

BLORA

Pramoedya Ananta Toer

Translated by Harold Merrill

Saudara! Do you know what every prisoner longs for? You must know! Getting out—regaining one’s freedom, living among friends, relatives, and fellow human beings. For you, maybe these words “getting out” don’t arouse any impressions whatsoever. But for prisoners and former prisoners, how sweetly stirring these words are. They have the same magical power as the national anthem.

And today, *saudara*, how happy I am. Why shouldn’t I be? The guards came running into camp. The jailer was summoned. And all that little commotion was simply for my own happiness. Here’s what happened, *saudara*. The jailer returned from the camp office and yelled, “Pram!” I yelled back in response. And he went on, “You’re being released. Gather together all your gear.” Like a crow being pelted with rocks, a screech came from my mouth, “Okay, okay.”

I ran into my cell and packed up my clothes, bedding, and eating utensils. Friends rushed in urging me to exchange clothes. And there were also many who stood at the door with lustreless eyes. There were those who congratulated me and there were others who grumbled about their own fates. And I was touched. Naturally, there are moments when human beings will be touched no matter how materialistic they are. Especially when I walked to the camp office and they held up clenched fists, yelling feebly, “Freedom! Freedom! Don’t forget the prison! Don’t forget the struggle.” Then the piercing shout that I won’t ever forget for as long as I live, “Cheese tastes good, *bung*.¹ And condensed milk makes you blind!”² And I couldn’t respond to them one by one.

I bowed my head—I couldn’t bring myself to confront the eyes of my comrades who were still suffering.

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¹ “Comrade” or “buddy.”

² The references here to cheese and milk are clearly intended to imply complicity with the Dutch.

The first iron door was opened. I passed through. Then the door was locked again. And behind this two-meter high barrier, my comrades followed me with dull eyes. I handed over my inventoried gear. And everything I was carrying was searched. What was there to be had from me? Only the clothes that I was wearing, one other set, and a few books. Then I received a letter of discharge that had this stamp at the bottom: "de facto krijgsgevangenen-kamp."³ And I almost made another mistake. I smiled reading those words. A sharp glare locked up my smile.

For a moment I gazed at my comrades who stuck their noses between the iron bars.

I passed through the second iron door. My comrades behind the door still held up their fists. And the lustreless eyes became fiery yelling out, "Freedom! Freedom!"

I arrived at the third door. Once again I looked back. Then my comrades disappeared from sight. On my back hung a bag made of canvas. I had made this bag in the camp, stealing the materials when I was subjected to forced labor at the military repairshop. It contained one pair of short pants, one book by Steinbeck, one book by Weststrate, one book by Exupery and Tagore, and a book of French lessons that I never once picked up—all my wealth! And the third door was locked behind me.

And once more I looked back. Oh! Secure box. For nearly two years I had been caged inside that box. No, saudara—I couldn't bear to look again. I walked slowly. And all of a sudden my heart became terribly sad. I used to believe that sadness only arises when people's passions are not satisfied. But this time, on the contrary, I became sad as my desires were satisfied—in a big way! This world is full of secrets! And in my ears rang the shouts of my friends, which always rang out to compatriots who were released. "Well, what a flood in the night this is!" And I became even sadder.

Now I saw the sun freely again. Saw the hustle and bustle freely, too. Everything I laid my eyes on was completely free. And I really felt that what a person sees depends upon the state of his heart.

Saudara, you know what I did after that? Here's what happened first: I ate *sate* at Pasar Jatinegara—as much as I could hold. And I paid the bill with a pair of shorts. My second desire was satisfied. Then this: I went to a jeweler's and sold my wedding ring. I had no choice, saudara. If a ship is hit by a storm, a person can't feel sentimental about losing the mainmast. After that, the books that I loved floated away too. And finally, I went to the ticket window. Bought a ticket. Hopped on a train. I traveled, saudara—heading towards the town of my birth: Blora!

I myself don't understand, saudara, why this time the train ran so fast. And what I remember now: the sea! The sea, saudara. It had been a long time since I had seen the sea. And suddenly the open sea spread out from the train window. Only for two minutes.

Then forest followed. Once again the sea appeared with boats, silvery on a blue background. But only for five minutes. The train headed again into the interior. Semarang! Here I had once stood in line for a ticket for two days and two nights. But now I didn't have to anymore. Because the Japanese had already been sentenced to death and strung up everywhere. They who had lost the war.

Many towns were in ashes and the broken roadways had to be connected with boat-linked bridges. And I became even more confused as to why the trip went so fast. And

³ "de facto prisoner-of-war camp."

