
MY KAMPUNG¹ (KAMPUNGKU)

story by Pramoedya Ananta Toer
translated by Sumit K. Mandal

Friend, you have heard the name of my kampung, haven't you? Kebun Djahe Kober, five hundred meters in a straight line from the palace. And you know also, don't you? Its drains are covered in the feces of kampung residents. Indeed, yesterday the headman issued an order: "No more defecating in the drain." And what was the first reaction? A neighbor of mine helped his child defecate in someone else's drain, not his own. And at night the same thing was true of adults.

This is not a situation that ought to be admired or condemned. I have lived in this kampung for two years. Much have I seen of the events in this kampung. And it seems to me that I too have become a small part of this kampung.

Friend, this kampung is not that large. More or less 200 meters in width and the same in length. So, an area of more or less 40,000 square meters, crisscrossed by seven alleys. The population within this 40,000-square meter area could not be less than 900 people.

Friend, I want to tell you about the condition of my alley—one among seven alleys. Do you know when I first came to this kampung? One gleaming bright morning. But I did not see the signs of morning, so many were the trees that consumed the breathing space of residents. However, residents of my kampung were used to all these trees of questionable use in their stoves. And since I have lived here, since then I have felt a longing for an abundance of morning sunshine. What's more, houses here are so close together that fresh air is unable to flush out air carrying fecal gas and drain gas. This drain, friend, it cannot flow if municipal laborers do not push it along as every resident

¹ *Kampung* = residential quarter of a city.

throws trash into it. This has become common practice because they know no one is likely to prohibit their actions.

Friend, what I will tell you about this alley of mine is a situation which once wrenched my heart but then became a usual thing, namely how often Old Djibril² came. That's right friend, I will tell only of the connection between Djibril and this alley of mine.

A small guerrilla squad that is cautious is not likely to lose ten people in two years, yet in my peaceful kampung with its smell and conditions, people die one after another. They die a cheap death, friend. Like this, at the back of my house, soon after I started living in Kebun Djahe Kober, one person died because of a chronic venereal disease. After that, a woman died in the very same house after saying: "You see, I'm not afraid to die, it's better than living like this." And so she died, calm and happy after sleeping in her platform bed for two months straight, not wanting to cook and not wanting to eat if food did not come to her. Her adult children did not say a word about the matter. Three months later her daughter gave birth to twins. The younger of these two Little Grandkids³ lived for three months. Then the first one followed this child to heaven escorted by Old Djibril. The series of deaths in this single house occurred in a period of no more than two years. Think about it friend, just how active was Old Djibril in my kampung.

In front of my house, friend, lived a woman who loved her son very much because her other children were all daughters. Last among the children were twin girls, one healthy, the other unhealthy. Of course, Dear Mother⁴ loved the healthy one more. On one occasion the healthy one was given worm medicine and because of her love she increased the dosage of the medicine. Of course the intestines of the small child ruptured when attacked by worm medicine beyond her strength. And one evening the child died. Of course many tears were shed because of her death, as customarily happens among human beings. Neighbors came to give their condolences and there was some talking about death. But truly, the realization that it was she who actually killed her own child did not come to the hearts of old people such as Dear Mother. She killed because she was born to a family that did not understand and likewise she gave birth to a family that did not understand. What's more, friend, this kampung of mine has long been in existence, hundreds of years before I moved here and hundreds of years before I was born. Of course they cannot be told that they kill their own children. They will only say that it is they who know their kampung better and since long ago none have dared to *open their traps*⁵ too much. They have a logic of their own that organizes communal life.

Beside my house, friend, there was a wedding that ten months later was blessed with a child. And because everyone wishes to live luxuriously by the easiest means possible and with as much profit as possible, one time this officeboy with a child was caught and put into jail. Of course all bad deeds disappear upon furnishing a clever excuse. And this officeboy had his excuse too: "To live as a human being should,

² i.e. "sang Djibril." Djibril is the archangel Gabriel.

³ i.e. "Sang tjuju."

