
CLARA

A short story by
Seno Gumira Ajidarma

translated by Michael H. Bodden¹

Maybe I'm a dog. Maybe I'm a pig—but I wear a uniform. You'll never know my true identity.

The woman sat before me. Her hair was dyed red. Actually brown. But people call it red. And the fact is, red has a different meaning for me. For years I've been indoctrinated with the idea that people who are red are dangerous.

So I had no reason to trust this woman who intentionally dyed her hair red. Maybe what was in her head was red as well. Maybe her heart was red too. Who knows? I had no reason to believe the words this woman spoke, even though in all honesty I'll admit her story was pretty harrowing.

She told her tale in language that was impossible to understand. Not because her Indonesian isn't good enough, since she has complete command of the language, but because it seems as if what she'd experienced and felt couldn't be put into sentences. Her pretty face was full of unimaginable emotional pain. I was almost moved even before she began to tell her tale. I could never have imagined that a human being should have to endure so great a burden of suffering merely because she was born a human being. Her story came falteringly. The sentences didn't follow one another. Her words were scattered about without being linked together so that I had to make sense out of

¹ My sincerest thanks to Benedict Anderson for his careful reading and numerous helpful suggestions which greatly improved the translations of both "Clara," and the essay, "Fiction, Journalism, History: A Process of Self-Correction," also published in this issue. Any remaining weaknesses are, of course, my responsibility. Translated and printed with permission of the author.

them myself. What kind of burden of suffering could a human being experience that would render her unable to speak coherently?

So, the story that you are about to hear isn't built from her sentences, but rather from mine. For years now I've been assigned to make reports and hardly any report was the truth. I've become an expert in making bitter truths turn magically into something agreeable and, contrariwise, making deeds that were actually patriotic turn into subversion—the main thing is they were always transformed according to the needs of the moment. And so, if it's just a matter of joining together sentences disconnected by suffering, for me it's a simple job.

* * *

Fires were already burning everywhere as my BMW sped along the toll road. They called me from home. "Don't come home," Mama said. She said our subdivision was surrounded, the neighbors' houses had been looted and torched, Papa, Mama, Monica, and Sinta, my sisters, were trapped in the house and couldn't get away. "Don't come home, save yourself, go directly to Cengkareng, fly to Singapore or Hong Kong, the main thing is get a ticket out of here. You always carry your passport, right? Leave the car in the parking lot. If you have to go to Sydney don't worry. The main thing is you'll be safe. Auntie and Uncle are there, you know," Mama continued.

It's true I'd often been out of the country recently. Running frantically here and there taking care of Papa's business which had nearly been bankrupted by loans in US dollars that suddenly ballooned out of control. I dug in my heels about not firing our workers. Aside from feeling bad about it, it would only cause disturbances anyway. Papa got all worked up. "We don't have any money to pay the workers, and besides production has come to a standstill and no one is buying. Right now the workers are living off subsidies from our offshore joint ventures. And the people there are already annoyed about having their profits snatched away, so how long will they be willing to pay workers who, practically speaking, aren't working any more?" I stood my ground. So Papa decided that I would be the one to try to ensure that the profits from our joint ventures in Hong Kong, Beijing, and Macao increased, so that what trickled down from them would be enough to keep our workers going, even though our production had ground to a halt. That's why I was always going back and forth out of the country with a passport continually in my bag.

But why should I run away now, while members of my family were trapped like rats in their own home? I raced along the toll road, heading for home as fast as I could. Of course I'd heard about all the recent disturbances. They called the students' demonstrations riots. Frankly speaking, I didn't know what was going on. I'd been too deeply submerged in business matters. I only glanced at the headlines in the newspapers. And even their meanings were never clear to me. Nevertheless, I was certain it wasn't the students who burned and looted the subdivisions, the shopping centers, and the passing automobiles. As a matter of fact, even non-students would have had no real reason to burn people's homes if others hadn't deliberately instigated the arson.

I stepped on the gas. My BMW raced along as though it were flying. To the left and right, I could see fires lighting up the night. The toll road was empty, my BMW flew along at 120 kilometers an hour. In less than ten minutes I would be home. But up ahead I saw a gang of people. It was really hard to stop the car. Would I have to hit them? Pedestrians weren't supposed to stand in the middle of the toll road, but I didn't want to run them over. I stepped on the brakes, pumping slowly in order to avoid rolling the car over. I braked little by little, and even so the wheels rubbing against the asphalt still screeched Skreeeeeeee!— which is often taken as a sign that the automobile owner is a macho show-off.

Once I'd come to a stop, I noticed there were about twenty-five people. All men.

"Open the window," somebody said.

I opened the window.

"A chink!"²

"A chink!"

They were shouting as though they'd discovered a diamond. Before I could even think, the front windshield of the BMW was smashed in. Good lord, can they really hate the Chinese so much? Yes I'm of Chinese ancestry, but what's wrong with being born Chinese?

"I'm Indonesian," I said, but I was shaking.