Blora—a moment later we arrived. In the past, I always used to hear the hissing of engines and shaking of wheels against the tracks. But now it just ran calm and fast.

Blora! Just the sound of it felt sweet to my senses. Saudara, you would be like that too if for years you hadn't set foot in the land of your own birth. And the land where the parents and relatives whom you love are. But feelings, saudara—just like the hinterlands—have no lasting security! Because fear came churning into my marrow. Maybe my whole family was already dead. Killed by Muso's Communists or by the TNI⁴ or by the Dutch. Who it was that destroyed the family was not something to bother my head about. It was the catastrophe itself that I was scared of. And another fear was this: the mop-up campaigns that were just as horrible as mop-up campaigns anywhere—and guerrilla movements like other guerrilla movements anywhere. Both of them are equally violent. And now it was definitely wartime. It's really like this, *saudara*; sometimes people get sick of security and want war. When war has broken out, people get bored with it and want peace again. Just like you, saudara, when you get sick of a lover who's always complaining and asking for money. But if your lover's gone, you long to have her sitting next to you. Perhaps that's just the way human nature is. And in all matters, too.

Blora, saudara. Blora! Have you ever been to Blora? That town that is so famous for its poverty? Later on I'll tell you about it. But now, the stony Mount Kendeng has appeared. Harsh, saudara. Like the carcass of a giant that has begun to turn yellow. And the smell of it, saudara! A smell that bothers the people who live there. The smell—poverty. And it's like a tradition here—people have to live poor. Because here, saudara, people who are able to buy meat once a week aren't considered common folk any longer but are already said to be "*ndoro*."⁵ But butchers aren't included in this category.

Blora, saudara!! And I had arrived. And just here my story begins. At first what I saw was this: the ruined station. And this had been demolished by Amir's forces,⁶ when they were attacked by the TNI. In front of the station stood rows of buildings owned by Chinese. All of these, too, had been completely demolished. Demolished by American bullets. But I didn't care who had done it.

The passengers lined up to go outside. And at the exit I saw Inah. You don't know Inah yet, saudara. She was the most beautiful girl in my kampung. And also the most arrogant. You know why she was arrogant, too. Because she was terribly pretty and she rejected my proposal. Yes, she answered my letter. But her response, saudara, was *advice*! Nothing but advice, that's all! It really stung. But now she wasn't Miss Pretty like before. She had gone soft and her body was frail. The white powder on her face was thick and her lips were as red as a cock's comb. Her hair was thin, her eyes wild, and her behavior flirtatious.

"*Mas*," she greeted me.

And I bowed my head. You yourself know the reason, don't you? I was afraid of her asking me to marry her. And I just walked on in silence. And she called again. And I plugged my ears. And she kept calling. I quickened my pace.

⁴ Tentara Nasional Indonesia, or Indonesian National Army

⁵ *Ndoro* refers to the Javanese aristocratic class.

⁶ Amir Sjarifuddin was Minister of Defense and later Prime Minister of the Indonesian Republic before joining Musso in opposition to the Sukarno government. He was a leader of the Socialist Party (PS) in the early Republican period and organized some of the revolutionary youth factions (*badan perjuangan*) that were active against the incoming Dutch forces. During this period, there was often fierce competition at the local level, particularly in Central Java, between the Indonesian Army and the *badan perjuangan* as well as other armed groups.

The flat bag still rubbed up and down on my back. And the only other thing I was carrying was a red half rupiah note. Suddenly she roared with laughter. The bitch! I was being laughed at. And suddenly, too, I got angry. I stopped. Turned my body around. And she was already being fondled by a soldier of the occupation. My anger disappeared, dissolved, oh! This was a liberated region that was being liberated.

For a moment I sat on some rocks watching my old heart-throb's behavior. She wriggled with pleasure. And the soldier sat, not daring to stand, his hands groping at whatever parts of my old heart-throb's body could be touched. Saudara, whether or not the sun was out that day is not what determined the truth. What happened, that's what was true. And for once truth unfolded in broad daylight: my old heart-throb was being fondled by a soldier.

It occurred to me to carry her away—to join in helping guide her back to the world of goodness. So I stood up. Began walking. Approached slowly. And she was still tangled up in the fondling embrace of the cat-eyed soldier. Her loud laughter faded. Her happy wriggling faded. And her dimmed eyes stared at me—dripping tears. She struggled hard to free herself from his embrace. I moved closer. I was overcome with emotion. I held her hand tightly. I pulled to tear Inah away from the soldier's control. As a result of my concern, I got a kick in the groin.