⁴ i.e. "sang ibu."

⁵ i.e. "*lantjang batjot*." A Jakarta Malay vulgarism.

means accumulating just a few luxuries." As a result he was not seen to be bad in our kampung, but only a little unlucky. Also in the household beside me, once there was a death which shook my kampung. Here is the story as it really happened:

He was a printsetter.⁶ He had fifteen years of experience, which is the same as saying he had long withstood life as a setter. One time he got sick, got better, and went back to work again; sick, better, and back to work; sick, better, and back to work. These cycles became more frequent as time passed and lasted for three months straight. Of course Mr. Printboss,⁷ who knew the printing sickness inevitably lodges in his laborers, gently said to him: "We'll pay for you to see a doctor."

So Mr. Setter⁸ went off for medical treatment. The doctor said: "You must be operated on." Of course he jumped in shock and staggered back to his beloved kampung, for it was this very kampung which raised him, and this kampung too which gave him much friendship and the grace of life. But not a few people from our kampung who came by to look said: "Oh, a stomach operation is not serious. It will be done in a moment, and you'll be well again in a few more days."

Mr. Setter came back to his boss. He wanted the operation. He was sent once again to the hospital and asked to be operated on hurriedly. His pancreas was destroyed, eaten up by tin poison from fifteen years of experiencing the sickness that caused the deaths of so many setters. All this doctor wanted was to make his diagnosis suit the fact.

After the operation all the setter did was scream while blood flowed from his middle. He asked to be returned to his kampung as he did not wish to die without a witness. And so he was taken home. If at the hospital he had to be silent and motionless, at home he had the opportunity to roll around in pain. Five hours after arriving home he was escorted away by Old Djibril. Fifteen days earlier, his baby, born only a few hours, had been escorted away by Djibril because of tetanus. People said (because they already knew its father's illness was serious): "Wah, this child is a substitute for its *baba*,⁹ long life to its baba." But Djibril did not want to hear the voices of the people from my kampung. Mr. Setter was compelled to die even though his baby had been taken away already.

The death of Mr. Setter reminds me of the student setter at the government printers with a base salary of eighty rupiah a month. Every workday he has to swallow tin poison that will kill him in just a few years to come. It is simply no longer surprising when many people choose fields of work where they will get a cheap death. It is truly not surprising any more. Still, not rarely, this situation jolts my mind.

Djibril also came to the house in front of my house, a little bit to the left. A Chinese shop! Having lost business to the Indonesian-owned stall in the same alley, the husband despaired and was stooped over in his bench coughing everyday. Eventually he said to his wife, who was also a trousers-wearing Chinese: "It's o.k. if I die as long

⁶ i.e. "zetter." I have translated this word as "setter" in all but this reference to indicate its complete meaning.

⁷ i.e. "sang sep pertjetakan."

⁸ i.e. "sizetter."

⁹ *Baba* = father, in Jakarta Malay.

as it's in my country." One day, quite unexpected by his neighbors, he disappeared; he was shipped away to the beloved country of his ancestors. A year later his wife, unable to make enough of a living for herself, was forced by Djibril to cough and cough every day until finally she was taken to the hereafter.

Friend, this is not all that I have to tell you about the activities of Djibril in my kampung. More to the other side of my house lives an officeboy who wakes up early in the morning and returns from work at five o'clock in the evening. Of course the whole household had to work together to fend off Old Djibril. But Djibril truly is a messenger with great initiative; he came to their house really often. When the Old Woman¹⁰ was pregnant or gave birth he did not bother, but once the child began to crawl, worms were inserted into the body of the sinless creature. Then, the little child was escorted away by him. Of course its mother and father cried a little seeing the fruit of their lives picked up just like that by Djibril. But when these worm victims were alive they were neglected by both their parents, who feigned not to see their children always in the grip of fevers and chills and sometimes teary-eyed. Only when the child was no longer strong enough to move parts of its body did the mother shed some tears. And of their thirteen children, only three were left now. Every two years a new child was born and will be born to be escorted away by Djibril. If killing with weapons is punished by the government, killing because of ignorance and poverty is not prohibited in my kampung, even killing one's own child. It is an ordinary situation and perhaps only fitting.

