



Idrus

ANOTHER ROAD TO ROME

(*Jalan Lain Ke Roma*)

by Idrus

Translated by Mark Cammack*

Translator's Foreword

Idrus was born in Padang, West Sumatra, on September 21, 1921. Information on his early life is scanty. He intimates in his autobiographical *Perempuan dan Kebangsaan* [Women and Nationalism] (1949) that as a child he aspired to become a doctor. He was educated at the local Dutch-language primary school (HIS) and some time after graduation moved to Jakarta. From 1943 to 1944 and again from 1947 to 1950 he worked as an editor at the Balai Pustaka, a government printing house founded by the Dutch to promote Indonesian letters and continued during and after the Japanese occupation. There he met and worked with most of the important Indonesian authors of the day, including his friend and mentor H. B. Jassin. In 1961 Idrus left Indonesia for Malaysia, where he lived until he moved to Melbourne, Australia in 1965. Thereafter he was a senior lecturer in Modern Indonesian Literature at Monash University. Idrus died of a heart attack during a brief visit to Padang in May 1979, and is survived by his wife Ratna and six children.

Idrus is best known for his short novel *Surabaya* (1947), based on the events of November 1945 when British and Indonesian troops clashed in and around the city of Surabaya. Most of his best and most characteristic works appeared during the 1940s, including a group of stories known collectively as *Corat-Coret Dibawah Tanah* [Scratches Underground] (1948), a story "Kisah Sebuah Celana Pendek" [The Story of a Pair of Shorts] (1948) and a novelette *Aki* (1950). His other major works include *Dengan Mata Terbuka* [With Open Eyes] (1961); *Hati Nurani Manusia* [Man's Inner Self] (1963); and *Hikayat Putri Penelope* [The Tale of Princess Penelope] (1974).

"Jalan Lain Ke Roma" first appeared in 1948 as a part of a collection of Idrus' writing from the beginning of the Japanese occupation entitled *Dari Ave Maria ke Djalan Lain Ke Roma*. It tells the story of Open and his lifelong struggle to understand and fulfill the charge given to him at birth to be *terus terang* (straightforward). The quest for *terus terang* leads Open from one extreme of innocence and guileless simplicity as a school teacher to the opposite extreme of brutal realism as a fiction writer. In the end he rejects both extremes and seems to discover the real *terus terang* in love for his wife and parents.

In an interview he gave in 1948, published in the weekly *Siasat* under the title "'Terus Terang'--Pedoman Idrus," Idrus gave his view of his role as a writer:

* I would like to thank my teacher Jeff Dreyfuss and Tim Behrend for their help and criticism on the translation and foreword.

People often ask me why I write at great length about the cow shit on the road when we are surrounded by beauty. Realism for me is something higher. The cow shit I depict can become the manure that fertilizes Indonesia and its people who have been sleeping for 350 years. We already have too many writers describing the gentle breezes.

This cow shit is the antithesis of the fantasies of an earlier era. I'm convinced that out of the present antithesis and the old thesis will emerge a synthesis. It is this synthesis that I'm pursuing, but I haven't yet achieved it.

The statement is practically identical with a conversation depicted in the story between Open and a publisher, when Open defends his preoccupation with the ugly as necessary to arouse the somnolent masses. In the story the antidote works; the tension produces a synthesis. But it is clear from the interview that, as of 1948, the same year "Jalan Lain Ke Roma" was published, Idrus did not feel that he had achieved the synthesis in himself.

ANOTHER ROAD TO ROME

Idrus

First Open was a primary school teacher, after that a *mualim*,¹ then a writer, and finally a tailor. As for his physical appearance, what is there to say? He had two legs, two arms, two ears, two eyes, and one nose. It's true he had two nostrils, but that's only natural. Open was like other men, not otherwise.

But as for his name--yes, of course there's a story behind the name. That can't be denied. Thousands of other names--Abdullah and Effendi, Al'aut and Binuwak--sound pretty and look nice written down. Critical readers will no doubt feel cheated if not told how Open got his name.

Obviously Open himself had no part in the name giving. At the time, he was still red; now and then he would let out a yell and his mother would rush up with a bared bosom and thrust a protruding nipple into the baby's mouth. Open would suckle contentedly, stop his screams, and eventually fall asleep.

