

“A TWIST OF FATE” (“BELITAN NASIB”)

(Achdiat Karta Mihardja)

Translated by D. M. Roskies¹

The sun had only been shining now for three hours. It was just getting pleasantly warm. Slanting rays penetrated the glass skylights, passed through windows and through doors flung wide, spilling into the courtroom packed to the gills with people.

In the forecourt of the ancient building, folk who hadn't managed to find a seat within were warming themselves in the sun. They clustered together here and there, talking animatedly amongst themselves.

Leaning back against a flagstaff, a lanky fellow, all dressed in gray and flashing gold teeth, was chuckling to himself. “Seven years,” he was saying, “at the very most seven years.” His too-loud voice grated on the ear, for he was a printshop foreman in the way of work. So saying, he shot a glance to his left over towards another fellow, lankier than himself though leaner, who returned the laugh, shaking his head all the while in disagreement.

“Five years,” he rejoined. “Five years for sure, no more no less. More than that'll be unfair—too severe. But less'll also be unjust—too light.” And he rattled off several articles from the Criminal Code which he had learnt by heart. As a bush lawyer Haji Tahir was known to be a pretty crafty fellow. These citations from the Criminal Code had an air of credibility about them for those busy laying odds, so that anyone set on winning followed suit and plumped for five years.

Morning sang out, from trees full of birds. The scent of flowers wafted along the length of fence lining the curb. A hill-breeze blew, making the leaves sway rustling, bringing a refreshing tingle to people's faces. Yellowing government proclamations coming loose from their boards were from time to time a-flutter.

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People were still crowding forward in droves to enter the courtyard. Cigarette hawkers, their trays filled with packs held in front of their bellies, each carrying a thermos flask almost as thick as his own midriff, ice-block vendors with their thermoses filled almost to the brim, moved nimbly amongst the members of the public, crying their wares above the voice of the crowd as it kept humming steadily away with a sound like that of a downpour of rain.

All of which gave food for thought to Anwar the barber, squatting in a corner off to the left of the garage. He mused to himself as he gazed upon the people gathering together and moving hither and thither. His cheeks were puffed out and his lips sucked in as he made an effort to drag deeply on a cheroot, of which there yet remained a stub the length of a thumb. He thought to himself: "How comes it that murders are always such a draw?" As though these reflections were legible from the furrows of his brow, Teacher Parta suddenly turned to him, saying:

"Isn't that something, *bung*. Look how keen they all are. Extraordinary. Watch those *kampung* folk, all stocked up on rice and *ketupat*² from home. But, hm . . . come to think of it, you can see why. A murder like this, whose victim is the local strongman, carried out by an ordinary farmer, it just wouldn't make sense if there wasn't all this interest."

Anwar squinted out of the corner of his eyes at the stranger but offered no reply. He kept on struggling with his cheroot, thinking to himself: "Now, you take the slaughter of a water buffalo or cow, or a goat, or a chicken, which happens everyday; why doesn't that stir everybody's interest?"

The strongman whom Teacher Parta had in mind was none other than Haji Misbach, a miscreant feared like a tiger or like a bogeyman by all the denizens of Panjingkiran and its surroundings. He was known as far as the town itself as a Grade A scoundrel. And held in fear even there. Every townsman was acquainted with this Haji. Physically he was burly and tall, always clothed in black from head to toe, two fingers missing from his left hand, the mark of a machete fight with one of his enemies.

Suarma, his killer, was a simple peasant farmer, a taciturn chap celebrated for his patience. He never quarreled or argued with his betters, nor had he given serious offense to anybody. It was just as Teacher Parta had said: "He wouldn't even upset an ant." Indeed, upon hearing of the killing, people shook their heads incredulously. How was it possible, they thought. They could scarcely believe it. Anwar the barber alone wasn't surprised. Why on earth wasn't it possible, thought he: *agar agar*³ when consumed by an ant often brings about the death of the ant as well. What isn't possible, in human relations? Why the surprise, when in life anything is possible?

