

WHEN THE RAIN CAME

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(Translated by Toenggoel Siagian)

Usually towards twilight or when it was overcast--as on that evening--none of us dared to go out anymore. Quickly we'd do the dishes and clean the whole kitchen, including the cooking place, which was always full of ashes left over from the wood fire. We'd slam the door tight shut on the chicken coop in the corner underneath the kitchen. On the drying rack next to the kitchen, we'd set out a few buckets, just in case it rained. We always used rainwater for doing the dishes and other kitchen utensils; the water hauled up from way down in the valley, we saved for drinking and cooking. When all these daily chores were done, we'd go into the living room. The window there and the one in Father's room we shut tightly, to ward off the cold outside. My two younger brothers and I would sit around the table, leafing through the next day's lessons. My sister Is would sit not far from us, crocheting or patching old clothes. Once in a while, she'd look in our direction. The whole room would be quiet, the only sound coming from Father, who was resting down in his room, humming to relax himself, his age reflected in his voice.

If the cold of the evening air had not gotten to us yet, we'd leave the window closest to us open. Once in a while, we'd glance towards the road that cut through the rice fields to see if Mother was on her way home. Occasionally, on such evenings, we would fall under the spell of the clouds of mist chasing each other far away over the hills to the north. Quite often the spell was only broken when Father, who was more sensitive to cold than we, called out to us repeatedly and told us to come to his room.

On such cold days, Father did not allow us to play outside even when it was not raining, and my friends were having fun playing in the yard around the church. To make us forget the pleasure of playing, Father would usually have us come close to him and sing from a small book: my mother's beloved hymn-book.

An oil lamp was attached to the wall over our heads, and we would sit or lie on our stomachs on the mat. My sister, Is, would then choose some hymns which Mother had taught us, and we'd sing along in three or four parts, each of us harmonizing to our own ability. Meanwhile Is would never fail to tap out the beat with her fingers on the mat or on the wall, and our eyes would watch and follow carefully. When she got tired, she would leave the conducting to one of us, her younger brothers, and we'd pick other hymns that we thought fitted the mood of the evening. Sometimes Father would deliberately praise our singing, a sign that he wanted us to keep on singing. Ah, those happy, beautiful evenings! We did not feel the cold of the night, and often,

without any of us noticing, Mother would be there in the doorway, absorbed, watching us engrossed in our singing.

"Your choir sounds beautiful from outside," Mother would suddenly say. Then we'd jump up and crowd around the things that Mother had brought home.

And yet . . . and yet! Usually the lure of the children's noisy play was stronger than Father's prohibition; they called me to the yard. Heedless of the icy water soaking their feet or the cold air that usually made them shiver, on they'd go, slithering about in the mud to their hearts' content. Hearing those voices, I would try to sneak out. The easiest way was always to wait till Father dozed off or fell asleep.

When my friends had gone, I wouldn't go home. I was always afraid of Father's anger, and so I'd sit moping on the stairs of the church, waiting for Mother to come home.

II

I was more afraid of Father at home than at school where he was the teacher. Father often got angry at us, his own children. Sometimes he would lash out, for no reason we could see; and Mother, in turn, would explode at him for being so touchy.

"Why get angry at the children? After all, they don't understand what's happening. Just accept the situation in patience." That is what Mother would always say.

And when Mother started off like that, Father would fall silent. He'd get his hoe and take off for the rice field. He wouldn't come back till called.

III

At school the children were all afraid of Father. Sometimes they'd try to sidle up to me, thinking that Father would be less angry at them if they befriended me. But no matter how they tried, they could not soften Father's anger. Father was indeed very grouchy.

I still remember one particular incident. We were doing arithmetic problems, a whole blackboard full. Arithmetic was the subject I disliked the most--and still do. And of course Father really liked assigning a lot of problems. As usual, I had not finished even half of them, although many of my classmates had got their work marked. And on that occasion, I couldn't even expect any help from my friends, because the teacher's eye kept roving around the class. I tried to concentrate, but I only got more heated and resentful. All of a sudden I spat on my slate and wiped it off with the palm of my hand. On seeing this, a classmate next to me yelled out to the teacher. Everybody looked in my direction, including Father who quickly sat up.

In a flash he stood beside me. I didn't dare to look up at him. Then I felt his fingers clutching my hair tightly. Then with a jerk of his arm, he yanked me from my bench. He kicked me out through the door, and I ran screaming home.

IV

Not far from where we lived, the rice fields stretched out in terraces, far away to the feet of the hills. To get to any of these rice fields, we had to clamber down to the bottom of the valley, cross it, and climb up the other side.