The duty of name giving falls to fathers and mothers; and any who have been through it will confess it isn't an easy task. At first, Open's parents wanted to ask a *dukun*² what name would be best for the child. But they quickly discarded that idea. They were ashamed to have to do with dukuns, for in HIS³ they had learned that dukuns were charlatans, idiots, and to be avoided if one wished to be *selamat*.⁴ Next they thought of naming the child "Ali." But their neighbor was also named Ali and he was a scoundrel, a gambler, and a cock fighter. And they didn't want their child to end up a scoundrel and a cock fighter.

Then one night Open's father had a dream. He dreamt about New York City and its skyscrapers that reach the clouds, but, and who can say why, during the dream all he heard, over and over again, was a single Dutch word: *openhartig*.⁵ While bathing early the next day he was still hearing it, as if someone were shouting in his ear: *openhartig--openhartig--openhartig*. Even in the toilet, about which no one is *openhartig*, he kept hearing the whisper in his ear: *openhartig--openhartig--openhartig*.

When he told his wife she jumped for joy as high as the sky. "It's the whispering of the Lord, you fool. Our child must become straightforward⁶--*openhartig*. Let's call him Open."

1. *Mualim*: Moslem teacher.

2. *Dukun*: Javanese healer, shaman.

3. HIS: Hollandsch Inlandsche Scholen, Dutch language primary schools.

4. *Selamat*: safe, protected, prosperous.

5. The Dutch word *openhartig* means honest or straightforward.

6. The Indonesian word translated here as "straightforward" is *terus terang* (straight-clear), a concept that played an important part in Idrus' own think-

The father blinked his eyes. "What are you saying? Name the child Open? You're crazy!"

But as usual in such matters, the wife must and always does prevail. Thus Open was named Open. As to whether he would really grow up to be a straightforward man, *openhartig*, well, that must be left to others to decide, not Open. But when he heard from his mother the story of his name, Open decided that from then on he'd do his best to fulfill her wish, that is, do his best to be straightforward.

When he became a school teacher, Open remembered his mother's wish every day he entered the classroom. So he started every lesson with: "Good morning children. Yesterday I married a girl in this town. I deliberately didn't invite you because I knew you'd have nothing to offer. What can one expect from children? Hey, Amat! What's 41 x 41?"

Another time he told them at great length about an argument with his wife, how he was wearing only underpants and she was carrying a *golok*.⁷ One thing led to another until suddenly she was chasing him with the *golok* and he was scurrying out of her way. Open even tried reenacting the scene for the class. The children laughed. One said, "Ah, teacher's scared of his wife." Another said, "Pity the man, continually nagged by his wife."

Those of the first opinion were more numerous than those of the second, which is why from then on Open was dubbed *guru*⁸ *golok*. And because *golok* makes a nice rhyme with *goblok*,⁹ in the end he became *guru goblok*. After that he never stepped inside the classroom without some wiseacre shouting at the top of his lungs: "Good morning, *guru goblook . . . blok . . . blook*"; or rode his ancient bicycle into the school yard early in the morning without hearing from every direction the yell "*Goblook . . . goblook . . . goblook!*"

The most patient man eventually gets angry. Open was a man who always followed his heart. If his heart told him: grab a kid and hit him, then he'd grab the nearest kid and let him have it. To Open it seemed like a gentle enough blow. But blood ran from the child's ear.

That's why the kid's parents showed up at school, and why Open was yelled at by the principal, and why, to finish the story, Open was dismissed.

But before he left the accursed school, Open confronted the principal and firmly said: "You must admit one thing. I'm not *goblok*. All I did was tell the kids that my wife once chased me with a *golok*. I ran . . . and from then on the kids called me *guru goblok*. Why? God only knows. I don't."

With that he left, with bowed head. But no sooner had he stepped onto the main road than the raucous cry was raised louder than ever: "*Goodbye guru goblook . . . blok . . . blook.*"

Open didn't care to look back. That's the way Open was. Once he decided on a thing he didn't look back. So he climbed on his ancient bicycle and slowly headed for home.

ing. Although "straightforward" is the nearest English equivalent of *terus terang*, the Indonesian concept is more lofty and the term lends itself better to the philosophizing of Idrus and Open than does the rather mundane English word.