Suddenly, like baby chicks summoned by the mother hen, everyone in the courtyard was astir, rushing to the doors and windows, pressing up against one another, elbowing one another aside. Those at the far rear rose up on tiptoe, craning their necks over the backs of their fellows who stood together jam-packed. Suarma entered, his fetters making a clinking sound. The escorting officer was of sturdy build. His long machete extended straight downward, his moustache made a straight line across his round face.

²*ketupat*: a variety of rice, cooked in a very small container formed of young coconut leaves plaited together.

³*agar-agar*: a species of gelatin concocted of seaweed.

Suarma sat down immediately, bowing low in deference to the magistrate who sat foursquare, his head bowed, in his black robe, behind the baize table. To his left and right were arrayed in black the clerks and other members of the court, all of whom were retired officials. They looked as if they were dozing off, as did the *penghulu negeri*,⁴ a red turban atop his head and in his hand a copy of the Koran. Directly opposite the chief, at the far end of the table to the right, sat the prosecutor, who looked still quite young. His eyes roved restlessly about and the expression on his face was very animated. Near the prosecutor, the Counsel for the Defense was busy wiping clean his spectacles. Now and then he glanced towards the public.

How small Suarma looked, in the presence of these august figures. His crumpled yellowing undershirt and his check *kain*⁵ with its faded squares made a weird contrast with these black and green colors.

From time to time the chairman of the court looked him up and down very earnestly. Suarma bowed his head, his eyes fixed on the toes of his feet splayed wide upon the floor. He seemed calm. Not even his tousled hair nor his unkempt moustache and beard gave an impression of uneasiness of heart. Now and again a beam of intelligence darted forth from his eyes, striking through the fog of illiteracy enveloping his sunburnt features. He was all of 28, but looked ten years older.

To an earlier session of the court, convened deliberately *in camera*, Suarma had rendered a full account of events. The circumstances of his story were as follows:

Haji Misbach had on two previous occasions been banished for murder. The first time was for six years to Sawahlunto, on account of having killed Asnawi, a rice trader. The petty merchant, game in one leg, had been cut down near a bridge one day at dusk as he was hastening homewards from the market. All his money and gold rings were stolen, and his corpse unceremoniously flung into the river as you'd fling a banana trunk thrown ke-splash into a swift current which bore it away downstream.

On the second occasion, Haji Misbach was exiled to Nusa Kambangan for eight years. That time, an old gent was the victim. Pak Ibro was done in for refusing to hand over his goat, at a time when Misbach was keen to wed a young girl, daughter of a mosque official of Kampung Pasirhuni, over whom he had lost his head.

As long as Misbach was in exile everyone heaved a sigh of relief. Farmers once again wielded their picks with a light heart, were merry come harvest time, relaxed as they plucked the strings of their lutes and, of an evening, played on their bamboo flutes.

But when Misbach returned it was back to square one. It was as if the sky had caved in, everyone's breath was stuck fast in his chest. Once again the *kampung* was rendered unsafe. Once again terror stalked over every head.

People with two goats, if Misbach had a yen for one, didn't dare refuse and offered one in homage. If he passed by and caught sight of some almost ripe bananas on a tree, he'd lop them down without so much as a by-your-leave from the owner of the grove. If hungry, he'd simply enter any old house which he happened to be passing, make straight for the kitchen, devour such rice as happened to be around and, if none had been cooked, would angrily demand to be brought some. And right there and then people would start to cook, their hands a-tremble. Come harvest time, he'd go the rounds

⁴*penghulu negeri*: an adviser on Islamic matters in a Javanese civil court.

⁵*kain*: cloth used as an article of men's clothing, and worn sarong-fashion.

from one *sawah*⁶ to another, two henchmen in tow bearing machetes and carrying-poles.⁷ And every *sawah* owner knew precisely what those machetes and carrying-poles were for. Fish caught in manmade traps had nary a chance to grow to full size—apart from hawks or otters—for this Haji too was exceedingly fond of pondfish, especially of goldfish. Most especially those female goldfish whose innards bulged with roe.