² The word used here in Indonesian is the frequently derogatory term, *Cina*, a term which gained common currency during the New Order period. Previously, a more polite, more neutral term, *Tionghoa*, was used. The term *cina* is repeated in this story in the narrated thought of the Chinese-Indonesian protagonist, Clara, which, given its often derogatory tenor, strikes Benedict Anderson as highly unlikely and the sign of a possible failure in characterization by the author—unless the author indeed intended to show the internalization of the regime's language among Indonesians of Chinese ancestry. I feel that there is a third possibility which emerges from the internalization of the predominantly negative term, coupled with the intentional effacing of the previous term, *Tionghoa* (to the extent that younger generation Indonesians find it a peculiar term—when they are even aware of its existence). I have, on many occasions, heard the word *Cina* used to refer to Indonesians of Chinese descent without the note of contempt so apparent in other circumstances. On a recent trip to Indonesia, I also heard Chinese Indonesians debating whether they thought the term *Cina* was derogatory or not. It is possible that some Indonesians, including Indonesian Chinese, have accepted the term but are modifying the dominant derogatory thrust in everyday usage, in effect giving it a wider range of connotations. This would seem a natural linguistic process, given that New Order Indonesia sanctioned only one term to discuss a group of people whose existence would possess a wide range of associations for many Indonesians. My sense is that in everyday usage, the initial negative connotation of *Cina*, though by no means lost, is nonetheless now undergoing at least a partial transformation. I am further convinced of this by the slippage in Ariel Heryanto's usage of *Tionghoa* and *Cina* in "Nonpribumi: Dibiarkan, Dibaurkan, atau Dibubarkan", an article included in *Pergulatan Intelektual Dalam Era Kegelisahan* (Yogyakarta: Kanisius, 1999), a volume in memory of Y. B. Mangunwijaya. Careful to use *Tionghoa* in the initial pages of his article, Heryanto nonetheless has recourse to the term *Cina* in several instances that are difficult to characterize as derogatory, given their deployment as parallel terms in lists of ethnic or national identifiers. For example, "orang keturunan Cina dipaksa menempati Kampung Cina, orang Arab di kampung Arab, orang Eropa di kawasan Eropa dan seterusnya." (189) Or "Di sana mereka dijejali makanan Padang, Cina, Jepang, atau Italia..." (193). Thus, I am translating the term *Cina* differently, either as "Chink" or "Chinese", according to who uses the word in the story.

CRACK! Someone pounded the hood of the car. I was pulled roughly out through the window. I was thrown down on the toll road like a gunny sack.

“Shit! Slant-eyed like this and you still have the nerve to say you’re Indonesian!”

My cheek was plastered to the scored surface of the toll road. I saw rough and grimy feet wearing flip-flops, some wearing nothing at all, and only one wearing shoes. Their feet were grimy and covered with dried mud.

“Get up!”

I stood up, teetering because of my high platform shoes. I saw someone peer into the car. He rummaged around in the *dashboard* glove compartment, then took my bag. Dumped the contents out on the road. Out fell my wallet, make-up, mirror, eyebrow brush, eyelash comb, lipstick, hand phone and the cinema ticket I’d used to go to the movies with my boyfriend the previous night. The wallet was taken immediately; they divided up the money, half-scuffling over it. A million rupiahs in *cash* vanished in the blink of an eye. It didn’t matter. The car could still be driven with a smashed windshield, and I didn’t need *cash*.

There was a picture of my boyfriend in my wallet. The man who took the wallet pulled the photo out and then came up to me.

“Did you ever do it with him?”

I just kept quiet. No matter what he meant, I didn’t have to answer him.

SMACK! I was slapped. My lip stung. Perhaps it had split.

“Answer me! You did, didn’t you? You Chinks have no religion!”

I didn’t have to answer.

CRACK! I was slapped till I collapsed.

Someone else came up to look at the photo.

“My God! Her boyfriend’s Javanese!”

I thought of my boyfriend. I never cared whether he was Javanese or Chinese, I only knew that I loved him.

“Look her over! See if she’s still a virgin or not!”

Automatically I tried to move my hands to hold down the tight mini-skirt I was wearing, but they couldn’t move. It turned out there were already two men holding down my left and right arms. I felt my skirt being pulled down. I kicked wildly. Then two more pairs of hands caught hold of my legs.

“Nooooo! Heellpppp!” I screamed. The grimy bottom of a foot was jammed into my mouth, silencing me. The expression on the face of the person who put his foot in my mouth was icy cold. Dozens of hands touched and squeezed my body.

“Keep your mouth shut, Chink!”

My skirt had already slipped off. My panties were grabbed and torn to shreds . . .

* * *

The woman wept. I should have felt for her. Should have. At least I feel moved by the dime novels sold on street corners. But getting emotional isn't a good idea if you're an operative like me. I had to make detailed notes that were objective, descriptive, as well as checking to see whether or not she had some hidden motive. I couldn't just take things as they seemed, I had to be suspicious, always anticipating possibilities, laying traps, fishing out evidence, and driving her to exhaustion so that she'd quickly confess what her real motives were. Don't be too quick to trust your feelings. Feelings can deceive you. Feelings are subjective. And after all, I was not the subject here. I was only a tool. Just a robot. To hell with a conscience. I was only an operative who filed reports, and a report has to go into all the details, right?

