In town. In Kalibesar, beside the Ciliwung River, on the road to Tanjung," said the guest cheerfully.

"Yes," answered Amilah restraining her excitement.

"Thank God. So at two o'clock this afternoon, send Amah or Imah there. I'll be waiting in front of the barracks. Aman will be there to be picked up. But look, don't tell anyone about this. If you can't keep your mouth closed, it'll be bad for everyone. The MPs will arrest everyone. How about it, Ma'am? Do you understand?"

“Yes. But why Amah and Imah?”

“Everyone in the barracks knows exactly who you are. That's dangerous in itself.

You understand, don't you?”

Suddenly Amilah's voice heated up again.

“What do I care about the barracks people? What do I care? Aman is my own child. And I'm his mother.”

The man who called himself Sergeant Kasdan responded calmly to this objection:

“So you don't care?”

“I'm still strong.”

“Oh, is that why?”

Amilah didn't answer. Then her guest went on again:

“If you don't want to listen to me, what can I do? I can't take responsibility. I won't help.”

Amilah bowed weakly.

“Aman,” she sighed.

And the guest went on with his lecture.

“I already explained this. Nobody can know. And everybody in the barracks knows you. I said that before.”

Then his voice took on a warning tone.

“And you, ma'am—understand me now—you are too rough. That's the other reason. You're too angry. You don't have any patience. And if you yourself go there, there will be an uproar. I guarantee—it'll be nothing but an uproar. You're too bad-mannered for a

job as difficult as this. Got that, Ma'am? And if anything goes wrong, I'll be arrested by the MPs. Understand, ma'am?"

Amilah didn't answer.

"If you get mixed up in this," the guest continued, "as rough as you are, the whole city will hear about it immediately. And it'll be the end of me. Got it? I'll be hung, ma'am."

"Hung?" asked Amilah fearfully.

"Yes. Hung."

"And Aman will be hung too?"

"Yes. Aman will be hung too."

"Bastard," screeched Amilah. "Who dares to hang my child?"

"The government."

"Bastard. What did my child do wrong?"

"Something really bad. Murder. Robbery..."

Amilah leaped up and attacked her guest. Her old shrivelled hands jabbed at him savagely.

"Bastard!" she shrieked. "You bastard. Got it? Get your butt out of here right now."

But the man who called himself Sergeant Kasdan was beginning to know Amilah. His words menaced:

"If you don't want to listen to me, Aman must be hung. And I myself will hang him."

All at once Amilah's ferocity abated. Defeated, she surrendered, and pleaded:

“I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. Don't hang my Sa'aman. He is my own son. Forgive me. Forgive me.”

“So now you understand.”

“Yes, sergeant.”

“Fine. Now be quiet. So, at two o'clock this afternoon I'll be in front of the barracks, waiting for Amah or Imah. If nobody comes, I'm not responsible. And don't you come yourself. You really have to remember that. Don't get it wrong. Is that enough?”

And the guest faced the woman of the house with a lordly attitude. Confusion sprang up in Amilah's eye.

“What?” she asked.

“At two o'clock this afternoon, send Amah or Imah to the front of the barracks to get Aman,” the guest repeated his orders.

“Yes, Amah or Imah.”

“Right. And not you yourself.”

“Not me myself,” repeated Amilah unhappily.

“If you come anyway...”

“If I come anyway...”

“...I'll break all my promises.”

“Yes,” Amilah nervously.

“It would have been nice if you'd understood before.”

“Yes, it would have been good.”

“Don't forget, two o'clock exactly.”

“Yes. But why didn't he come himself? Is he sick?”

“He's sick. Dysentery. But he's almost better.”

“Dysentery,” echoed Amilah sadly. “He often gets dysentery.”

“Why—” the man who called himself Sergeant Kasdan didn't go on.

He stood. His cigarette, dead in his hand, he threw on the floor. Then he spoke again.

“Ma'am, that's all for now. Excuse me.”

Amilah was still standing in front of her guest. She asked,

“Why didn't you bring him now? Nobody would know, now.”

The man disregarded the words of the lady of the house. With his lordly attitude he stepped to the door. For a minute he nodded at Amilah, declined his head slightly, and said slowly:

“Goodbye.”