The short of it was that, upon the return of the Haji, the *kampung* had resembled a fertile, verdant garden suddenly gone all faded and withered. Fear and hatred sat heavily on every countenance, which grew melancholy and listless. In the last resort there was none so brave as to stand up to this cruel rascal. No one was even brave enough to report him to the police. If I report him, went the reasoning, he'd get several weeks at the outside, and what's a prison sentence for the likes of him? He'll only get more boastful, more arrogant, as though each time he comes out of jail he feels he's passed some new and higher level examination. And the consequences, for yours truly? And so forth and so forth. Then they'd be put in mind of the fate of Pak Ibro, or of Dimjati, a young fellow who was still deaf in one ear and whose teeth had been knocked down his throat, the result of having been thrashed to within an inch of his life by Misbach after his accusations had sent Misbach up for one month.

There were many who, such was their fear, sought another means to save their skin. Ijon, for example, a tobacco factor whose wife had once been propositioned by Misbach, displayed exaggerated respect for him. If he ran across Misbach in the street he would move well to the side, bowing and bobbing the while. He would always laugh the loudest whenever Misbach happened to be having his little joke. He'd nod his head reverently when Misbach would command him to do this or do that for him. And, as if all this wasn't enough, a couple of kilos of tobacco would move each week from his house to Misbach's, just so long as he leaves my wife alone, he thought. But in his heart of hearts he prayed that Misbach would be run over by a car or be clobbered by a falling coconut, or at the very least become nauseated by tobacco. Djaja, whose wife was also pretty, chose another route and took himself off to the big city.

So it came to pass that fear and hatred held sway over the hearts of all the inhabitants.

One fine day Misbach turned up at Suarma's house. Suarma had just returned from the field. He bore firewood upon his shoulders and dangled loosely from one hand three outsize eels which the fair-skinned Munah would shortly clean for cooking. After bathing and reciting the afternoon prayer Suarma sat down alongside Munah beside the hearth, his arms embracing both his knees. Munah kept the fire going. She was younger than Suarma by ten years, and, with her fresh countenance and slender but well-proportioned figure, was counted among the prettiest women in the *kampung*.

The subdistrict head had once evinced a keen interest in her.⁸ But, his higher-up the district chief being keen on her as well, he withdrew. Later, however, the district chief shrank back as well, thanks to innuendoes which people began to put about: "Big scissors, little scissors—ripe fruit on the branch. Big cat, little cat—tussling over the

⁶*sawah*: wet-rice fields under cultivation.

⁷A *pikulan* is a bamboo carrying-pole with a large basket suspended to either end and held across the shoulders.

⁸Lit., *juragan camat*, "Master camat," or "Master Wedono."

thigh of a goat."⁹ And he knew who the big cat and the little cat were! And, as always, in such situations, a third cat popped up on the scene.

As was his custom, Suarma went over the day's doings at work. Slicing away at the chili pepper and onion for cooking the eel, Munah was all ears. Her fair-skinned face flushed, as she blew on the coals. The line of her forehead, sloping downwards, gave way to an aquiline nose, a sweet mouth, and a lushly rounded chin, offering in profile a sight most lovely to Suarma, who observed her from the side. In such moments, for a few moments, Suarma felt happy to be at the side of his faithful wife.

He said to her: "Earlier this afternoon," he said, "Just when the prayer drum at the mosque began to sound, I caught sight of a frog being swallowed up by a field snake. How it croaked, the poor little creature! If its cries were anything to go by, it was badly hurt and scared to death. The longer it went on the weaker its voice became, until it stopped completely. To my ear it was as if I were hearing a human voice pleading tearfully for help. Pleading for help in the face of certain death. And the strange thing about it, Munah, was that I remember dreaming of just such an event. Can't say exactly when I dreamt it, but I recall it vividly, it was exactly like this one. And, what's all the more strange, Munah, is that in this dream I was thinking to myself exactly as I've done just now. Hey, I thought in my dream, it's exactly like a human voice begging for help, as though there were still some hope of saving someone doomed to death? What can it all mean?"