"After your panties were pulled off, then what happened?"

She started crying again. But she still kept telling her story in fits and starts. It was really hard to pull this woman's story together. She didn't just cry. Sometimes she fainted. What could I do, I had to keep interrogating her.

"I have to know what happened after your panties were removed. If you don't tell me, what am supposed to put in my report?"

* * *

I don't know how long I was unconscious. When I opened my eyes, all I could see were the stars. In the midst of such a vast universe, who cared what happened to me? I was still sprawled on the toll road. The dank breeze brought with it a charred smell. I turned and saw that the BMW had been burned out. I felt as though for the first time I was seeing fire as a kind of beauty that only brought disaster. The contents of my bag were still scattered about. I saw my hand phone light blinking rapidly, a sign that someone had left a message.

I wanted to get up, but there was a sharp pain in my groin. It was like a spear had been thrust deeply between my thighs.

Oh, I can't express how much my heart ached. I have no words for it. I don't know the language for it. I only know Indonesian and enough English to do business. People say, Chinese is very rich in terms for describing feelings, but I can't speak a word of Chinese in any dialect, except those words that concern prices. I'm only a Chinese woman born in Jakarta who from the time she was just a little girl was plunged into the world of business. I'm not a linguist, nor a poet. I don't know if the Comprehensive Indonesian Dictionary contains the words to express the pain, the humiliation, the bitterness, and the insult felt by a woman who's been gang raped by many men—because she is a Chinese woman. My boyfriend, on the other hand, is so shy even about kissing me on the lips. My groin hurt, but I knew it would heal quickly. But the wounds in my heart, must I carry those with me to the grave? Just who do you suppose would defend us? Can it really be that we were born just to be hated?

I couldn't move until a stooped old woman came over to me. She immediately covered my body with a cloth.

"Forgive our boys," she said, "they really hate the Chinks."

I didn't have time to ponder the meaning of that sentence. I wrapped the cloth around my body and unsteadily headed for the spot where my belongings lay scattered. I picked up my hand phone and heard my father's message: "If you're hearing this message, I hope you're already in Hong Kong, Sydney, or at least in Singapore. Brace yourself, Clara, your two sisters, Monica and Sintia, were thrown into the fire after being raped. Mama was raped too, then killed herself, jumping from the fourth floor. Maybe I'll follow her. I don't know whether it's worth living any longer. I feel I just want to die."

* * *

She was sobbing again. Yet no tears fell. Then she fainted. I ignored the fact that she was sprawled out on the chair. She was only wearing a cloth. An old woman from a *kampung* by the toll road had helped her. She was sprawled naked by the roadside, the old woman said. I'd already reported it to my commander. Over the phone he shouted, "Another one! There've been a lot of cases like this today. Hold her there. Don't let anyone know. And be especially sure the reporters and NGO's don't get wind of it!"

An office boy put smelling salts under her nose. She came to again.

"So you're trying to say you were raped?"

She stared intently at me.

"Yet you just said that you lost consciousness immediately after . . . what was it . . . your panties were pulled off?"

She stared at me, a look of disbelief on her face.

"How can you prove that you were gang raped?"

In her eyes I saw an emotion that could not be put into words. Her lips were agape. Of course, they were split and bruised from being hit. But that didn't mean the woman wasn't attractive. She must be rich. After all, she drives a BMW. A woman executive. I want to be rich too, but even though I've put the squeeze on people here and taken bribes there, my situation still hasn't improved any and I still haven't managed to get rich. I've never even had a ride in a BMW. And of course I feel a certain way about the rich—and especially if they're Chinks. I hate them. *Yeah*. The cloth covering her slipped down a bit, and I got a glimpse of her shoulder, so white . . .

"Don't be too quick to make an issue of being raped. Rape is the hardest thing to prove. If something goes wrong you'll be accused of slander."

Anger flared from her eyes for an instant. That she had the guts to report all this in the first place already showed that she was a woman with backbone.

"I want to go home," and she stood up. She had only a cloth draped around her shoulders. It wasn't quite long enough—I could see her feet, so white and unblemished.

"Just sleep there for now. Things are still unsettled out there—shops are being burned and lots of Chinese women are being raped."

"No, I want to go home."

"Who's going to take you home when the riots are still going on? You want to walk home like that? When even police posts are being burned everywhere?"

She didn't say a thing.

"Sleep over there," I pointed to a long bench, "tomorrow morning you can go home."

I saw her walk to where I'd indicated. In the light of the lamp, the curves of her body were silhouetted. She was really beautiful and attractive, even though her hair was dyed red. I, too, felt like raping her. I already told you, maybe I'm a dog, maybe I'm a pig—but I wear a uniform. You'll never know who I really am. The problem is: according to the scientists, no animal commits rape.

Of course, I don't need to report this one little thing to my commander. I can only tell it in all truth to you, but with this proviso—it's all a secret. So don't tell anyone.

Jakarta, 26 June 1998