Then he stepped from the house.

After the guest was gone, Amilah moved. Like someone in shock, she leaped and ran to the door. From her old mouth she cried loudly:

“Sergeant. Seaarrrrgeant. Seaaarrrrgeant.”

At the door, she leaped outside. Then she disappeared from view.

For a minute the area in front of the bamboo house was silent. Then the children in a row on the bunk stirred, woken by their mother's shouting.

Salamah was the first to stand. She said quietly to her sister Patimah, “Imah, mother's getting sick again.”

And Patimah stood up on her feet. But she didn't say anything. She just rubbed her eye with her right hand.

Salamah stretched, then quickly ran to the door through which her mother had just passed. She too disappeared from view. And the night lamp went on burning peacefully.

Patimah went to the door too. But she just stood on the threshold, peering out and craning her neck right and left. Then she returned to the bunk and spoke to her little sisters and brother:

“Ma's daydreams have upset her. Poor thing.”

She was silent a minute watching Hasan who was still too lazy to get up.

“It's early.” she said then. “Go back to sleep.”

Salami and Hasan closed their eyes again. And the girl Patimah went to the back to wash. It was five o'clock in the morning. The sky was still dark. But the light from the east already starting to touch the world.

Meanwhile, Private Kartiman was breathing his last on the battlefield, forty kilometers from his family's house. At the very same time, hundreds of guerilla soldiers were paying their respects to their slain companions. Private Kartiman fell while escorting a guerrilla family. And among those who were paying their respects to the departed spirit was the only person in the whole world he'd loved: Ratni the orphan child. But there was no machine-gun salute at the end of the ceremony. Private Kartiman was not accorded the army's mark of respect. And he wasn't given the red dawn that he yearned for. All he got was the regret and grief of his brother Corporal Canimin.

Back at home, Salamah reappeared through the door. Her right hand grasped Amilah's resisting arm. The two went toward the big bed.

“Ma,” said Salamah, “Where were you going so early?”

“He wants to lie to me too. He's a damned bastard. Oh, why does he have to be so awful?” said Amilah harshly.

“Mom, you're so angry. Who is this 'him?’“

“He's a bastard. Nothing but a bastard. A barracks crocodile too. He's a sergeant, Sergeant Kasdan, he said. I don't care about any sergeant. I don't even care about any general. He came only to carry a message. Just a message. All he brought was a story. Just a story. Nothing more. But Aman? He's still not back. Oh, Allah. My son!”

“When the time comes, Aman will come back, ma,” said Salamah soothingly.

And she seated her mother on the bed, in the spot where she had been sleeping.

“You haven't slept all night. Sleep, ma, you're very tired. You've been thinking too much. Go ahead and sleep now.”

Gently she pushed Amilah down. The old woman didn't resist. She allowed her daughter to lower her to the big bed, so that she was lying alongside Hasan and Salami. She sighed and closed her eyes.

“Everyone,” she said to herself, “The whole world's getting so crude.”

“Ma, sleep. Don't be so angry.”

“I know. Amilah knows everything,” she continued to grumble. “Let the world get a little kinder. Oh, just let the world get a little kinder.”

“Be quiet now, ma,” said Salamah comfortingly. “I'm going to bathe now. You can wake up later when the water is hot again.”

Then the girl Salamah took off her blouse and placed it at her mother's side. For a

minute she watched Amilah as she began to sleep. She tiptoed to the kitchen door and was lost from view.

And as soon as Salamah left, Amilah woke again. Quickly she got off the bed.

“I’ll go to the barracks now. Right now. I’ll find Sergeant Kasdan if it kills me.”

Salami and Hasan were wawakened by this muttering. When they saw their mother was there beside them, they fearfully clenched their eyes, pretending to sleep.

Amilah looked around her, and looked at Salami and Hasan too. Then she took Salamah's blouse. Quickly she moved toward the door. And she said to herself:

“Aman might be back later. Let me sell this blouse to buy an onion, a chili pepper and some pickles. You always liked pickles, didn't you, Aman?”

She vanished from view. And two seconds later Salami and Hasan got off the bed and went to the back. The lamp was left burning with its red-yellow flame.