Munah, who set little store by superstition, listened without attaching any significance to these events. A frog swallowed by a snake, it happened everyday. What was so very odd about it? Now, if it had been a *snake* swallowed by a *frog*—that, maybe, would mean something, Munah reflected. But Suarma's thoughts ran otherwise. The event had, in truth, impressed itself profoundly upon him. Though he didn't say as much to Munah he remained mystified. "Why did it happen exactly as it did in my dream? Exactly!"

Suddenly someone was heard banging at the door, demanding to be let in. Suarma at once ran to open it, and there before him was Misbach, standing with one foot on the threshold. He came right in, without first asking permission. He bent his head upon entering, the door being too low for his massive frame. The bamboos making up the floor cracked and snapped under his tread, as, without further ado, he strode over to the brazier. "I'm starving," he said. "There anything to eat?" It was a query known only too well by Suarma and Munah to be a command. Forthwith they carried it out.

Misbach's stomach was crying out for food. This made him very impatient, harrying them to get the food ready fast.¹⁰ For her part Munah, her hands shaking, pushed more wood into the flames.

Not long after the food was ready, Misbach fell to. He sat crosslegged, facing a full bowl of rice, a pan of cooked eel, a bowl of *sambal*,¹¹ and several plates full of other side

⁹A *pantun*, or poem composed in quatrain and often containing an item of popular wisdom; notoriously difficult to translate into English. In Achdiat's original it is given as follows: "Gunting besar, gunting kecil, rambutan masak diranting/Kutjing besar kutjing ketjil, berebutan paha kambing."

¹⁰*Mendongsok-dongsok* is a variant of a Sundanese word whose meaning approximates "hurry," "push," "urge," and is used here in both a figurative and concrete sense. I have given "harried" as the nearest equivalent in English.

¹¹*sambal*: generic term for mixed spices into which chili peppers have been ground.

dishes. First he rolled up the sleeves of his black shirt. Then he tucked in. He ate with gusto, as he demonstrated by repeatedly thrusting balls of rice into the spices. His sweat ran, glinting on his nose and chin, so hot was the *sambal*. His nose streamed, water poured from his eyes. As always when he was enjoying himself he would growl contentedly, issuing forth a voice which was somewhere between that of an angry cat and a duck's quack.

Three days earlier he had also dined at Suarma's. On this occasion Kukut, Munah's favorite chicken, still hatching her eggs, had to have her throat slit. Her thighs had to be roasted to a turn, then sprinkled with soy sauce into which a little lime juice had been mixed. On that occasion too he had dined with relish. But now, he said, it was with even greater relish.

Munah and Suarma observed him chewing, gulping down, and polishing off the cooked eel, listened to him smacking his lips and growling in the back of his throat; and they hopped to it when Misbach ordered coffee to be prepared and some *tape*¹² to be heated up, which he then ate with *gula pasir*,¹³ "Gosh, this here's tasty *tape*!" he said. "God must be with me today and no mistake!" And, downing it, he growled yet again.

At last, having eaten and drunk his fill, he lay himself down on a mat near the fireplace. He stretched out his thick body, plump and long like that of the black caterpillar in the fable of *Lenggangkatjana*.¹⁴ By his side he laid his machete.

Suarma and Munah bore away the plates and saucers, and the remains of the meal. Though famished earlier, they'd no appetite now. It wasn't only that it was distasteful to sup in front of Misbach, but that they were none too keen on eating the leftovers of their uninvited guest, and because, watching his movements with resentment, their desire to eat had vanished completely.

All this while Misbach would be constantly glancing in Munah's direction with his sharp eyes. The shape of her well-developed limbs, her saffron skin glimmering under her thin *kebaya*,¹⁵ made his blood course the swifter through his body. Whenever Munah passed close by he felt his blood start upward, his throat contract with desire, his head pound. It was as if the beam of his eyes wanted oh-so-keenly to penetrate that flimsy *kebaya*. At a certain moment, he ordered Munah to give him a massage. Her heart thumping, Munah felt as if her heart had ceased to beat. Everything seemed to have turned dark. This was soon succeeded by a feeling of distrust, producing tightness in her chest and vertigo. Never before had she massaged any man save her own husband. Deep within herself she balked, rebelled.