7. *Golok*: machete, bolo knife.

8. *Guru*: teacher, term of address for a teacher.

9. *Goblok*: stupid.

It wouldn't do to leave out the story of how the bike fell into Open's hands. Of course he didn't steal it. He bought the bicycle with his savings--bought it fair and square. Furthermore, if he *had* stolen it, he would have said so to anyone who cared to hear. Since he never said a word, there can be no doubt that he purchased the bicycle with his own sweat.

What Open did say was this. He had wanted to buy a bicycle for a long time. One day a fat Dutchman came to him with a bike. The Dutchman said he wanted to sell it and would Open like to buy? Open thought a moment, then said he would but that his savings amounted to only one hundred rupiah; would the Dutch gentleman sell for that price? The Dutchman said a hundred rupiah was enough, but the headlight would have to come off, the tires be replaced by bald ones, and the two pedals be removed. Open said that was all right and handed over the money. The next day he picked up a nearly naked bicycle. But it worked, which was all Open really cared about. And he was grateful to the Dutchman for blessing him with a bicycle.

In his present situation--jobless, chased out like a dog--he felt even more grateful. When he rode the bicycle he felt as if he were riding a much loved horse, which would be very useful as a companion in difficult times. Actually, from time to time he remembered to think of selling it.

With that thought Open felt relieved. Now he could turn his attention to other matters.

What in fact had happened? The children misbehaved, he hit one and made his ear bleed. He was fired and the children could go on happily studying at school. Where was the justice in that?

His mother had said, "Open, you must be straightforward in everything. In that way you can improve this world so full of lies."

And the counsel of his mother was one hundred percent true, Open believed. Everywhere he looked he met lies and well-concealed corruption.

The schoolroom, as Open saw it, was the best place to plant the seeds of straightforwardness. That's why he had become a teacher. But in the end, that's also why he was thrown out.

For the first time it occurred to Open that the world was filled with ingratitude. Jesus Christ had been crucified. The prophet Mohammad had been harassed and attacked.

When Open remembered the prophet Mohammed, he was overcome with an irrepressible desire to renounce the world, trade his trousers for a *sarong* and his cap for a *peci*.¹⁰ He rode his bicycle to the bookstore and bought Mohammad Yunus' translation of the Qur'an. That began his life as a mualim.

But there were still difficulties to be overcome before he could achieve his purpose. The first was his wife. Women can only be upset by such news as Open brought home that day. What does quitting work mean for a wife? No more comforts, no fire in the kitchen, shame before the neighbors.

The fight was terrific. But all would have been of no consequence if Open's wife hadn't asked:

10. *Sarong*: piece of cloth fastened at the hips and worn over the lower part of the body. *Peci*: round black hat worn by men. The sarong and peci are the expected attire of devout male Moslems in Indonesia.

"Why did they call you guru goblok?"

Open, faithful to his promise to his mother, told all. When his wife heard that her name had been paraded before the class, she could restrain herself no longer. She snatched the Qur'an from Open's hand, tore it to pieces, and threw it into the fire.

Well, when fighting reaches the point of burning one another's treasured possessions, from that point on every road back is shut tight--except divorce.

Seething with anger Open left his wife and headed for the junk-dealer to sell his bicycle. The bike had cost him one hundred rupiah; now no one wished to buy it for more than thirty-five. One of the dealers said that all he wanted was the frame, since the tires were bald, the pedals were gone, there was no carrying rack, and the wheels were rusted. Another happened to be interested only in the wheels, because the frame was bent, the tires were bald, and everything else was missing. Another one piped up and said that all he really wanted were the pedals; but, when he saw there were none, he changed his mind and bought the spokes. In the end Open sold the bicycle for thirty-five rupiah and with the money went home to his parents' village.

The village was like other villages--no lights, no bookstore, no outhouse. When Open's bowels gave him trouble he squatted on a dike; and while fiddling with a rice straw, out came everything that troubled him. But one day, while fiddling with a rice straw, he was discovered by a village girl. Open was so ashamed that he ran all the way home with his stomach still in knots. Once home, he stamped his foot and shouted at his mother: "We have to have an outhouse. I can't stand it like this. Surtiah passed by and made me feel so embarrassed."