Of course I am not going to tell you about the frequent visits of Djibril to other alleys. It is enough for me to tell what happened in my alley alone.

I haven't told you about the shanty attached to the back of the house across from my house: another officeboy family. You need not be surprised when I mention officeboys only. Really, friend, you need not be surprised; it is a typical example for my kampung. And the same example can be found in the family of my neighbors who are over there some more, a little to the left. When their son was still small he was rocked to sleep with these words: "Later, when you're grown up, become a foreman like baba, o.k.? A foreman gets a fat salary indeed." What he said was very true; compared to my salary when I was a grade IV/B government officer, a foreman's salary was by far higher. Even the driver who lives in front of my house gets a higher salary than my IV/B. And you know that one can learn to drive in seven days, right?

About the officeboy family I was going to describe just now . . . Friend, you've seen a skinny child, haven't you? So it was with his children too: a row of skinny people, including himself and his wife. Mr. Officeboy¹¹ was crazy about food. He loved to eat so much that he did not think about his wife and children while eating, though they were right under his eyes. Not very far along he was promoted to the position of clerk from his officeboy-ship. But he rejected the promotion because a clerk has to think a little, while an officeboy does not. Here lies the officeboy's victory—his victory. In short, he did not want, he really and truly did not want. So he remained an officeboy with all the perils of officeboy-ship circles. As he was often absent lately, he was sent by the office to a doctor—straight into the darkroom! He was asked to come

¹⁰ i.e. "sang bini."

¹¹ i.e. "Sang opas."

again the next day. Then he was told to come back the following day also. This time he received a letter of dismissal that he had not expected; *tbc*¹² was the cause. Tbc did not amaze anyone in my kampung anymore; it was something ordinary. Actually Miss Washmaid¹³ tells the story well: "When my in-law got sick like that I wasn't afraid. Yah, I just finished off all his leftover food." And fifteen years later, the sickness does not appear to have migrated to her body. But her husband was let go from his officeboy-ship because of the very same sickness and got a pension of sixty rupiah a month. As sixty was not enough for a whole family to live on, what's more in an all-expensive city like Jakarta, he went on to another office to become an officeboy once again.

The officeboy family over there a little, his child got tbc. Just four months old and got it. The parents of the officeboy were running around in circles. He himself was a *santeri*¹⁴ who was unpretentious, so he tried very hard to make the child well. Only at the age of two was the child able to sit and eat much. But the officeboy had lost the desire to talk a lot, like he used to when he was a bachelor. There truly weren't very many people like him in our kampung, as officeboy work was something to do in passing, besides pilfering paper, typewriter ribbons, and the like. But this officeboy was one officeboy who was unpretentious. This too need not come as a great surprise. No. It had become so ordinary, a part of day-to-day life. It was not as surprising as the incident which occurred in the household at the end of the alley. One day a police squad arrived. Coins were found that were going to be smuggled. And when the commandant got two thousand rupiah in hush money, the squad just left peaceably. Sure enough, houses in my kampung were mobbed and what happened in this house was heard from one house to another.

And if on one corner there are paralytics and little children whose job is to cry for hours every day, on the second corner there is another sufferer of tbc, a government officer who continues to work anyway. In front of his house, there is another person in whom the accursed but usual sickness of our kampung has lodged. And in the alley over there a little lives the family of an Arab who also jolted us with his sickness when suddenly he became a crazed man, jumping up and down and hurting people who were caught in his hands.

And later when Old Djibril comes again to escort one of us, children will jostle each other to enter the prayer house and beat the drum because religious teachers have promised merit in the afterlife for this good deed.

This then is the condition of my kampung with its vibrant Djibril. You too, friend, can come to my kampung sometime. My kampung also can become a tourist kampung that will enrich the soul. Finding it is not hard at all because everyone in Jakarta knows where the national palace is. Five hundred meters in a straight line toward the southwest, there my kampung stands in all its glory, challenging the ranks of doctors and technocrats.