In pain I left sheepishly. I was willing to bet, a three day ordeal and only then would the pain from that kick go away. I went back to the rocks I had been sitting on. I watched Inah still struggling. Her eyes were focused on me. Eyes that begged for sympathy. Eyes that conveyed words about the course of her life after I had left her. I am a woman who sells herself willingly? And those eyes said, "Don't blame me for becoming like this."

Suddenly Inah was pulled to his chest. Her legs were lifted up. And she struggled harder. She realized her own predicament—the battlefield of a life that she hated, but that she had to enter. And the soldier's chest was covered by Inah's body. He walked to his jeep. A faint cry could still be heard, "Mas— Mas—" Then the cry disappeared, drowned out by the roar of the engine. And I kept imagining Inah, who was so frail, with tears flowing. A question suddenly came to me, saudara. Who is it that actually owns a human life? Clearly humans don't own human life! Clearly humans don't own their own lives. And who was it that owned Inah's life? I was not able to answer, saudara. Everywhere prison air weakens the stamina to think. Answer for yourself, saudara.

I followed the jeep with my eyes until it disappeared down onto the Lusi River bridge. I stood up. Slowly went off in the direction of the jeep. A strong desire to find my home and family returned.

Military vehicles went back and forth. Also bullock carts that I used to see when I was a child. And the ruins of stone houses. And the embers of houses. And naked children roaming about with bloated stomachs. And beggars. The condition of a free territory that had just been occupied. And everywhere it was just the same. A dead town—a town that had no young men.

Suddenly there was someone calling me: "Agus, Agus."⁷ And I was facing a dwarfish old woman whose face was all wrinkled. "Agus," she called again slowly and I was hugged with aged strength. And with a lump in her throat she cried, "You are still alive, Gus? I knew you were still alive."

⁷ Javanese term of address used by an elderly person speaking to a younger male. As is seen below, "Agus" is commonly shortened to "Gus."

And again I was overcome with emotion. Because I was moved. Still more moved by the stink of my own clothes. Part of me was also remembering Inah. But not completely. And below my eyes: white hair, disheveled and foul-smelling. Her face was buried in my chest. The nape of her neck was full of scabies and on her right shoulder a pineapple-fiber string was visible—tied at the bottom to a palm-leaf sack. She was a beggar, *saudara*; actually, I don't want to say beggar because everybody is a beggar either inside or out. But it is certainly the way of the world that this ugly name is always given to people who can't take care of themselves. And what's more, *saudara*, people who don't have money are not permitted to become members of society. They are called society's trash. The person in front of me was a beggar—society's trash.

"Who are you, granny?"⁸ I asked, shrinking back.

Her crying intensified. Her grip tightening, I couldn't get free from her grasp. Between sobs I heard this:

"Gus. Gus. You don't care to know me anymore? I am your grandmother."

My grandmother! And again I was overcome with emotion. Yes, my grandmother was as dwarfish as that. I hugged her warmly. At the side of the road near the station. Then we walked. Just walked. Her hand did not let go of me. And because of her grasp, my old female friends didn't care to know me anymore. That was fine, too. We stopped at the cemetery where Mother was buried. A cemetery that wasn't as well-kept as before. It was covered over by tall and thick weeds.

Together we searched for Mother's grave. Only with great difficulty could we find it. Then we pulled out the grass.

If what I had seen so far was this horrible—my heart-throb had become a soldier's squeeze, my grandmother had become a beggar, the grave had become a patch of weeds—it was quite easy to guess what condition my home was in. And you can guess for yourself, *saudara*.

As we pulled out the weeds, I remembered the way things used to be, *saudara*. This: a regiment of the Dutch Indies Army ran for their lives when one Japanese section landed at Lasem. Then a fierce battle took place. But what was attacked were the gasoline tanks around Blora. And the Japanese entered safely. And my mother died two months later. Mother's credulity was that immense; the Dutch were going to promote father to "*schoolopziener*."⁹

Reality taught her that appointments cannot be made by defeated governments. In that same year, month, day, hour, and minute, my youngest sister also followed her to eternity. Mother's grave shared a plot with my younger sister's.

With weak hands I wiped off the headstone, which was covered with dry mud, and there appeared writing in tar which said, "Siti Saida and Sri Susanti."

I hate praying. But this time I had to pray and I whispered: "*Bu*, your son has come." And I imagined my mother musing while she sat under the front awning with her thin hair blowing in the breeze. At that time I was seventeen years old. And I said, "*Bu*, can I have a

⁸ The Indonesian term *nenek*, while literally meaning "grandmother," is commonly used as a term of address for old women. I have chosen to translate it "granny" to retain the sense of irony that Pramoedya intends when the woman turns out to be the narrator's real grandmother.

