

THE QUARRY

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Along Enemy Lines

The sullen heat woke Emile, pressing against him as he became aware of the birds squawking outside. He sat up, pulled the heavy window shades back, and the morning light streamed into his room. Walking through swirling motes of dust, he felt the tiles, cool and reassuring against his feet as he padded down the corridor. Then he remembered that yesterday, everything had changed.

At the end of the darkened hallway he thrust open the door and stepped into the humidity. The two tall palms still reached skywards from the front garden and Rama, the street-sweeper, was pushing his cart and brushing away leaves with his twig broom. His familiar smile crinkled his eyes as he paused to wave at Emile.

Where were they? The soldiers Emile had expected to be marching down the street with guns and bayonets. Was it too early? Hadn't they finished eating breakfast yet?

Down the road, a desultory, horse-drawn wagon progressed passed *Toko Okumura*, the shop where he and Wim had bought ice creams yesterday. Now, tacked to the wall was a poster, its corners lifting in the lazy breeze.

Were Mr and Mrs Okumura his enemies now?

He scampered across the road, its surface already hot enough to bite his feet, and stood before the poster.

CITIZENS OF BATAVIA

Strategic necessity has led to the surrender of Batavia. The Japanese occupation army will arrive shortly.

Please avoid walking and travelling about unnecessarily. Abstain from any hostility, or demonstrations of anger, against the occupiers. Fighting the enemy is the role of the army not of civilians.

Maintain peace and order, and trust that the local authorities will do their utmost to protect your civilian rights.

Food and water are readily available at present.

God give you strength.

‘There’s a notice on Mr Okumura’s shop,’ Emile announced as he slid into his seat at the breakfast table. Through a mouthful of porridge, he continued, ‘It says we’re not to fight the Japanese.’

His mother looked up from the breakfast she and Alya were preparing.

‘You are not to walk down the street on your own!’ *Mama* admonished, her voice sterner than he’d ever heard before.

‘Where’s Wim?’ Emile demanded. There was no bowl at his older brother’s seat.

‘He’s gone to Tjimahi to find *Papa*. He’s bringing important things from us, clothes and letters. Remember, you wrote a letter too?’

‘Why? Why didn’t he take me with?’ Emile protested, blinking furious tears from his eyes.

‘*Ag, Mielkje...* you know it’s dangerous. I can’t risk you going,’ *Mama* replied.

‘Where’s *Tjimahi*?’

‘Very far *Emile*. Too far for you. And I need you here to help me. You and *Cahya* have to do all the men’s jobs now.’

He spooned brown sugar onto the porridge and watched a sweet, aromatic pool form before he stirred it into the depths. Many years later he would recall how quotidian each mouthful had been, but now he said nothing, ate slowly, and waited until *Mama* and *Alya* had left. Then, heart pounding, he grabbed a bamboo steamer from the cupboard and carefully placed two slices of bread with jam and several left-over dumplings in it. He checked the lid was tightly sealed.

He recalled his aunt, *Tante Snet*, had talked about a Japanese prisoner camp at the harbour, *Tanjong Priok*. Yes, he thought, they had taken *Papa* there!

‘What’re you doing?’ *Cahya* asked, materialising as quietly as a cat. He leaned against the doorframe, scratching his bare foot along his shin.

‘I’m going to *Tanjong Priok* to look for *Tjimahi* camp. I’m going to find *Papa*.’

Cahya’s eyes, shiny brown as lychee pips, widened. ‘How d’you know the camp’s there?’

‘I just know.’

‘*Tjimahi* means ‘lots of water’ – maybe that’s because it’s at the harbour?’ said *Cahya*.

‘Perhaps,’ *Emile* replied.

‘Can I come too?’

‘No. They’ll notice if we both go.’

‘I could help.’

Emile considered this for a moment, wishing *Cahya* could come along, but he shook his head.

‘Stay here and don’t tell anyone where I’ve gone. Promise!’

‘Okay,’ *Cahya* said, slumping against the doorframe.

Emile called out to his mother, ‘*Cahya* and I are going out to the garden.’

‘Be sure to come back in if it gets too hot, and stay under the trees,’ she replied, her voice drifting from the sewing room where the women had already gathered for the day’s work.

Emile slipped out the gate feeling Cahya’s wistful gaze follow him as he started down the road. A few soldiers lounged in the shade of the roadside palms; he avoided their eyes and hurried across the bridge. The women below waved at him as they spread their washing on the river rocks and slapped it in rhythmic waves against the canal wall. Wim had once told him if you followed the canal, *Kali Sunter*, it would take you to the harbour. He set off along the edge of the deep, green waters.