Open's mother agreed to his request. She thought: "Poor Open, just divorced from his wife--I'll do whatever he asks, so he'll be happy and can quickly forget his bitter past."

That's the way it is with mothers, always loving to their children, always concerned about their children. But in fact with Open there was really no need to worry. Once he had the thirty-five rupiah, he no longer remembered what was past--not his wife whom he'd just divorced, not the principal who had abused him, not even the bicycle that now belonged to the junk-dealer and which was still there on his eyelids.

That's how Open was. He quickly forgot the past and never thought about the future. He was a man of the moment. If time moved ahead, he moved ahead with time. And if time stopped . . . well, Open would long since have departed this world.

No. Open's thoughts were not as his mother supposed. He had merely been very embarrassed by Surtiah, nothing more. That alone was why he had pressed his mother to build an outhouse.

Could there have been some other reason? There was, but since Open himself hadn't breathed a word, it wasn't certain. Wasn't there something suspicious in the way Open ran home with his stomachache still in his stomach, and in the way he pressed his mother for the outhouse? Wasn't there something suspicious in his being embarrassed by Surtiah over something that one doesn't have to be ashamed of in the village?

Surtiah was a true village girl. Her toes were splayed and her palms had bumps--not from mosquito bites but from the bite of a hoe-handle. In one thing only was she like the city girls--her large breasts. But here again the reasons were different. When city girls have large breasts it is from dancing and fun.

Surtiah's breasts were large because her blood was healthy, because her body was active every day, because of hoeing and harvesting rice and lugging baskets of rice to her parents working in the fields.

It's true she didn't have a pretty face. But that's not so important when love is about to blossom. That is, if we can call Open's feelings "love."

Open himself had forgotten his meeting with Surtiah. He spent his time in reverie. His thoughts entered the realm of abstraction. "What is the purpose of life on earth? Straightforwardness, as his mother said?" "Yes," he answered. "By returning to the classroom to spread the seeds of straightforwardness?" "No."

"What is religion?" "Purity," answered Open. "Where does Purity come from?" "From truth," he said. "How does one find truth?" "Through straightforwardness." "How best to spread the seeds of straightforwardness?" "By becoming a mualim," answered Open.

So Open buried his face in religious books. He learned the twenty attributes¹¹ by heart, repeated the Yasin¹² every day, did the five prayers without fail, and soon became known in the village as the young mualim newly arrived from the city.

No one becomes great overnight. One must begin at the beginning. Then slowly, step by step, one becomes known and establishes oneself as a great philosopher, a great writer, a great prophet, or even a great mualim.

Open realized this. And with a reluctant heart he had to begin all over again as a teacher, teaching children to recite their ABCs¹³--but this time as a teacher of religion. Nevertheless, what had happened before now happened again--that is, he was once again faced with a classroom of impudent children.

The first months there were no incidents. The children roared their ABCs like cars roaring down a highway at sixty kilometers per hour. Soon Open was able to set aside the primer and begin to teach the foundations of Islam.

One of the foundations is the twenty attributes, that is, the twenty certain and unsearchable attributes of Allah. These the student must swallow whole, without any proofs such as offered by Spinoza. Just like swallowing quinine tablets--though they taste bitter, they give hope for recovery.

As with all Islamic studies in the village or the *langgar*,¹⁴ the twenty attributes must be learned by heart and chanted: *ujud, qidam, baqa* . . .¹⁵ and so forth, on through the twentieth.

Unfortunately for Open, one of his students was Javanese. Like all full-blooded Javanese, this boy had difficulty pronouncing the letter "a" at the end of a word. And so in chanting the twenty attributes, he would begin: *ujud, qidam, baqa* . . . at which point Open would stop him with: My dear child, it's not *baqa* but *baqa* . . . a . . . a . . .

The Javanese would chant again *ujud, qidam, baqa* . . . *ujud, qidam, baqa* . . . One of the other students, annoyed that the lessons was being held up so long by the Javanese, waited for a chance to vent his anger. And when the Javanese

11. The twenty attributes of Allah.

12. Yasin: Koranic verse commonly used as a prayer.

13. The children are learning the Arabic alphabet.

14. *Langgar*: neighborhood prayer house.

