

A JAPANESE

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Translated by  
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I was just five years old when the Japanese came to our town to replace the Dutch.

My father and mother were separated by that time, and we--my mother and I--lived with my grandfather--my mother's stepfather--who was the *lurah*<sup>1</sup> in our town. As a *pamong*,<sup>2</sup> grandfather was immediately contacted by the short, yellow people. They came calling at our house right away. And every time they came, naturally, they wanted something; one time it was a chicken, another a mango, and then a pomelo.<sup>3</sup>

At that particular time our pomelos were still green, very green, so we did not comply with their request. Of course grandfather refused in a friendly, laughing way, and fortunately they accepted his reasons. They would wait until the pomelos were ripe.

But one afternoon, Mitsu, a *kempei*<sup>4</sup> in our town, came along on his motorbike. He was alone. We children, who were playing on the verandah, welcomed him with cries of "Banzai!" He returned our greetings very elaborately.

He left the motorbike on the road in front of the house. We flocked in amazement around this thing, the likes of which we had never seen before. But no one dared to get too close--we were afraid.

I felt proud to have a Japanese go into our house, since that made it special--our house had attracted the attention of a Japanese. And I boasted to the other children and warned them against getting too close to the motorbike. I followed Mitsu up to the house, but he didn't know who I was and couldn't tell the difference between me and any of the other

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1. The village chief.

2. That is, pamong pradja, or civil servant.

3. A large, green, grapefruit-like citrus fruit, called djeruk Bali in Indonesia.

4. A member of the kempeitai, or Japanese military police.

children, even though my clothes were far better than theirs-- by then clothing had already started to get scarce. He didn't know yet that I was the grandson of the lurah whom he was going to visit. And without paying any more attention to us, he headed toward the house.

Our pomelo tree grew close beside the front of the house, almost at the steps, and its branches touched our roof-tiles. Often the fruit landed on the roof, and sometimes we couldn't find them on account of the heavy foliage.

Our pomelos were always thick on the tree all year long. And on the lowest branches hung fruit as big as a man's fist or a tennis ball. There were even some as big as a kick-ball, but still green. So green, in fact, that they didn't have any fruit inside and their skin was as thick and soft as a pillow.

The minute he saw such large fruits, Mitsu wanted one. He couldn't tell, just by sight, whether a pomelo was ripe or not. With a child-like movement he picked a big pomelo and, holding it tightly, hid it behind his back.

Whistling uncertainly, he climbed the steps. He found grandfather sitting reading the newspaper. He addressed him in stilted Indonesian. For some unknown reason, he laughed a lot, so much so in fact that grandfather was rather surprised. Laughing, I pointed to the pomelo Mitsu was holding behind his back. He was startled. Then he burst out laughing at me. He showed the fruit to grandfather. And what could grandfather do but laugh too?

Then my mother came out with tea and cakes. She sat down and chatted with us. I was on her lap. Whatever the Japanese said, he said with the aim of interesting us and making a good impression.

He asked me if I were old enough to go to school yet. My mother answered that I was in the first grade at public school beginning this year. Then grandfather added that when I finished grammar school, I would be sent to Tokyo. How happy I was when I heard that!

After that Mitsu often came to our house. If grandfather wasn't home, he talked with mother, grandmother, and me. Needless to say, I kept quiet for the most part. I was only to speak when spoken to.

He always brought something when he came. One time it was a bolt of unbleached cotton. Then he brought two boxes of wood-working tools, which grandfather was very happy to get. English goods like that could not be bought in our town, or even, for that matter, in Tjirebon. Another time he had people bring us four sacks of peanuts. It was perhaps on this account that our

relationship with him got closer. We were always happy to receive him.

But I finally realized that he came only to see my mother. And then the rumor started that my mother had become the mistress of a Japanese. Of course, I was angry when I heard it, but apparently my mother hadn't yet heard the crazy story.

Sometimes some of the jokes Mitsu told us made us angry and upset--upset because we couldn't release the angry feelings pent up inside us.

In those days my mother moved around a lot in women's circles, as was expected of a lurah's daughter, and she was connected with anything and everything having to do with ladies' affairs. There were meetings in the auditorium, or sometimes even in the town square. Speeches, oh yes, speeches: talking, shouting, gesturing with the hands to get people to come and listen, then a finale with glorious applause. Or if there was to be a drama performance, she went to participate. She always took the role of the woman who gives up her loved one to fight to the death for a cause. She screamed until the moment the curtain went down, and the people in the audience screamed back at her even louder.

My mother's relationship with Mitsu was close, very close. I often heard my friends joking that I would soon have a Japanese for a father. Sometimes they drove me nearly to tears with that kind of teasing. But I didn't dare bring any of it back to my mother. I didn't tell her that behind her back they were calling her the mistress of a Japanese and me the future stepson of a Japanese. When I came home crying and my mother asked me why, I always replied that I had been treated badly by my friends and goaded into a fight. There were lots of them, and I was alone and still little. And my mother would be quite angry with me.

But I understood, through my own childish intuition, that my mother's relationship with Mitsu would never end in marriage. I knew that, in reality, she hated and loathed the sight of him. But he had power, and even my mother was happy to talk with him, since it was obvious that he was extremely interested in things to do with women's groups and the war struggle.