The heat rose around Emile, making his clothes cling to his body and his feet clumsy in their boots. *Mama* never let him walk barefoot like Cahya. He imagined himself a desert adventurer arriving at a river oasis. Such a hero would drink from the water and cool his tired body in its freshness. Emile perched at the edge of the swiftly flowing canal and took off his shoes. His feet swung into the current and the water swirled and eddied in turquoise rills around them. How deliciously cool it felt. He knotted his laces and slung the shoes around his neck before continuing on, now walking in the shade and avoiding the stones. Already he could not avoid the hunger gnawing at him, and the thoughts of the dumplings he carried.

‘No, they are for *Papa!*’ he said fiercely.

The path stretched, an endless white before him, and he counted his progress in groups of ten steps. The waters of the canal were becoming sluggish and brown, above which sunlight glanced from a viridescent haze of midges and mosquitos.

What would Wim and *Papa* say when he arrived? *Papa* and Wim would be happy to see him.

In the distance a dirty, faded dog appeared, trotting towards him with her tail and rump swinging and her ears laid back.

It can smell dumplings, Emile thought. I must not touch the dog. *Mama* said that dogs could be *dol*, mad, and they bit you for no reason. Then you become *dol* too.

Emile stared ahead, ignoring the dog. Nose to the ground, she followed him hopefully and soon he got used to her small, brown presence. Cahya had told him that dead people could come back to earth as animals. The dog must be a friend, come back to protect him. He clutched the thought, holding it tight.

Without warning, the dog whined and flattened her body, thin and quivering, on the path. Before them stretched a grey wall, high and intimidating with its spiked wire slung along the top.

There it is, thought Emile, excitement filling him. The prison where I'll find *Papa*. I've walked so long. It's here!

Three soldiers leaned against a gate set in the concrete; their cigarettes glowing as they talked in low accents. The boy and his ragged dog were merely the landscape of this strange place where they found themselves.

Emile walked up to them while the dog slunk back in the shadows.

'*Sayonara*,' he said, using the word *Mama* had taught him. '*Papa?*' he added, pointing at the walled enclosure.

The youngest of the soldiers waved him away, turning an impatient back on this intrusion and lighting another cigarette.

Perhaps they understand English, Emile thought.

'*Sayonara*.... Daddy?'

The young soldier lunged at him and Emile saw his disdainful eyes before ducking the blow that whooshed past his ear. Another of the men bent over Emile and pointed to the camp. '*Daddy?*' he asked, his tone rough and strange to Emile's ears.

Emile nodded, his heart galloping in his chest.

The soldier extended his white-gloved hand and Emile felt his tight grip. He looked up at the man's dark eyes, the stern hair combed from his forehead, and the blemished cheek that glared at Emile. Unsmiling and silent, the man led him along a scrub path which lay shadowed by the wall and up an embankment of loose stones and scree that slipped and crunched beneath their feet. The man bent down, and Emile smelled cigarettes and sweat. Firm hands gripped his body and he swung wildly through the air, his breath snatched from him.

Then he stood on a ledge overlooking the wall. Below stretched a parade ground where Dutch men, some in KNIL uniforms, marched under the shouting scrutiny of Japanese soldiers. He strained to identify his father. His fingers tightened, gripping the wall as he

scanned the distant men. There was a man marching in an officer's uniform. His back was straight and tall. His hair short and dark.

Papa?

No... no it wasn't him. He wasn't there. Emile recognised no one and, feeling his throat tighten, he blinked away the burning in his eyes.

The black-eyed man looked up at Emile in expectation. The small boy shook his head and let the strong arms lift him down. They walked back along the path, separate and still.

The steamer! He had forgotten the steamer. *Mama* would be angry. Emile raced back up the path. The soldier, arms hanging limp, watched the child's run and return. His mouth hinted a smile when Emile offered him a dumpling, but he shook his head and joined his companions at the gate.

The younger soldier picked up a stone and aimed it at the dog. He was rewarded with a dull thud as it hit her side and she ran off yelping.

Emile watched the dog disappear. She had not been his friend for long, but he was alone without her. He didn't look back as he walked along the canal through the cicada-buzzing heat. The monotonous, insistent *koo-eel* of a cuckoo mocked him from trees that threw long shadows across the path.

Evening dark was flowing up from the river when he finally crossed the bridge and turned into his street. In the distance he saw *Mama*. He broke into a run.

My recollection may no longer be precise; it's been so long since I was told this story. I believe my father's eyes held mine and, given to rumination as he was, he concluded, 'I have no idea why the soldier tried to help me that day. Perhaps because I was only six years old or maybe we stood together at the edge of a world in which neither of us knew the rules.'