15. *Ujud*: being; *qidam*: preexisting; *baqa*: everlasting.

began to chant, ujud, . . . the angry pupil loudly chimed in ujud, qidam, bacco, cigarette, cigar. . . . Hearing this, the class burst into laughter. Several of them repeated the whole thing: ujud, qidam, bacco, cigarette, cigar.

Open's face became red with anger and he hit the impudent child. Luckily, the incident did not bring an early end to his career as a religious teacher and a mualim.

Open, looking very sad, told his mother what had happened. At first she tried to comfort him. But then she thought to herself rather cheerfully, "It's no longer your responsibility to comfort a child as old as Open. He needs the comfort of a wife." Without even thinking she said: "Open, how would you like to marry again, have someone you could pour out your feelings to? I'm an old woman now, and sometimes I don't understand you. How about if I ask Surtiah?"

On hearing the name Surtiah, Open remembered their first meeting, when he was squatting on the dike emptying his stomach and fiddling with a rice straw. He remembered how embarrassed he was, running home clutching his belt. In fact, he still felt embarrassed--which is why he said, "I'd be ashamed."

His mother, who didn't understand the direction of Open's thoughts, said, "What are you ashamed of, child? Our family is better than hers. You're a mualim. Surtiah is just an ordinary village girl. I'll speak with her parents."

With fairy-tale speed Surtiah was, two weeks later, beside Open. And when he smelled her sweet breath, he knew his mother's choice was right.

One day Open took Surtiah to the city. There they met another mualim. The odd thing about this mualim was he didn't wear a sarong. Instead he wore pants like any clerk in an office. He didn't wear a peci either. His hair was smeared with 4711 and was combed like a college student's. At first Open was disappointed--Surtiah even more so. But when the city mualim spoke of religion and truth and the purpose of life, Surtiah knew, and so did Open, that clothes were not the measure of the wisdom and greatness of a mualim.

The city mualim said: "Many people misunderstand. Clothes for example. They say a mualim shouldn't wear pants. But nowhere in the Qur'an or any other religious book is there a single line forbidding pants. That's why I wear them on purpose, to combat this general view. People also say a mualim shouldn't write--which is why I write."

"Write?" asked Open. The truth is, he asked not because he was surprised but because for the last few days he himself had been considering that very thing. There was so much he wanted to say to so many people. A classroom could hold only thirty, maybe forty, pupils. At most, seventy villagers could study religion with him. But by writing it is possible to speak to thousands. So he asked, "What do you write?"

"Everything, even novels," the city mualim answered.

This time Open was surprised. "Novels?"

"Yes," answered the mualim. "Love stories between a girl and a boy for instance. The usual thing, but with content . . . content."

With that the conversation ended. Open and Surtiah went back to the village. Not long afterwards came yellow-skinned, slant-eyed men, short, wearing khaki and high boots and carrying all sorts of weapons of death. Everyone became very poor. Open's mualim clothes were in tatters. There was neither money nor cloth for new ones. Finally, when Open's sarong was nothing but a rag, Surtiah said to him one night: "There are plenty of pants. Wear them. Remember the mualim in the city?"

Open hugged his dear wife and the next day, and the day after, and every other day, he wore pants. The villagers were dumbfounded. Some of them whispered, "Look, our mualim's gone mad." Others dared to say, "Our mualim is a Japanese spy. Be careful! Don't go near his house. Don't let the children study with him any more."

In the end this became intolerable, especially for Surtiah. One night she said: "Let's go to the city. There you can try writing. Remember the mualim in the city."

Open hugged his dear wife and they left for the city. Open was going to become a writer.

The first person they went to visit after they arrived was their friend the mualim who always wore pants. Open merely intended to chat with him about his work as a writer in hopes of learning something helpful. But unfortunately the mualim wasn't home. His wife said he had been arrested several months earlier by the Japanese. He was arrested because he refused to cooperate, he refused to read the sermon prepared by the Japanese Bureau of Religious Affairs.