⁹ School inspector.

ring?" And she responded, "What more do you ask from me? I am just waiting for death, Muk." And a month later Mother died. Since then I've never asked for anything. Saudara, my younger brothers and sisters and all my relatives call me Muk.

Right now I don't want to tell you about the sun that rises and sets or about rain and storms. I am tired of that. Right now I want to tell you about a flower—I don't know its name—the only one that grew on the grave. I picked it. Its color was light blue. A color that I like. And I stuck that flower on top of the headstone. For quite a while I gazed at it. And Grandmother just kept quiet. Her hand still clutched my arm.

Then we walked on again. Each time we met a soldier of the occupation, I braced myself. If they knew I was a former prisoner and hadn't yet requested permission to come to a new region, I would certainly be arrested again. Safe—always be safe. The town was quite deserted. The further we got into the kampung, the more frequently we ran into little kids. Finally we passed my old school "Budi Utomo." To pass seventh grade, I had sat on that bench for ten years. Now, the school was not owned by my father any longer. My father had put it at the disposal of the Japanese. And no longer was it the name "Budi Utomo" that was displayed there. As times change, conditions change.

Grandmother still had a firm grasp on my arm. And her step was very slow. Now we arrived at my old kampung. But now it was someone else's kampung. And each face we encountered in the streets was taut with fear. Looks are cheap, saudara, and lives are three times cheaper. And the more bullets that America sent, the lower the price of human life fell.

From a distance, the hedges around my yard loomed up—turned yellow. But the roof of my house was gone. And the thought entered my head, the communists were the ones that had burnt it. My father was anti-communist, I thought. Once I had asked him, "Pak, what would happen if education in Indonesia were adapted to the education system in Russia?" He answered, "What would happen? Just take Indonesia to Russia and then you'll find out for yourself." And I shut up. The coconut tree which had always stood behind the kitchen and for years had served to lessen Mother's expenses was now bare, a tall trunk that no longer had leaves.

The road that I passed was of stone. But the world of my childhood had disappeared. There were no more children playing ball in the middle of the road with shirts and rocks as goal posts. Just silence. The road turned. And if you simply went on you would arrive at the buffalo path which headed towards the Lusi River. Far down that turn I saw a naked little kid carrying a "grasshopper catcher" by the wings. And behind him trailed his little chicken.

Only then did my grandmother open her mouth again: "Gus, that's your little brother."

"Who? Tjuk?" I asked.

Grandmother nodded. And I called out. And from a distance he watched carefully. Then ran towards me with a limp. In the middle of the road he stopped. Then ran again. I too quickened my pace. Quickly I picked him up, holding him in my arms. He was only seven years old—stark naked.

"Why are you limping, Tjuk?" I asked.

And he cried. I kissed him while we walked. Slowly the child responded. "Father said it was eaten away by a boil, Mas."

Grandmother just kept quiet.

"Mas, *Mbak*¹⁰ Kun soaks my foot in salt water every day. Then I can walk a little bit. But now I have to limp." He sobbed. "Can you make it better, Mas? Did you bring medicine, Mas? Surely you brought medicine." His tears went away. "Once, you came back and bought me a goat. Now that goat is gone, Mas. *Mbak* Kun said it was eaten by a civet. Are you going to buy me another, Mas? You will, won't you, Mas!"

And my little brother started crying again—he cried like grandmothers do. I was overcome with emotion again. He's my little brother, isn't he? Don't I have the right to share in the pain in his one swollen foot? To cheer him up I answered, "Of course." And my little brother was quiet.

"Mas, you've brought medicine now, haven't you? They call me 'the cripple.' I don't like it, Mas. But they call me that anyway. If you're here, I bet they won't dare to anymore. Right, Mas? They won't dare anymore, right? You'll beat them up for sure, like when you beat up Mas Lik because he wouldn't bathe. But I always bathe, *Mas*. You brought medicine, right, Mas?"

"Yeah, I brought medicine."

"I knew it, you must have brought medicine."

"What grade are you in, Tjuk?"

My little brother started crying again. It was a while before he could answer. "I'm not going to school, Mas." He sobbed. "Father says I'm a crybaby. I'm not a crybaby, am I, Mas? I'm not a crybaby, am I?"

"No," and I kissed him on his face which was wet from tears—a face that was pale.

