

AMONG THE FAMILY
(fragment)

by

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(translated by Mrs. S.U. Nababan)

Everybody was happy to see me come, especially grandmother, although it was only several months ago that I had left home. I was the prodigal son! And grandma would treat me just as she had always done: she would pamper me, and, just as before, at the early stages of our reunion, she would be very nice to me. She would offer me sate,⁽¹⁾ chicken, dendeng;⁽²⁾ yes, it was always this way. Whatever I asked for, she would give me. But this lasted only for a few days after our reunion. When I had been home for a week or so with my brother, mother, and grandma, she would start to grumble. Her voice could be heard as far as the mosque (our house was close to the mosque); every so often, even as far as the market-place (our house faced the marketplace, which was deserted most of the time).

When the "honeymoon" was over, I would just smile when I heard grandma's grumbling. And mother would look at me with a mocking smile. A smile of understanding too. We were a younger generation, and grandma was just like an old wreck whom we ignored, or like a piece of old car-junk beaten by children, when she started being angry like that.

I was a spoilt child. I want to point out this fact because I realized it very clearly even then. Grandma always came with food in her hands. Mother did not like this. Mother's favorite pastime used to be to beat me till the red streaks of her fingerprints appeared on my back. That was when I was still small. Mother beat me when she found out that I had been bathing in the river whose water was yellowish and dirty (I realized how dirty it was only when I had grown much older), or when she found me fighting (and mother always made my opponent win, strange!), or when I was doing other forbidden things. However, the more often mother beat me, the harder I tried to find ways to do things behind her back.

"Yip", grandma always called me that when she saw me eat greedily, "Don't act so spoilt! Now who else would eat his fish

(1) A kind of shishkebab of roasted pieces of meat skewered on bamboo sticks.

(2) Fried slices of seasoned dried meat.

without rice like you do!"

Upon hearing that I just ate more of the fish and meat, because grandma herself gave them to me. In fact grandma was proud to see me eat so much. I ate even more when there was meat or chicken. Well, didn't grandma buy those pieces of meat herself?

And now, when I came back from Djakarta (home for a vacation) and when I ate as greedily as I ever used to when there was food, grandma said laughingly (with the same feeling of pride she had had before): "How is it, Yip? Aren't you ashamed of yourself for eating meat so greedily at other people's houses? (I had room and board in Djakarta.) What will people say!"

Unlike the old days mother supported me by saying: "That's all right, isn't it, Yip? There is nothing to be had in Djakarta". (Mother knew that I had room and board in a shack with a poor family.)

"Why nothing?"

"Well, just about. Over there I only eat rice with tempe(3)," I said, while throwing another piece of meat into my mouth.

But my younger brother always looked miserable. He had been that way since he was a baby. His body was thinner than mine, although I could not be called a fat person. Only his stomach was swollen. When he was only a small child he did not live with us, but with father. At that time father was a teacher. It was during the Japanese occupation. Life as a teacher during that period was on a level with that of the poorest man in my town today.

And now my father owned a stone house. Strangely enough he still kept the eating habits he had acquired during the Japanese occupation (only now there was rice, pure, unmixed rice), when it was still wartime, and father had just been released from prison. He still ate very little rice, with not much of a side dish.

It still puzzled me why my father had divorced my mother. But then, I was only three years old when they separated. It was impossible for me to remember!

Now father had children by his second wife. And my mother had an adopted child, because she had no children from her present husband.

(3) Fermented soyabean cake.

As for this adopted child (who was thus my adopted little brother), I could tell a long story. I could even start another book about him. This child was only five and a half years old, but he had experienced so much already that he could have a story all of his own.

I can still remember how his mother came to us a week after his father had been shot to death by the Dutch (it was during the war), and in his last sufferings the unfortunate man had been thrown on the street, where he had been run over by a truck. This father was a badjigur⁽⁴⁾ hawker, who sold his wares at the corner of the market-place every afternoon. That was before the war had crept to our town. On quiet nights, when it was not market day, his corner was always the busiest in the place. Yes, he was only a badjigur hawker. But the Dutch never cared what a man's occupation was: when they were thirsty for blood and eager to kill they just killed anybody around. That was what happened to this badjigur hawker. He was our neighbor.