"Get a move on and massage me!" snapped Misbach his eyes blazing. Munah quaked with fright.

When he saw her hanging back, casting reluctant glances at her husband as if seeking his permission, Misbach took grave offence at the slight to his authority and, of a sudden, dealt Suarma so hard a blow to the head with a piece of kindling that the latter sank to the ground in a dead faint. Munah screamed but the burly Misbach pounced on the

¹²*tape*: a fermented cassava dish.

¹³*gula pasir*: granulated, refined sugar used in the preparation of confectionery.

¹⁴The provenance and substance of this folk-tale are unclear. Keith Foulcher in a private communication, has suggested a Sundanese source.

¹⁵*kebaya*: a woman's blouse, reaching down below the midriff.

adorable little figure as a lion springs upon a goat. She shuddered with terror, her whole body limp and helpless.

Shortly afterwards Suarma came to. Slowly, ever so slowly, his eyelids fluttered open. His vision was at first blurred and unsteady. Soon, however, it cleared. When he heard that growling voice loud and clear and saw what was taking place before his very eyes, everything began to spin with the speed of airplane propellers, whistling and roaring. He forgot about all else, quick as lightning his hands laid hold of the long machete lying near Misbach and, in a wild rage, hacked the stout Haji to pieces.

Thus the backdrop to the explanations offered by Suarma to the magistrate in closed session. Having thus delivered himself of the story Suarma broke down, sobbing like a child.

By now everyone was positively throbbing with anticipation of the magistrate's judgment. At any moment now this would be handed down. Suarma appeared still calm, looking as if ready to accept with an open heart whatever judgment was delivered. He hunched over, waiting. The magistrate began to speak. In the tension of waiting the whole court room fell silent.

Suddenly an astonished hubbub burst forth from the public gallery, softly rustling like the sound of water in spate, reverberating outward through windows and doors. Everyone stirred in their seats and where they stood. They were flabbergasted to hear the voice of the magistrate clearly pronouncing the judgment "Not guilty."

Not guilty?! They could scarcely believe their ears. There wasn't a single person who could credit it. How could so sensational a murder be adjudged "not guilty?" They shook their heads in disbelief. But it was as if Suarma had yet fully to take in what had happened. As if his thoughts were drifting between dream and consciousness. As if he believed yet disbelieved. For several moments he only sat with head bowed. His eyes roamed nervously about, emptily gazing, expressionless as marbles.

Surprise and amazement gave way rapidly to delight, with everyone murmuring thanks be to God. They were no less grateful to the magistrate who had just set Suarma free than they were to Suarma for having released them from cruel terror. All this delight came at last to a head in their shared intention to stage a big *selamatan*¹⁶ in the *kampung*, in Suarma's honor.

Upon his release from custody, Suarma appeared to have altered greatly. He had been transformed into a new person, a sort quite unknown to his *kampung* friends. Where formerly he had been fond of company, now it was as if he avoided everyone. He was always off on his own. Where previously he had, returning home from his *sawah*, been in the habit of stopping in at the mosque to pray, now he made straight for his house, taking not the *desa* road but a footpath through the graveyard.

Everyone felt surprised, was beset with questions. But Munah felt more than this, more than consternation: she felt depressed, felt the loss of something whose value couldn't be assessed, her intimate happiness. For Suarma had altered greatly in his dealings with her too. Her husband's cheerful and warm attitude, replete with fond smiles and happy laughter intended specially for her, for Munah herself, had disappeared entirely now, to be replaced by chill melancholy and by a flat blankness.

¹⁶ *selamatan*: a ritual meal eaten collectively and in celebration of birth, circumcision, etc.

In the end, Munah herself sank into glumness. No longer was she the Munah of old, cheerful, whose laughter and banter so often brought relief to burdened hearts in the *kampung*. No longer was she a *dalang*¹⁷ who was forever telling stories, amusing others so as to cheer them up, especially her husband whom she loved so. She had become a sort of gong, resonating only when sounded. In such wise did conditions at home grow cold, oppressively cold, as if no fresh breeze were coming through, as if the sun's rays no longer poured in.