"In that case, I can go with you to Jakarta, right? Ride in a car and see Pasar Gambir? Right, Mas? I can go along to Jakarta, right?"

"Of course you can."

"I knew it. Sure I can. Where is your car now, Mas? Taken by the Japanese? I keep asking Father, you haven't come home for such a long time. Father said you were captured by Nika.¹¹ You weren't captured, were you? You're brave, aren't you?"

"No, I wasn't captured."

"Your car wasn't taken by Nika, was it?"

"No."

"I knew it. Father lied."

"You still like to sing, Tjuk?"

"I'm not allowed, Mas." Suddenly his tears burst forth as hard as they could. And I began kissing him again.

¹⁰ Javanese term of reference for a female, most often who has not yet married and who is roughly the same age or older than the speaker.

¹¹ NICA (Netherlands Indies Civil Administration), the post-war colonial administrative body in occupied territories.

"Why are you crying, Tjuk? Who says you can't? You used to like singing in the *jambu* tree."

"Mas, they all forbid me to sing," he sobbed. "And the *jambu* tree was burnt down. Burnt by the communists, Mas." He sobbed. "Now you've come. I must be allowed to sing again."

My littlest brother Tjuk's eyes beamed.

"Mas, Mbak Kun said, if I sing 'From the West to the East,' Nika will come from the West and the East and burn my hurt foot. Not any more now. I can sing again, can't I, Mas?"

His last sobs disappeared. With a clear voice he sang out at the top of his lungs, "From the West to..."

Quickly I covered his mouth with the palm of my hand. He struggled and cried. My hand shook from his screaming.

"Don't. Don't cry!" I warned.

His crying stopped. Just his sniffing remained. And I released my hand. How skinny my little brother was. With hate-filled eyes he looked at me. And tears welled up in the corners of his eyes. In between sobs he said, "You won't let me either, Mas? Ah. Don't carry me. I want to go home by myself. I want to look for my chicken. Don't carry me. You're Nika, Mas! You're Nika."

"No, Tjuk," I consoled him. And my eyes had filled. "Later on I'll put some medicine on your foot. When you're all well, then you can sing again."

His sniffing eased. And Tjuk began to cheer up again.

"You'll teach me the ABC later, right, Mas? Like before when you taught Mbak Kus. But you won't rap me on the head with a spoon, will you? And I can go along to Jakarta. And ride in a car, right, Mas? And see ships..."

"Hey, is Mbak Kus still going to school, Tjuk?"

"There isn't anyone going to school anymore now, Mas. Mbak Kus came home from Pati on foot. She said there wasn't any schooling anymore."

"Where's Mas Lik, Tjuk?"

"Taken away by Nika, Mas. The man said he was a *pemuda*."¹²

My chest pounded. Oh, he was still a kid, only fourteen. But what's wrong with that? The prison that I just got out of had two kids that same age.

"Where's Father, Tjuk?"

"Father's underneath the *duat* tree."

"That tree wasn't burnt?"

"No, Mas. Father's just there, Mas, writing and reciting verses."

"Reciting what?"

¹² A member of the revolutionary younger generation, which played a crucial military role in the struggle against the Dutch.

“Permadi’ and ‘Subodro,’¹³ Mas. And just writing until late at night.”

We kept walking. Grandmother still kept quiet. The house was near, but its roof still wasn’t visible. Through the gaps in the yellow hedge which was turning brown, I saw the ruins of my house—a wall and ashes. And it was just like everywhere else. Up towards the bend in the road, I saw a group of soldiers quite a ways off, on patrol. And my little brother pointed towards the patrol.

“He’s coming again, Mas. The *tuan*!¹⁴ He always comes here. I am often given candy and he likes talking with Mbak Kus. Father doesn’t like it. He’s happy under the *duat* tree, just writing and reciting. And when the *tuan* comes, Mbak Kus runs to the back and cries, and I cry too.”

“Why do you cry, Tjuk?”

“You never came, Mas. And they say the *tuan* wants to take Mbak Kus far away—really far away. That’s her, Mbak Kus, Mas!”

Tjuk pointed in the direction of a pile of stones. Oh, my cutest and brightest younger sister. She was just sixteen years old and just in the second year of junior high school in Pati. In between the gaps of the dead hedge, I saw that her once clear face had become mottled. And her light-yellow skin had now turned dark. Tjuk called loudly, “Mbak Kus, Mbak Kus! Mas Muk has come.”

The girl ran to the road. She was still as agile as she had been two years earlier. Immediately she hugged me. She said ecstatically, “You’ve come, Mas. You were in prison for such a long time. You’re really thin, Mas. Mas, the house was burned down. You don’t have a room anymore. And the books that you sent, all of them have been snatched by Mas To.”