"I plan to go to Bandung," his wife said to my mother. "But I cannot take the child with me. It would be too bothersome. And besides, you cannot have any children yourself, so....."

My stepfather had wanted a child of his own very badly. But surely he did not want this one-year-old child, who was very hideous besides! Yes, he was simply hideous! His entire body was covered with sores; he had an infection in his ears, and he smelled horribly. However, my mother accepted him. And the weak little boy, who did not have any hope of surviving another year, was put in a pen, which my stepfather had built for this purpose. And all day long, if he was not crying for food or playing with the bars of his pen, he was sleeping very soundly. Yes, very soundly.

But now, this little boy with his sores was no more. There was a small girl in his place, who was healthy and chubby. And she was naughty too. Her laugh was loud and she was very spoilt.

This spoilt child had a story of her own too. She seemed to take it for granted that grandma spoilt this adopted sister of mine. So, among us children, only my younger brother had never been pampered by grandma. He always looked miserable and sickly. His chest was like a bird's, thin and weak. His physical condition was such that I suspected that he might be suffering from a serious disease, perhaps t.b.

Then there was my grandfather (I mean my "step-grandfather",

(4) A kind of hot drink with ginger and other spices.

who was my mother's stepfather and grandma's second husband. My own grandfather was separated from her long before I was born. Long before even my parents got married. I myself did not know him very well; in my whole life I had only met him at the most three times). Well, my grandfather then had dental plates which I would often hide when he forgot to put them back on again after he had taken a bath. Then he would get very angry and I would just laugh. And I would open the palm of my hand: give me money! And only when I had received some money did I return the dental plates.

But this grandfather was no longer with grandma. He had married my aunt. She was a niece of grandma. And the funny thing about it was (if it could be called funny) that this aunt had been brought up by them since childhood. And now, she had "pushed out" grandma in repayment, and taken the latter's place in grandfather's household.

Thus grandma returned to our home to live with mother.

My aunt used to put me to sleep with her stories and her lullabies. But I preferred the first to the second, for my aunt could tell stories better than she could sing. My mother too was very fond of singing, and I often pretended to be asleep in order to get away from her annoying lullabies as quickly as possible. Now my aunt would never again sing for me but only for grandfather. She would never tell stories to me, but only to grandfather. Yes, just for him!

So from the beginning there had always been complexities in our family. And since I had always been among my relatives only sporadically, I became increasingly bewildered by the complexities that arose. Sometimes I would address a person as "uncle" who should have been called "grandfather", or who, on the contrary, should have addressed me as "uncle". But they were all trivial matters to me.

When I came to town I always stayed with mother, with whom I had lived since childhood, and whom I knew so well. I always stayed in the house in which I was born, where grandma lived, and whose occupants had become part of my memories of my childhood days.

But my own father always and always asked me, hoped for me, ordered me, yes, sometimes even forced me, to stay in his house. He wanted me, upon arrival, to step down from the public transportation in front of his house right into his own home. He wanted me to sleep there when I was on vacation, and to have my meals there too.

It was not that I had never eaten there, or never slept there, at my father's house. But since my relationship with my stepmother was becoming worse and worse I seldom approached my father. Moreover, as far as food was concerned, it was by

far inferior to what grandma offered me. And this was very important to me!

Once when I was asked by father to stay in his house, I refused. Father immediately suspected that my mother had detained me. And this was not true, not at all. On the contrary, she persuaded me to give in to my father's wishes when the "honeymoon" at my mother's house was nearing its end and when grandma's grumbling started. But only when these had reached their peak and grandma even began to be angry with me (and not only grumbled) did I go to father's house and stay there. In the same house with my stepmother; under the same roof. Father knew about our bad relationship, and he was sorry about it.

There was another thing that annoyed me. My father was a teacher, as he had always been. As was proper for a teacher he gave me many pieces of advice, although he might have guessed that they would never be followed by the one who received them. Anyway, as a teacher, he felt that he should give advice.