Every day after school, Father went to work there, and often he took me along to keep him company. Father would carry his hoe, and had me bring along a kettle of tea. Often, with envy I'd watch my friends playing, while I had to follow Father to the rice fields. Yet I never dared refuse to go. I could not understand why I had to go to work too. Once I did ask Father why. "To eat," he replied. "Yes, you have to work to eat," and caressed my head as he spoke.

Then Father went on to talk about my older brother, who at my age had already been a help to him. He told me how glad my brother would be if he could see that I too was now able to help. After that, as soon as I got home from school, I was ready with my work clothes, a hoe, and a kettle of tea.

Sometimes my older sister, Is, and my younger brother, Min, came down to the rice field to bring food. At those times together, how happy I felt! How delicious food is when you are starving. Even if it's only cassava with chili peppers. And more important, for a while I could play with my little brother.

And when harvest time came, all of us had to go down to the rice field to help Father.

Usually school was let out a week before that. And Mother did not go to market.

Early in the morning, we'd already be there in the rice fields harvesting, and when that was done, we'd *mardege** the grains. Except for my sister Is, none of us could yet work like Father. To help them, we'd bring along sticks of wood to beat the rice out from the piled up stalks. We'd sit down on mats, and lay out in front of us two or three sheaves of rice-stalks, then with these clubs the size of our arms, we'd beat the pile till the grains fell out. Bit by bit, we'd put aside the leftover straw and throw it away. And so our contribution would match Father's labor. And in fact, we enjoyed working this way. Towards noon, Mother would go home to fetch rice. Eaten in the heat of the day, out there in that wide open space, the food tasted delicious.

*Author's note: *mardege* means to thresh rice by stamping on it.

V

In the dry season the rice fields dried out because the headwaters were not enough to irrigate them all.¹ Farmers had to work hard, especially just before the rice completely ripened. Otherwise, it meant giving everything to the field rats.

I had to get hardened to the night cold. Sometimes I had to watch till our rice field was fully inundated. Quite often I had to stay till late in the night, till the other people had gone home. When everything was quiet, I would close off the water intake to the other rice fields, and all the water would flow into ours.

But opportunities like that I rarely found.

They--the farmers who were much older than I--usually only gave me a piss-thin stream of water, as though they were the ones in control of the headwaters, as if we had never taken part in repairing the works.

Even though I estimated there was enough water to be divided three ways, I still had to go upstream to the division-point if I wanted to get my share. Even at night. Even though they knew that a child my age rarely dared to walk by himself across such a wide and desolate valley. Of course my share of the water would be diverted again while I was upstream, and so the water still would not increase. If I was lucky, somebody would keep me company on the climb up to the division-point. Then I needn't be afraid to walk along that narrow path winding through the bushes, and I needn't be scared of the hooting of the owl that seemed to be chasing me.

But if I couldn't find anybody, I had to walk to the division-point by myself. I fought down my fear. At such moments, I felt closer to God.

VI

Mother was gone from home more and more often. Father and I were left to take care of the rice fields. Sometimes Mother only came home after two or three days. But her absences no longer made us miss her. Not even my youngest brother. We had got used to it. Less and less often would we ask where she was, and when she would be home.

On the days that Mother stayed home, she'd be out by the road early in the morning. She would bring a roll of burlap sacks, and by noon these bags would be filled with rice which she had "intercepted" bit by bit from the villagers on their way to the market.² On the next market day, she would take this rice to the market in a rented cart.

¹*Hulu air* (headwaters) can mean a natural water source, e.g., a spring, or a point of division of water in an irrigation system. It is most likely the latter that is intended here.

²The mother offers to save villagers who come long distances with small

From that market Mother would bring back a bundle full of clothing and other goods. On market day she'd bring them to the nearest market and what she couldn't sell there, she'd peddle around the villages. Village people do like heavy, ready-made clothing, and Mother knew their preference. The most common form of payment was rice.

Ah, how happy we were when Mother came home with ready-made clothing. We'd crowd around her pack. We'd pick out what we liked best and while watching Mother's face, who refused to look in our direction, we'd try on the clothes in front of her.

Promises were all we got from Mother, by the end. When we pressed her to come through on them the next day, she'd say in a tone that shut off any further whining, "You don't look at other people, do you? They don't have any clothes, just tree bark. Sometimes they don't eat. They are lucky even to get sweet potatoes."

We'd fall silent. In our minds' eye, we'd see villagers dressed only in tree bark. Or, if they had any real clothes, they'd be in tatters. Their shrunken bodies reflected the misery of the times. Children went to school naked and adults cut off the legs of their pants.³

"You're lucky that you still have some clothes on your back and eat normally," Mother would add.

Well, when Mother put it that way, there was nothing else to do but be silent. Quietly we'd go to the back of the house to do our chores. As time passed, we no longer dared to ask for anything at all. We just accepted anything whenever it was given. But such days, red letter days for us children, came along only once a year, at Christmas and New Year's Day.⁴

VII

One day we became quite anxious waiting for Mother to come home.