“Who’s Mas To?”

“The friend I used to play music with.”

“Why were they taken?” I asked.

“Because, because, you and Mas Wit are Army.”

“He’s Nika?”

“Communist. I can’t study anymore, Mas. Oh how skinny your arms are. You still like eating *nasi jagung*,¹⁵ Mas?”

We went into the front yard. And I responded, “Still do.”

All my little brothers and sisters came crowding in—Kun, Um, Kus, and Tjuk. Father left the *duat* tree carrying his book. He asked, “Are you well, Muk?”

“Blessings, Father.”

And Father went back to sit under the *duat* tree.

“Mas Muk,” Kun said, “your letter through the Red Cross, I got it a year ago.”

¹³ Permadi and Subodro refer to Arjuna and his wife Sembadra from the Javanese Mahabharata epic.

¹⁴ Term of reference for an adult Western male.

¹⁵ *Nasi jagung* is a dish made from rice mixed with cornmeal, which is often eaten during periods when rice is relatively scarce.

"Why didn't you answer?"

"I wrote fifteen times. But no more letters came from you anymore," and she drew a long breath.

"I never got them." Then I whispered to Kun, my younger sister who was eighteen years old and already married to a private from the Jatikusumo Division, "Why did you let Grandmother become a beggar?"

Grandmother, who had kept quiet all along, began to sob and hid her face inside her *kain*.¹⁶ Then she drew back, sitting in the middle of the doorway of the rice-shed, bowed over like a toad. Regret radiated from Kun's eyes.

"Mas. We eat only from the corn plants grown in the yard, which isn't that big. Your little brothers and sisters are the ones who work it. Father just writes under the tree and doesn't move from there if the sun hasn't set. I mean, I don't want to force Father to hoe the ground. In fact, when a Dutch lieutenant came here to offer him the position of educational officer for the Residency of Pati, I was also the one who told them, 'Father is already old. I won't allow him to work anymore.' Because of that our income has been very small and food has to be divided as evenly as possible. And Grandmother stole Tjuk's portion. I scolded her and she left. The kids said Grandmother had become a beggar at the station. I told them to bring her home. But Grandmother refused. I myself urged her to come home. And she said, 'I don't want to go home. I'm waiting for Gus Muk.' And I said, 'Mas Muk isn't coming home. He's been captured by Nika.' But she didn't pay any attention and kept waiting at the station."

Grandmother was crying. Sobbing deeply.

"Grandma," I called. But she didn't pay any attention.

Slowly we went into the shed. It was empty. We sat on the mat.

"Kun, where is your husband?"

Kun was silent. Kus came carrying two black earthen plates holding *nasi jagung*.

"Mas, eat, Mas, with Grandmother."

We sat on the mat on top of the mud floor. The kids crowded around.

"Where's your husband, Kun?" I asked again.

Hesitantly she answered, "He has never come back, Mas. I don't know. There isn't any news."

Tjuk, who was standing behind me, grabbed my neck, his voice exploding, "Liar! Last night he came carrying a rifle."

Kun leapt behind me, shutting Tjuk's mouth. The little kid struggled to defend himself and his truth.

"Kun, you don't trust me?"

Her clasp over Tjuk's mouth was released and she fell silent. Tjuk started crying again and threw his body down into my lap. I kissed him again.

"Mas, I'm not lying," he said defending himself.

¹⁶ A *batik* cloth that is wrapped around a woman's lower body as part of traditional Javanese dress.

Kun covered her face. And all the kids bowed their heads.

"Mas Jus came last night carrying a rifle and a grenade. I saw him myself, Mas. I'm not lying. When I asked him where he was going, Mbak Kun wrapped me up with her *kain*. And I cried. When I woke up I was scared, Mas. I was really scared. There's war there. I don't know where. But I wasn't wrapped up anymore and Mbak Kun was chanting prayers. Just chanting. Mbak Um too, and Mbak Kus too. Father came and held me tight...."

None of my little brothers and sisters dared to look at me. All bowed their heads. Worry and fear were broadcast from their eyes.

"Mas," Tjuk went on, "I don't like it here. I'm not allowed to sing. I'm not allowed to play far away. If I talk with anyone, Mbak Kun shuts my mouth. Mas, I just want to go along to Jakarta. There I'll be allowed to sing and to play and talk with you, right? I'm scared of war. In Jakarta there isn't any, right?"

"Yeah, later on I'll take you."