After hearing that, Open's perspective on everything was suddenly very different. When he saw someone in the street wearing gunny-sack pants he asked himself, why? When he met a beggar in the street he didn't immediately hurl insults--idler! monkey!--but asked in his heart, why? And when he saw men die on the bank of the Ciliwung River . . . why? And when he saw people walking past the corpses barely noticing, he asked himself twice, why? why?

He recalled the mualim who had been arrested by the Japanese. When he again asked himself why, everything suddenly became clear as day. The Japanese hadn't come to bring prosperity. The Japanese had come to rape religious freedom, to starve and strip the Indonesian people naked. And the Indonesian people only slept, just as they had slept for the last three centuries. The words shot out of his mouth like a torpedo out of a submarine. "The people of Indonesia must be awakened! awakened! awakened!"

At nearly the same moment he imagined his mother's face:

"Open, you must be straightforward."

From then on Open became another man. Or rather he was no longer a man, but the boiler of an overheated locomotive ready to explode, pulverizing everything in its path, all the depravity of the human race.

Sitting behind his desk with a blank piece of paper, Open saw the sleeping Indonesian people industriously planting castor-oil trees. And above them in the air he saw airplanes, oiled with the same castor oil, dropping bombs on the people planting trees.

He envisioned before his eyes peasant farmers stooped over, harvesting their paddy, and he unconsciously heard screaming in his ears the words of Multatuli: "De rijst is niet voor dengenen, die zij gepland hebben."¹⁶

Next he saw the incidents that were now a daily occurrence on the banks of the Ciliwung River: stark-naked men struggling over the corpse of a dog that happened to have been carried downstream by the current. Open wrote on his paper:

16. Multatuli was the nom de plume of Eduard Douwes Dekker, author of the celebrated novel *Max Havelaar*. The quoted sentence means, "The rice is not for those who plant it."

Corpses fight over corpses.

Open looked in front of him. The dog's body was being eaten by the man who had been lucky enough to grab it. He wrote again:

Corpses eat corpses.

Open saw the others watching enviously as their friend ate alone. The more fortunate one showed not the slightest intention of sharing with the others. All humanitarian feelings were gone, just as all feelings of shame were gone. Open wrote on his sheet of paper:

Dogs eat dogs.

When he had finished eating, the man leaned against a shady tree. He slowly closed his eyes, then suddenly rolled over on the ground dead, both hands clutching his belly. And Open wrote:

Corpses become corpses.

The others cheered. Strollers wandered by smoking KOOA cigarettes. And Open wrote:

The sleeping smoke KOOAs.

Finally, Open saw his mother. "Open, you must be straightforward in all things."

Open began to write--write frantically. His hand could not keep up with his thoughts. He wrote and wrote and finally was ready with a composition.

With this composition he went to an editor. The man was small and thin. His face said "masturbation" and his clothes said Japanese money. But he had a good heart and told Open: "This is dangerous for you. You should hide it--or burn it. Why write about cow shit when you have before you all the beauty of nature. Look at Priangan, look at Selektta near Malang, and surely your outlook on life will change completely. Surely you will laugh and be happy. Life is not as bad as you have pictured it."

Open went home. He said to himself: "It fits! A thin face and an expensive coat." He went home with rancor in his heart.

At home, Open thought: The editor said I write cow shit. He's right. It is cow shit. It looks bad, but if it's spread around as fertilizer it makes the trees grow. And the trees are the Indonesian people who are sound asleep.

Open wrote another piece and hid it away in the folds of Surtiah's *kain*.¹⁷

He quickly came to know the joy of writing. But one day Surtiah said to him: "Kak,¹⁸ your stories are very good, but we're nearly starving to death. Find yourself a job."

At first Open responded kindly. But after a while his answers became sharp. Then one day, while Open was busy writing and Surtiah was pressing him to look for work, Open threw down his pen and shouted: "You're always pestering me. You think I don't work? Get out. Go back to the village."

Open meant what he said. Surtiah felt that indeed she'd better go. Hopefully Open would some day need her again and she would return to the city. But for

17. *Kain*: here, woman's wrap-around skirt.

18. *Kak*: older sibling, intimate term of address for husband or friend.

now, she'd go home to the village. Sadly Surtiah returned to her parents' house.

Open felt relieved to be free of his wife. He continued to write--every day another short story. It made no difference that they weren't published; he must listen to the whisperings of his heart and remember the words of his mother. And for those two things it didn't matter that his wife was gone. She could be dead as far as he was concerned.