So almost every evening father had a piece of advice ready for me. When it was near bed-time, for instance, (when my stepmother was putting her little baby to bed), father came on with his advice while he was preparing for his teaching the following day, and while I was reading a book which I had taken from my father's library. Father's words flowed from his mouth like water flowing down from a mountain.

I could not remember any of them clearly. There were too many of them. Moreover, they were seldom very interesting to me. In fact, they were quite boring. However, I do not deny that sometimes there were some which were so touching that I could hardly keep back my tears.

Sometimes father had no pieces of advice to give, but then he talked about the reasons why this situation of ours could have occurred. He told me the tale of Father and Mother. The tale too of his own experiences, physical as well as mental.

Anybody could guess that father would put the blame on mother. It was mother who did not want to remarry him, although father had asked her to. That was at the time when both had not remarried anybody else, when both father and mother were still divorcees. If mother had not refused father's proposal then, the situation would not have been like it was now. I would not have had a stepmother and there would not have been this tense situation between her and me.

The way it had all happened was different again when I heard my mother tell it. When I listened to her side of the

story, about her and father, mother blamed father for what had happened. It was father who did not have any feeling of responsibility. Their child -- me -- had always been supported by his wife, my mother. From babyhood up till now. It was mother who brought up both of us, me and my younger brother. And this was true. It was mother who had had to work hard for us. So hard that her stomach had to be operated on. (Mother worked as a seamstress in order to keep us alive.) And now she was not allowed to work too hard. She could not sew any more; she could not ride a bicycle. Fortunately there was my stepfather now.

But I had never been able to find out the truth of the story. Who had been in the right; father or mother? They had both tried very hard to justify themselves by blaming each other. And this made me feel indifferent about the whole matter. I became angry when I heard mother blame father and slander his name; or when I heard father talk unfavorably about mother. I got fed up, as I had heard these stories since I was a child. Were they not still my parents who begot me and who were the cause of my existence?

And father's words of advice which were as shallow as river water in the dry season finally bored me. I tried to avoid as far as possible any occasion that might induce father to bring forward any of his words of advice.

These conflicts among my family made me a bored and indifferent person. I stayed out of the house all day long. I only returned at dinner time, or at bed time. Once I even stayed away for two days. And when I returned there was a new longing, a new atmosphere.

And for several days I could be calm and ignore grandma's grumbling. I was calmed down, for I did not have to listen to mother's complaints; I did not have to listen to father's boring advice. And the laughter of my adopted sister returned. During the past days she had been very sensitive in her feelings and had cried very easily when I teased her just a little.

And my longings could be fulfilled till they were satisfied.

Grandma came to me again with delicious morsels of food in her hands and a happy smile on her face (a smile, not a frown and grumbling): "Where have you been all the time, Yip? Look, I have prepared this chicken leg for you, and now it has become stale. Just for you".

But of course I refused to eat meat that had turned stale, although it was chicken leg!

My younger brother stared at me in his melancholy way. I threw the leg onto his plate. He went on eating quietly. He nibbled his meat little by little. Quietly he finished his meal. Then, silently, he too went out, and disappeared from

the house till suppertime.

The longer I stayed home the less my family longed for me, and the less homesick I felt. (I came home just to spend my vacation.)

Grandma started to grumble again, about any trivial thing at all, like when I asked for a side dish to go with the rice at meal times. What was worse: her grumbling was now mixed with plain anger. That was why I refused to eat with grandma, and preferred to eat with mother. Or even alone. I stealthily had sate bought for me at the marketplace. I had my brother buy it, and later I gave him a few sticks as a reward (ah, what a glutton I was!).

When my vacation was nearing its end I began getting some attention again: from grandma, mother, father, yes, from all the members of the family. I was again an important person among them; among the family. And the closer the time came for me to leave for Djakarta, the more meaning my presence had, and the more important I became in their eyes.

Ah, those short meetings were the sweetest! Then there was no boredom! While the longing was still lingering, they had to let me go! And my leavetaking again became an event that left a deep impression!