Kun left—without a word. Um left—without a word. Kus came near me. She asked, "You feel the bitterness of a man from Nika's prisons, don't you, Mas?"

I nodded.

"But your conviction isn't swayed, is it?"

I shook my head.

"And you won't betray us, will you?"

I shook my head. And Kus took out a knife that was shining silver. She dug the sharp tip into the sole of her foot. Blood came out. And I was taken aback.

"Why are you wounding yourself?"

"To find out, Mas, if it hurts or not."

"Of course it hurts."

"And I'm willing to suffer the pain from this knife. I'm willing for you to peel off my skin and kill me before you are killed by Mbak Kun and Mbak Um, if it turns out you are a traitor."

"Mas, come on, let's go to Jakarta," whined Tjuk.

"If I become a traitor, I am ready for all of you to kill me," I said. "I have already suffered a great deal. All you've said is: 'I don't trust you and I'm going to kill you!'"

Then I drew a long breath and raised my head. Suddenly I noticed the shape of a withered body sitting in a large, old chair. His two legs were missing up to the thigh. His two hands were intact but four fingers were missing on the right hand. His face had lost its original shape. His nose had a hole in between his nostrils and the base of his brow. And that hole was plugged up with dirty cotton wool. From the plugged up hole to his ear were lines of deep scars and from his left eye back, his skin had peeled off. Hair only grew over half his skull. His right ear had been sheared off. And his eyes were watering.

Kus joined in looking in the direction of the figure and without my feeling it, the knife had gotten into my right hand.

"He's already been here a week, Mas," said Tjuk. "He just sits there. He doesn't want to talk. Sometimes he tells me to get paper and pen and ink. But he doesn't want to talk."

That carcass's eyes watched me carefully with a gloomy stare. And tears calmly slid down his cheek.

I watched Kus. And the sixteen-year-old girl sharpened her stare. She said, "Rather than your making a sacrifice like that, it's better, if you really are a traitor, just to kill us all. Your hand already holds the knife, Mas Muk."

I tossed the knife to the corner of the shed and turned back to watch the mutilated figure. Then Kus silently left the shed. I stood up and stepped closer. I extended my hand and my greeting was accepted. It felt like he was pulling me so that I would go closer. And I uttered my name, "Pram." But he didn't respond. Only his hands fumbled with his threadbare shirt. He undid its buttons. He opened it, and I noticed inside a soldier's uniform. On the flap of his pocket was pinned a badge with the rank Sergeant Major of the Army. I was startled enough to explode.

I wept. Saudara, now it was I myself who was weeping. How could I not, saudara? Even hard rocks are worn away by water. And that carcass was my own brother . . . this was my oldest younger brother, Sergeant Major Wit from the military police.

"I know you're not a traitor, Mas Muk," he said slowly. "Even though my body has suffered the curses of war, I could easily kill you." And from his trousers he pulled out a *piti* pistol.¹⁷ "I'm a marksman. And from a distance of ten meters I can hit the tip of your index finger, even if you are walking."

I bent down and asked, "You're not afraid to carry a weapon in an area that's surrounded?"

Wit laughed. "If I've already sworn the soldier's oath, why should I be afraid to wear a military uniform and carry a weapon? And all of my younger brothers have sworn the same oath. And here I am, waiting for the final battle."

"With that lady's pistol?"

Wit laughed again. His teeth broke into a yellow grin.

"My weapon is sufficient, Mas Muk. I have three grenades on me. And within a radius of one kilometer my troops are still ready."

Then he pulled at my body. I bent down. Wit whispered, "Tjuk has to be killed!"

I almost collapsed on hearing what he said.

"He's of no use. He can easily endanger us all. Tonight you must take him to the Lusi and slaughter him."

And I fell back into a sitting position. Tjuk was again hugging me around the neck. How skinny he was. Lamé, too, and he had to die.

"I'm the commander in this area, you have to carry out my orders," and his peeled face scowled cruelly. And I shivered.

"Mas, let's go to Jakarta, Mas. Right now," whimpered Tjuk once more.

"Do you hear me, Mas Muk?"

I kept quiet. And Wit's eyes glittered.

¹⁷ A lady's pistol (author's footnote).

"Everything alive and dead within one kilometer's radius is in my hands. I'll have my revenge. I used to be a man full of compassion. I used to admire beauty. But those bastards made me like this and my face was doused with acid. And I've learned not to hesitate to do just the same thing. You must carry out my orders."

I stood up. I kissed Tjuk. And I knew it was already set, he had to die—at my hands.