So people less and less often came round to the house. They had a high old time asking all about and gossiping about the changes in these two. They aired their guesses, pawed the thing over. But they didn't really know. What had actually happened was that the freedom which had been granted by the magistrate was, so far as Suarma was concerned, no freedom at all.

Every time he ran into someone, he felt as if they were mocking him, despising him, making a laughing-stock of him. He'd once been passing by the edge of a water spout under a *waru* tree.¹⁸ Some women were busy bathing and washing clothes. While at this, they laughed and exchanged banter. At once Suarma quickened his step, half running. He felt his ears go all red. Finally he broke into a full run, impelled by something which sliced burningly through his heart.

The more he was off on his own, withdrawn into himself, the more he seemed to hear people laughing at him behind his back. The more vivid, too, the images contrived by his imagination. His heart grew hot, searing his very spirit.

One day he observed Munah throwing up and deathly pale of face, heard her complain of feeling out of sorts, of having lost her appetite for rice. She had a craving only for spicy and sour foods. From that time on, the livelier Suarma's imagination became the more he was overpowered by it. On one occasion Munah asked for a massage, because her head ached so badly, but Suarma refused absolutely to do it and it was all he could do to restrain himself from slapping his wife. Holding in his breath he left the house, leaving Munah prostrate on the couch all by herself, her head pounding.

By the time Munah had reached the eighth month Suarma was in a real state. Never had he been in such a state. But not for long, for at last he arrived at a firm decision. "No! I don't give a damn about violating the *adat*!"¹⁹ he thought, "I won't give a *selamatan*!"

The die had been cast. Hearing of it, Munah only smiled a little with the corners of her mouth. Softly she said "If that's your decision, *kakak*, so be it."²⁰ No question but that we've got to tighten our belts. Your clothes have got pretty tattered, and we've been wanting to do some repairs to the house as well."

Suarma little knew that later, by the pool, Munah wept alone.

Everyone grew more and more astonished, more prone to conjecture, asked more and more questions. But the more astonished they grew the more inwardly put upon

¹⁷*dalang*: the (often masterfully eloquent) puppetmaster and narrator of the *wayang* shadow theater.

¹⁸The *pancuran*, or water spout, in question is a primitive tap, constructed of linked bamboos and designed to convey water to a village from a nearby source.

¹⁹*adat*: Indonesian customary law.

²⁰*kakak*: lit. "elder brother," is a domestic term of endearment in country Malay, with (to modern ears) rather archaic overtones.

Suarma felt. One day, when his heart seemed about to burst, he put the question frankly to Munah.

She was so completely taken back by her husband's question that she broke down in sobs. But now she realized what lay behind it all, understood why her husband had become a changed man. And she replied with equal candor and in no uncertain terms. Suarma's suspicions, burgeoning all this while, she denied absolutely. Yes, she'd gone so far as to swear a solemn oath, may God blacken all the days of life said she, if I'm not telling the truth.

So the world suddenly felt level again for Suarma. His features grew unclouded once more. It looked as if he were coming back to life, happy once more. But, it became apparent soon afterward, all this was nothing more than a bright ripple on the surface of waters which deep down were turbid. Slowly but surely a gray mist descended again, curtained his features. And whenever he came upon anyone, images would loom up once again in his imagination. He would hear people laughing at him, poking fun, humiliating him.

So that when his son was born and the sound of his voice was heard crying hwah!, hwah! Suarma could contain himself no longer and ran to seize a cleaver, and hacked the newborn to bits. Shrieking helplessly, his mother was stabbed as well and was herself cut to pieces. Then he ran for it, ran with blood on his arms, blood on his face, blood all over his clothes. . . .

And now, as before when he'd chopped Haji Misbach to pieces, Suarma hurried to surrender himself to the police.

He draws his breath in, long and deep, before the police constable. He feels so free. . . .