She hadn't been back two Sundays in a row. Usually she was home by Saturday. One damp evening, as we were trying to cheer ourselves up out of our anxiety, Mother suddenly appeared in the doorway, empty-handed. She burst into tears, and ran into the bedroom.

Father, who had not moved from his seat, asked, "What's the matter, Mother?"

Mother didn't answer, but kept on sobbing, face down on the bed.

quantities of rice the trouble of walking further to the market. Her profit comes from the difference between the lower price she pays these villagers and the price in the market.

³Either because the old pants had worn out at the knees or to save material for other uses.

⁴In Batak villages, the whole period from Christmas through New Year's Day is one long festival.

"What's the matter? The moment you get home, you start crying," Father asked again, and stood up in bewilderment.

"The Japanese."

Hearing this, we all stormed into the room.

"What about the Japanese?" asked Father, even more confused. Slowly Mother stopped crying, and then sobbed on.

"The rice was captured. Not a thing escaped." And Mother wept again. But we felt quite relieved. We thought Mother had been tortured.

At that time the Japanese were indeed getting more and more brutal. Every day we heard news of torture. They didn't care who they tortured, even the most respected elders. One day the head of such and such village would be summoned. The next, we'd hear that he was ill after being beaten up.⁵ Or "clan elder so and so" would be flogged in public with his own cane. They said all this was to warn people not to delay in paying their annual rice contribution.⁶

It was indeed true that at that point we had not yet paid ours-- 220 *kaleng*.⁷ But then the yield from our fields was way below that amount. Fortunately, Father was a teacher. People said the Japanese were rather respectful of teachers, so they didn't treat him as they treated others.

The whole room was dead silent. Father too. He didn't say a word. That stillness we felt as an anger that couldn't be hurled at its proper target. An anger that had sunk its claws deep into the heart of every human being who still wanted to go on living and to care for his family.

But even this silence had to be set aside.

All we heard was the tired breath wheezing out of Father's lungs, breath that struggled to throw off all these burdens.

And in a voice heavy with emotion Father gathered us around him. That night we knelt in front of Him after Father had read several verses from the Holy Bible.

⁵The language here is ambiguous. It may simply mean that the village headman was in great pain; but it may also mean that he had it said that he was "sick" rather than spread the truth of what had really happened.

⁶*Iuran* literally means contribution. Many taxes imposed by the Japanese were labeled publicly as "contributions to the war effort."

⁷The amount represented by a *kaleng* (lit. tin) differs according to region and time. It is usually between twelve and twenty liters. Calculating on the basis of twenty liters to a *kaleng*, the amount of rice this family was expected to "contribute" would have been 4,400 liters.

VIII

It was one evening during harrowing. Here and there we could see farmers rushing to finish up their work. Some had already finished and were quickly driving their water buffaloes home. Even those who were not yet done, still hurried to unyoke their animals. That afternoon the sky had clouded over. In the distance the hills rose black and gloomy. Ah evening, that still brings back those times!

Father was napping in the bedroom, as he always did on coming home from the fields. As usual, we gathered in the living room. This time there was nothing that we awaited. For Mother was now back home with us, and she was not going away any more.

We felt the cold piercing through the chinks in the wall. We closed the shutters tightly. An oil lamp burned on the table in our midst. From time to time it flickered in the draught coming through the chinks.

Outside, the storm spattered rain through the leaves hanging over our roof.

We could hear the rain fall, drop by drop, on to the roof. More and more rapidly and violently.

We also heard Mother singing in the bedroom: her favorite hymn. The hymn she usually sang with deep reverence and feeling. At such moments, Mother was united with her God, singing with her eyes closed, as if experiencing life in a different world. A world about which she often talked and dreamed.

But we, especially my brother Min and I, always just felt awed and scared listening to her. Especially on eerie nights like that.

I lifted my head to look at the wall. Dark and gloomy. A picture of Jesus crucified, almost the size of a window. Aligned on the same wall, a picture of His drooping head, coiled round with thorns. Red, soaked in blood. His eyes trying to look up, pleading, as though He were unable to bear the agony that beat down on Him.

Mother often talked about those two pictures. Pictures that always terrified us. Not seldom, we'd avoid walking through the living room if we had to walk by ourselves, unless we had a lamp turned way up in our hands.

To dissipate our fear, which of course Mother understood, she would tell us about Him, about His kindness towards children.

Outside, the rain pelted down harder and harder. Once in a while, the flash of lightning would penetrate the cracks in the wall.

Mother told us to move. We closed our school books, which we hadn't finished studying, and hurried into the bedroom. Mother was holding a book open, her beloved hymn book. Next to her, Father was leaning against the wall.