¹² *Tbc* = T.B. (Tuberculosis).

¹³ i.e. "sibabu tjutji."

¹⁴ A *santeri* is a Javanese Muslim who is scrupulous about religious obligations and rituals.

But all this does not surprise residents of my kampung itself. If surprising, it is only so for tourists—among whom you are also included—because it is located so near the palace where everyone's health and every little detail is guaranteed. But my kampung remains tranquil and has not been penetrated by agitators. Only later when there is another person who is escorted away by diligent old Djibril, and after the drum sounds, people will just say coolly: "Who died?" Someone else will answer: "Mr. So-And-So." And then the talking will end with mutual understanding.

Jakarta, VII-1952

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Translated from "Kampungku," *Tjerita dari Djakarta: Sekumpulan karikatur dengan manusianja*, 2nd. ed. (Jakarta: Grafica, 1963).

Translator's note

Referring to the reader as *kawan* (friend) and by the informal pronoun *engkau* (you), the narrator sets a familiar tone from the start. This familiarity is a little unsettling for it ranges from the intimacy of oral storytelling to cynical chiding. The latter becomes most apparent when the narrator says that the reader too is a tourist whose life can be enhanced by viewing the miseries of the kampung. For things that happen here are surprising only to tourists and not to residents themselves. Here lies the core problem. The narrator asks, how do things that wrench one's heart become ordinary? It is the relationship with the reader that provides answers. Chiding the reader as a tourist is self-referential, as the narrator too is surprised by the conditions in the kampung; he too is an outsider. Through the telling of the story by the narrator, Pramoedya provides a perspective on a kampung world that is like an island on its own.

In substance, language, and style, the story evokes an image of social introversion. Pramoedya intends the kampung to represent a place which nurtures as well as kills, hence the double meaning of the word *kober* in its name. The ambiguity of this word is revealed when it is uttered; thus the opening question calls attention to hearing the name. Uttered as such it means hope or chance, but accented, *kobér*, it refers to a Dutch (or Christian) graveyard. Correspondingly, cycles of birth and death recur in the story within a highly circumscribed social and mental landscape. Enveloped by a thick canopy of leaves and subsumed by smelly gases and diseases, the physical conditions serve as a metaphor for a closeted environment that breeds its own justifications for

killing, stealing, and other social ills. Jakarta Malay, in the voices of kampung residents, refreshes while deepening the localism of the story. For the pronoun "I," Pramoedya not only has *gua* besides the usual *aku*, but also *owe* as a mark of the Chinese shopowner's speech. Another particularism, *menikusi* (pilfering) is not found in any standard dictionary. Besides the prevalent passive voice that affirms the image of a world merely acted on, dialogue is strikingly absent. People's voices dot the story in brief utterances to which no one responds.

The story is more of a satire than a caricature, the theme of the *Tjerita dari Djakarta* (Stories from Jakarta) collection. Perhaps this was the reason it appeared only in the 1963 and not the original 1957 edition. The cycles of social misery and the imaginary line linking kampung to palace, where political blame is laid, are obvious satirical aspects. And aside from the funny examples of mindlessness, bureaucratic pomposity, and corruption in the glimpses of officeboy-ship (*ke-opasan*), much of the rest of the story is neither funny nor grotesque enough to be a good caricature. Also, as the characters are underdeveloped, it is not possible to empathize with them. Still, these may not be weaknesses as much as part of the design, for the muted characters reinforce the image of a world unable to speak to other worlds. The narrator as insider and outsider breaches norms by "opening his trap." He asks in the story: why do people die like flies in peacetime when careful guerrillas suffer fewer casualties? (He is alluding to the bloody revolution not long ended when the story was written.) Here, if it is not kampung residents he blames, or their imagined nemesis Djibril, then it is centuries of ignorance. The story's success is in showing what is strange about a situation that is ordinary.