"Human love only comes from habit," Wit continued. "So when he dies, he'll be easy to replace. After all, people like to make children. They don't have to be ordered to. So get rid of any love and pity."

Silence. And night still hadn't come. Suddenly Tjuk sang out loudly: "The People's blood has begun to flow, suffering pain and poverty. Now retribution is coming. We are now the judges, we are now the judges. . . ." ¹⁸

My brother Wit roared with laughter and his ruined face was like that of Sukosrono—the dwarfish ogre of the *wayang*. And Tjuk fell silent staring at me. He asked, "Mas, I can sing, can't I?"

I nodded. Grandmother came near and whispered, "Gus Muk, you're safe and sound. You have come back here. Let me go. Go away again. I don't want to become a burden."

"Where will you go, Grandma? You're not happy here?"

"Why do I have to be here, Gus? People who tie themselves to a place they don't like are as stupid as animals." And she walked away. She didn't need any further response. And disappeared. I looked at my oldest younger brother, requesting an opinion. He shook his head slowly—two times. I stood up and moved toward the door. I was almost there when Wit called me back.

"Where are you going, Mas Muk?" he asked.

"To look for Father. I still haven't spoken to him at any length."

"Have I given permission?"

"Do I have to follow your orders in everything?"

"In everything," he said decisively. Then, "Your life isn't worth a cent compared to the thousands of innocent people living in the mountains and isolated villages who must die for hostages. If you leave this place before getting my orders, you may be the cause of hundreds of people's deaths here. Understand?"

"I'm still a soldier. I still have the right to my lieutenant's rank. You are not allowed to give orders as you please," I responded asserting myself. And I began to get angry.

He laughed. Strangely, he wasn't about to cry like earlier. He said full of certainty, "Soldiers who've been captured and held prisoner no longer have any self-respect. And you now have come to my home as a guest. And guests have to obey the rules of their hosts. Understand?"

Once more I nodded and he laughed again.

"Mas Muk, Mas Muk!" interrupted Tjuk. "I had a dream once, Mbak Kun had lots of money—lots and lots. And there was a man saying, 'Be careful where you keep that money,' he said, 'if it is taken by those bastards the breath of our resistance will die.'"

¹⁸ The opening stanza of the famous Pesindo Marching Song.

I looked at my oldest younger brother. He frowned. Suddenly he snapped, "That's too much."

Tjuk looked at Wit. Then hid his face in my lap. He cried and begged for protection. He said, "Mas, I'm scared of him. I'm scared, Mas. Let's go to Jakarta, Mas, right now."

"Mas Muk," warned Wit. "The time has come. His mouth has to be shut. He'll be the cause of a disaster." Then he said in Dutch, "Kill him."

As though Tjuk understood those words, he screamed as hard as he could. I directed my gaze toward Wit and noticed he had drawn out a small dagger—shining silver. The weapon was tossed at me. Ay, pain seared the flesh of my thigh. Below my eyes: Tjuk's screaming head.

"One . . ." Wit counted from his seat.

I pulled out the dagger. And the blood flowed out. A military man is a military man, but I still have a sense of humanity. I wept.

"Two . . ."

My tears welled up and I raised the weapon. My innocent little brother had to die by my own hand.

"Three!" and as quick as a flash the weapon vanished into his side, vanished up to the hilt in Tjuk's heart. In a second, his sobs turned into a moan. Blood gushed out. I wept hysterically. Dead, Tjuk! You're dead—by my own hand, killed by your big brother who loved you. The sour smell of blood filled the air. And I stood up again. I kicked aside my brother's corpse and approached Wit.

"Now you're going to kill me, too?"

Night still hadn't come. And he grinned, saying, "You're still of use to me."

I wiped away my tears with a sleeve. A hubbub of voices came from outside.

"A patrol's coming," whispered my brother. "Cover Tjuk with corn."

The sound of marching feet came louder and louder—the era of Jan Pieterszoon Coen had come again. There wasn't time, *saudara*. Barely was his head covered by a bundle of corn, the patrol entered the house. Someone yelled, "Kusye, Kusye," with a Friesland accent. And saw the blood on the ground. My brother Wit was ready, aiming his lady's pistol. And all of the "liberation soldiers" inside halted in their tracks as if they were suddenly nailed to the ground. The soldiers raised their hands.

Wit ordered me to stand guard outside. I walked out. My foot bumped against a piece of wood lying in the way. And I awoke from my daydream.

I am still in prison. Honest, I did hear the footsteps of the guards relieving one another. And in two months' time it will be two full years that I've been in prison. . . .