And most important: I myself had no desire--absolutely none--to have a Japanese stepfather.

Grandfather, on the other hand, would have been quite agreeable if my mother had become Mitsu's wife--his wife, not his mistress. I don't know what my grandmother thought about it.

One day we were talking about Mitsu, about his distressing behavior, at which we nevertheless laughed in order to please

him. Just then Mitsu himself came along. But he looked different, very different indeed.

He wore a sarong, a coat, and a kopiah,<sup>5</sup> and he carried a cane. Though he usually didn't wear them, he had on a pair of spectacles. And in his mouth was a cigar. From a distance he looked just like an Arab!

Of course, he had gotten the sarong and other things from the Merah Store, which was looted of everything when the Japanese came.

We laughed at the sight of his get-up. My mother turned away and stared at the wall because she was disgusted and really hated to look at Mitsu, who was always trying to attract our attention. Mitsu was delighted. He thought he had succeeded in making himself appealing to us. Yes, appealing. He was really rather like a child trying to attract attention by drawing on his face with charcoal.

Grandmother was full of the kind of praise you give when you see a prijaji's<sup>6</sup> boy dressed up like his grandfather, like an old man. But the Japanese didn't seem to notice the nature of our laughter. He thought there was only one kind of laughter: the kind that comes from pleasure and approval. In this case, he thought that we were pleased to see him, that he had succeeded in making himself appealing--which is exactly what he had set out to do. He was satisfied. He thought it was a good sign: surely my mother would marry him!

Not long afterwards, grandfather came, and he too, as you might have guessed, laughed to see the ill-fitting, out-of-place clothes. "They fit you perfectly! Perfectly!. Exactly like a kijaji!"<sup>7</sup> grandfather said. And Mitsu was even more delighted to get such praise. He laughed and laughed. And he took out a packet of cigars for grandfather, who was very happy to accept them.

That evening Mitsu ate with us. He was very greedy.

When he went home--of course he walked, since he couldn't ride his motorbike dressed as he was--lot of children laughed at him from a distance. And Mitsu, giddy with success, returned the children's laughter. He was escorted by the children for a long way; they followed him because they were astonished and proud. There were no critics among us since we, as children,

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5. A kind of cap worn by Moslems.

6. An official, or a member of the upper middle-class.

7. A teacher, scholar, leader of Islam.

thought that whatever a Japanese did was good and worthy of imitation.

Then outsiders began gossiping about his visit in strange clothes; he had dressed that way in order to recommend himself to grandfather and grandmother so that he would be acceptable as a son-in-law, or to tempt my mother into being his mistress.

But as usual I was the only one who heard all this ridicule, from people who made fun of me. And since I was a small child, I couldn't return any of the same cheap talk. Nor could I tell my mother what the rumors were. I always hid from her any news that was ugly or that even involved the family name, and I alone reflected on whether any of it was true or not. Never did I dare discuss it with the family. I always thought that, as a child, I had no right to do that; my mother had forbidden me to speak to grown-ups. Children must listen quietly. When there were guests, I had to stay in my room or play outside and not be included in things.

When I finished the school year and was promoted to the next grade, the Japanese brought me a toy bus which would go by itself if I turned a key. I was thrilled. And if someone had asked me then if I thought mother should marry Mitsu I would have immediately said "Yes!"

He did many favors for our family. He always brought rice, clothing, household goods, and something which to this very day hangs in our home: a pair of ornamental deer antlers.

Other people, in those days, complained that there wasn't enough rice, that it was too highly priced, that it was the same with clothing, that they were being driven crazy by the lice, and that the sale of rubber cloth was increasing. By contrast, we were very well-off: plenty of rice, plenty of clothing, and we didn't have to wear clothes made of rubber cloth or sacking. We didn't have to eat banana stalks, and we didn't have to sunbathe every morning to kill the lice.

Ours was the only family in the area not to feel the misery suffered by the Indonesians during the occupation. We could go where we pleased by automobile and could get anything we needed.

When we went outside our town to see grandfather's family, we took a truck. Yes, a truck. Traveling by truck was pretty hard, but there was no better vehicle in the whole town, which didn't even have a sedan.

When Indonesia suddenly proclaimed its independence, Japanese authority disappeared from our town, as it did from all of Indonesia. Japan was hated and people now dared to oppose the Japanese. Everyone wanted to kill a Japanese, any Japanese at all.

During this critical period Mitsu didn't once come to our house. He was busy. The Japanese were put in irons in a house where they had been living, until it was time for them to leave for Kedungbunder. There all the Japanese in our area were gathered so they could be sent back to their own country.

When the day came for him to go, Mitsu gave the things he was leaving behind to his friends. Among them was my grandfather, who received his share with thanks and a hoarse "Good-bye." He felt a real loss.

We waved good-bye when Mitsu got on the truck with the others, and the truck rumbled east toward Kedungbunder.

The last I heard of Mitsu was from my mother. She said that he had been killed when he and some friends tried to escape from the camp at Kedungbunder. It was like a piece of everyday news, something one might read in the newspaper. There was nothing in it that made me feel very sympathetic; there had not been anything particularly moving about the Japanese.