Only one of Open's stories was published. The Japanese Cultural Center had sponsored a fiction contest. Open submitted an entry. He had once heard a story and now he wanted to write it down. The story was about a Papuan who lived one hundred years ago. Like all Papuans he worshipped an idol. But the idol never did him any good. His luck at fishing was always poor. Dozens of times he would bow before the idol but his catch remained as small as ever. Finally he decided that worshipping the idol was useless. Why prostrate yourself before a god if he can't help you.

The Papuan left his village and came to the shore. There he met men such as he'd never before seen. These men covered their bodies with cloth, so they were not stark naked like him. But what puzzled him most was how many fish they caught. One day he plucked up his courage and asked: "Who gives you so many fish?" The men all pointed to the sky and answered together: "Tuhan Allah, Tuhan Allah."¹⁹

The desire to know more pierced the Papuan's heart and from that moment he began to study the Lord who gave so many fish. Eventually he embraced Islam because he was convinced that there was nothing on earth besides Tuhan Subhanahu Wata'ala²⁰ who could determine the fate of man.

Open's story was published. It was even chosen for the first prize. But later the Japanese censor regretted that he had let it through. Too late he realized that the story was very dangerous, that it was a most violent attack on Tenno Heika.²¹ Too late. Not, however, too late to arrest Open.

Open was asked to come to the Kenpeitai.²² Instead of being politely questioned he was immediately beaten and forced to confess that the story was an attack on Tenno Heika.

Actually there was no need for violence. For Open after all would say straightforwardly that such was the purpose of the story. But he said he hadn't just made the story up. He'd actually heard it and maybe it was true.

After he confessed, Open was beaten again. Blood covered his whole body. He was made to bathe in cold water until he was stiff and then to sit out under the hot sun. After several days the wounds had healed of themselves. Apparently that was the Japanese way of treating wounds: drench them until they're stiff, sun them until they're baked, and they heal themselves. There was no need for iodine, tincture of iodine or salve--only the cures of nature. It was almost beyond belief.

After that Open was locked in a cell. His body became thinner and thinner. But luckily he wasn't beaten any more.

19. *Tuhan Allah*: The Lord God.

20. *Tuhan Subhanahu Wata'ala*: The Glorious and Exalted Lord.

21. *Tenno Heika*: The (Japanese) emperor.

22. *Kenpeitai*: Japanese military police.

Locked up in the cell, Open realized for the first time the value of freedom. There are two types of freedom: bodily freedom and spiritual freedom. Bodily freedom can be taken away--as was happening to Open. But no one could take away his spiritual freedom. Though his body was surrounded on four sides by high walls, his thoughts were free to go anywhere. But is freedom the purpose of life? No, freedom is only a means to achieve that purpose. And what is that purpose?

For other people the answer might be different. But because Open had been educated in a Moslem society, and had once become a mualim, there could be only one answer. The purpose of life is to honor Allah's commandments in order to go to heaven and there meet and be united with Allah.

At other times he remembered his mother: Open, you must be straightforward in everything.

Actually she was saying the same thing. God . . . Purity . . . Straightforwardness . . . Truth. To be sure, his mother was no longer a simple village woman. She had attended HIS in the city. But because she associated with simple folks she expressed things simply too. Though she called it Straightforwardness rather than God or Purity or Truth, actually she meant the same thing.

Since becoming a writer, Open had read many books on philosophy. Locked up in the Kenpeitai prison, eating, drinking, defecating, and urinating, all in the same tiny cell, Open sometimes almost went mad with despair. When his suffering was worst there was only one philosopher that could speak to his misery: Boethius. At times he felt as if he himself were Boethius, imprisoned for trying to do good to his fellow men, imprisoned by the good itself.

Boethius had said that misery itself is nothing. Only the wrong attitude toward misery causes men to despair and feel themselves the victims of fate.

The words of Boethius were etched in Open's heart as a truth; and were a comfort to him once he was convinced that his mission in prison was to overcome his wrong attitude toward suffering. Suffering was not the enemy, the enemy was his attitude. When he had freed himself of this attitude and saw his suffering for what it truly was, he gave thanks to God and thanks as well to Boethius.