Mother leafed through the books in her hands, making her choice. Then she began a hymn, and we softly fell in, in different parts, forming a beautiful choir. Our eyes closely followed Mother's hand as it tapped to keep the beat. At the end of a hymn, Mother chose another one or we chose one ourselves. Mother picked out a cheerful canon, and we followed her with great spirit. And so it went on for several songs. We didn't realize that the rain outside was losing its force.

Suddenly Father stood up and opened the window.

For a moment, the wind spattered rain into the room. Father pulled the window shut. He went into the other bedroom. He passed by without paying any attention to us, hurrying away as if something was coming after him. He came back with an old raincoat. We were startled into silence watching Father's behavior.

"Where are you going in this rain?" Mother asked.

"The banks are gone," answered Father, indifferently, and hurried off.

"But it is still raining."

Father didn't answer. He disappeared behind the back door.

We heard a hoe banging against something in the kitchen. And steps hurrying outside close by the house. We were silent. The whole room seemed dead quiet.

"Your father never listens to anyone," grumbled Mother, as if to herself. "All he does is follow his own heart."

We were still mute. The book in Mother's hand dropped to the mat. All of a sudden a feeling welled up in my heart. Uneasiness mixed with fear. I imagined the slippery and narrow trail. To left and right, ravines, steep and deep. And desolate. What if Father slipped? Who would help him? Who would know? Who could hear a voice from deep below?

I stood up and headed for the door. "I'll keep Father company. He hasn't gone far yet."

But Is grabbed my hand.

"It's still raining. You'll get sick."

"No, it's stopped," I answered, trying to shake loose. But she tightened her hold with her other arm.

"Father!" I screamed, holding back my tears.

"Don't worry about Father. Nothing will happen. He'll be back soon." Slowly she released her hold. I leaned back against the wall. I was still worrying about Father.

Min started singing again. Then Mother joined in, followed by Is. My youngest brother had fallen asleep on the mat. Finally, I joined in the singing. And my worry about Father faded away.

Two hours had gone by since the church bell clanged six o'clock. Father still had not come home. Mother had begun to get uneasy. Every so often she would walk to the door and look out. Then she'd sit down again. Once again Father had become the focus of our thoughts, making us all uneasy.

"I hope Father hasn't gone to the sluice," Is said worriedly. I could imagine the old footbridge. The split palm truck hadn't been replaced in a long time. This footbridge was often used as a shortcut to the other side. The other path simply went through the village.

Mother urged us to go down to the yard and then to the road leading to the fields.

From time to time, Mother asked a passerby, but no one gave an answer that could calm our anxiety and fear.

"You go home, Is," said Mother. Then she took me along down the road.

It was dark in the valley, so dark that we had to walk slowly, groping for the path ahead. Mother walked behind me, holding onto my arm. To the left and right of the path, wild tangles of bushes concealed the cavernous mouth of the ravine. Far below we could hear water swirling by, showing that it had rained even harder upstream.

Shortly after climbing up the valley slope, we reached level ground. The change of air from the valley to the cold of the plateau made Mother shiver even more. She clutched the blanket that was wrapped around her still more tightly and quickened her steps.

Way up ahead, the hills lined with mist loomed white. Below them the flooded rice fields stretched out, so flooded that they look more like tiers of lakes with half-hidden tree trunks bobbing in them. From a higher embankment, we could see the water foaming down, drowning the rice fields still more. People who hadn't just rebuilt their levees were in luck. Those that had just be rewalled would probably be swept away by the torrent that roared so fiercely from terrace to terrace.

We were getting closer to our destination. I walked through every field, but Father was nowhere to be seen.

"Father!" I shouted from afar. I could hear my voice strike the foothills and echo back. I clambered to a higher bank and yelled "Faaather!" No answer. Only the sound of water falling from the higher fields. I got more and more anxious. My eyes made the rounds of all the terraces.

"Well, nothing's wrong," said Mother, as if grumbling, while checking each terrace with her eyes.

"Nothing's wrong, and here we are bothering your father," muttered Mother again. Her foot pressed the earth in front of her, as though testing it.

"Father! Faaather!" I shouted as I walked on. But all I heard in reply moments later was my own voice.

Suddenly a body loomed up from under the banks of the last terrace. Barely visible behind the falling water. I stopped in my tracks.

"Father!" I called out, full of hope.

"Heeey!"

"Father!" I yelled again, jumping down into the water and sloshing towards Father, whose body was only half visible. Then the body half disappeared under the banks.

"We'll go home in a moment. This one's almost done," Father answered. How glad I was, I alone knew. I still had my father.

"Almost all the banks caved in. This is the last one," said Father, lifting mud with both his hands.

I saw Mother coming around the edge of the rice field. Meantime, I helped Father finish repairing the embankment that the rain had washed away.