That's how he endured with patience his misery in the Kenpeitai prison. And when the Republic of Indonesia was proclaimed, he was freed. It's true his body was a bit thin, but the contents of his thoughts had grown fat. This was no longer the same Open. This was an Open altogether different--more aware and able to view life more broadly. That's why he didn't go along with the revolution killing Japanese, Eurasians, and Chinese. Revolution, in his view, was good. But as soon as it revealed evil elements it had to be reined in and channeled in a better course, towards the same ideals. Revolution is good. Open himself had experienced a tremendous revolution in himself. Revolution is simply the consequence of a natural evolution, an evolution that takes the form of a slow and orderly exploitation. But revolution is not killing. Revolution means shaking those who dream and waking those who sleep and then taking a long leap toward the ideals.

Now Open's earlier manuscripts were all published. His name became known far and wide. Once or twice he got letters from readers threatening him if he dared to go on writing his filthy stories. There were others who called him a fool. But these were all exceptions. For the most part he won praise from all sides.

Open enjoyed reading his stories over again, but something in his heart told him he could never again write stories like that. If he were to write again it would be very different, more refined perhaps and more significant. But he couldn't write anything at all just now. For indeed he had wrestled a good deal with the

complexities of life, with the purpose of life--truth, purity, as well as what his mother called straightforwardness. Nonetheless, he sensed a void in his heart, a void he must fill with a more decisive philosophical system.

No. For now he would release his earlier manuscripts one at a time and not try to write anything new. He was certain that some day the void in his heart would be filled and only then would he be able to write with renewed conviction.

When the revolution began to subside, Open was forced to look for work. The first job he found was as assistant to a tailor. But soon he learned to sew for himself.

His work brought him into contact with the dregs of every nation: English soldiers, Dutch soldiers, Gurkha²³ soldiers, Inlander²⁴ soldiers. Every day he was in contact with every form of evil in the world, but only as a spectator. If his soul were now the same as it had been earlier he would have written them all into short stories and novels. But now all he did was watch, record what he saw in his heart, analyze it and make it the substance of the philosophical system that would fill the void in his heart.

At night, before he slept, he was chased by shadows.

He'd see a Gurkha soldier killing a woman, robbing her of her jewelry and of her honor, buying cloth with the woman's money, and ordering Open to sew a shirt from it. A moment later a Dutch soldier would stand before him who spoke of nothing but bringing security to Indonesia, saying that he'd never trouble anyone, indeed he himself wouldn't harm a fly. There would also come to him an English soldier who cheerfully boasted of having just come from Bekasi where he had burned the village to the ground. That shadow would be replaced by an Inlander. This was not a human being that stood before Open. A human being is an individual and this man had not the slightest individuality. This soldier took great trouble to beg his captain for new clothes and then took no less trouble to beg Open to lower his price for sewing them. When Open refused, he was threatened with a bayonet. Open stayed calm and let himself be shot.

Open laughed. Then he said to himself: "Though wicked people retain the physical appearance of mankind, in their hearts they have become wild beasts."

In that way each night Open came to a new conclusion. He was certain that each of these conclusions was bringing him closer to the true straightforwardness, not the straightforwardness he had practiced as a primary school teacher.

Little by little, as the void in his heart was filled, his former desire to be alone and his egotism diminished.

Why had he sent Surtiah home? Because he didn't want his thinking disturbed with the problems involved in looking for a job. That is the essence of selfishness.

He no longer felt that way. On the contrary, from day to day he became increasingly convinced that Surtiah was essential to his spiritual life. She would no longer be a distraction for him. Surtiah was his backbone.

Open immediately wrote her a letter. Three days later she arrived with her father and mother. Open's mother came too.

23. Gurkha: Nepalese soldiers serving with the British army and deployed in Java in 1945-46.

24. Inlander: native, Indonesian.

Open's house was now bustling. For now at least, Open could no longer think the thoughts that had for so long preoccupied him. But he wasn't annoyed. He felt a change of this kind was necessary from time to time. And when the old people went back to their village, he felt that he had been left by people whom he loved dearly and who loved him.

Surtiah noticed this big change in her husband and was happy as she had never been before.