

Ben SOHIB

Two stories

### They Who Sold Ustazah Nung's House

You have got to see for yourself how the youngest played out the drama in front of his mother. He knew his mother always took pity on him and was quickly moved by anything he complained about. That fellow was of course woolly-headed in many ways, but not when it came to this particular thing. His three older siblings, two sisters and one brother, were kept from lifting a finger and could resign themselves when the mother finally went along with his desire: to sell the house, their family heritage.

"Dulah can't bear to live by himself. Dulah wanted to marry again as quickly as he can," was what he said as he rubbed his plump cheeks wet with his tears.

See, he always spoke of himself by his name, to emphasize that he was the spoiled youngest kid of the family. And of course he was indeed the youngest of the four siblings. But he was 38 years old, potbellied, baldheaded, and couldn't pronounce the letter "s" because he was missing his two front teeth. Just why these were missing I'll tell you later on.

I don't know what you would have thought if you had been there and witnessed the family meeting that evening, saw a grown-up man referring to himself by his name, something only a little kid should do or anyway an adolescent girl. You might have wanted to slap his face. His two older sisters and brother wanted more than anything to murder him.

"You're not thinking of Umi?" asked one of his sisters.

"Umi can buy a little house in the kampung near here. Why have a house as big as this if Umi and Dulah are the only ones in it? Plus, if Dulah marries, he'll want his own house, car, butness, just like all you."

His name was of course Abdulah, and he was of course called Dulah, but believe me, you would have been creeped out to see an adult man, with a shape such as I described just now, referring to himself by own name. And you'd feel all the more creepy every time he said a word with the letter "s" in it.

"But you can't be sure Umi can get used to a new house," snapped his other sister.

"Right, besides all her memories of our late Abah, Umi has, you know, a majelis taklim in this house. That's a special comfort for her old age." This time it was his brother who spoke up.

This youngest of the four stood up. "Comfort? Comfort for you all because you've got everything! You're all egoists! You've..." He couldn't continue. He sat back down and buried his face in his hands. Now he was sobbing. His sisters and brother sitting there in front of him said nothing, while their mother who was sitting beside him seemed to be in a daze. Perhaps she was confused at being confronted by such a situation, to say nothing of her thoughts having been all deranged by what Abdulah had said the week before. When he had announced his intention to marry again after eight years a divorcé, he had begun by complaining that all his life he had never been happy and that now he wanted to enjoy life before he got too old to do so. Ustazah Nung—for that is what the people in the kampung called her—felt all the more troubled when she found out who it was that this son of

hers wanted to marry. And this business of who he wanted to marry is what I will be telling you about.

After his tears abated, he went on. "You all've never thought of how Dulah's life hath been ruined. How lonely it's been, not having a family, not having anything at all!"

"We all think about your life, and you're free to marry whatever devil you want to, but we clearly don't agree with your idea of selling this house. We've also got to think of Umi's life!" said the first sister.

"Umi'll be just fine! Don't exaggerate! Think it's to take advantage on the high price now. What are you waiting for? It's no problem for you to see Dulah living in poverty like this year in and year out? Any more like this, and Dulah might end up shivering and walking around naked in front of the house!"

"I'll sell this house and divide the money according to each of your rights of inheritance!" finally decided Ustazah Nung. The old lady spoke firmly and clearly in a voice that trembled.

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And now the time has come for me to tell about Abdulah's two missing front teeth, as well as some other things. His teeth would have stayed intact if he had not done something stupid. Even his home life would have been untroubled. But he was too stupid to maintain either the integrity of his teeth or the harmony of his family life.

It started with his adventure with a woman named Lola. Abdulah had a wife at that time. But two years of marriage, it appears, was too short to extinguish the flames of his first love for Lola. He had indeed been just crazy for this woman ever since senior high school where they studied together. Abdulah had been in class 3 and Lola in class 1. But they graduated at the same time because Abdulah twice stayed behind a year. He had also stayed behind before this, twice in grade school and once in junior high school.

During those three years when he was her schoolmate, Abdulah never succeeded in making Lola his girlfriend, but he was contented to have gotten Lola be willing to accept whatever he would give her, whether an article of some kind or money. Never once did Lola reject a present from him. Abdulah's happiness increased several times over when Lola began to be brave enough to ask for money for snacks once a week, something he right away translated as the girl's willingness to be his wife.

"Yes, Lola's pretty all right, but she doesn't seem to be a good girl. I often see her smoking at Ma Mameh's food stall," said Ustazah Nung when Abdulah asked her to propose marriage to Lola for him, six months after they both had graduated from senior high.

"Lola is Dulah's first love. No one can take her place," replied Abdulah.

With a heavy heart, Ustazah Nung finally made her way to Lola's home to meet her mother and convey Abdulah's intention. And she returned with bad news for her beloved son. Lola "was already taken." It was a businessman who had a travel agency. They were to be married next year.

From that moment on, Abdulah grew melancholy and was often lost in daydreams. This situation, so disturbing for Ustazah Nung, lasted for almost two years, until one of his sisters came home with a woman named Hilda.

"This my friend's kid sister. She's from Tasikmalaya and has come to Jakarta to find work," she said upon introducing her to Abdulah.

They got married six months after that. Ustazah Nung sold a plot of land in Kebon Baru to pay for the wedding, and a part of what was left over was given to Abdulah as business capital to open a goat meat saté food stall on Jalan Otista.

To the total surprise of many people who knew him, Abdulah succeeded in running that stall well. As the days passed, the “Bro’ Dulah” Goat Saté Food Stall gained more and more customers. Within two years, Abdulah got up the courage to buy a car on credit. Just then, Lola appeared back in his life. Lola, who it turned out did not get married to a businessman who had a travel agency or any other kind of agency, came to his food stall.

“Your saté’s tasty,” she said when she paid at the cashier table.

“You don’t have to pay,” replied Abdulah, trembling.

Lola drew out two pieces of paper, a Rupiah fifty thousand bill and a white one on which was written her mobile phone number. Abdulah took this with the hand of a man afflicted with tremor senilis. And Lola deliberately touched the palm of Abdulah’s cold-sweating hand. Abdulah hurriedly put the two pieces of paper into the drawer and forgot to give her the change.

In less than two weeks after that visit, the word that Abdulah often went out with Lola, just the two of them, was the big news throughout the kampung. The rumors that circulated among the residents had it that Abdulah gave Lola upkeep money each month. The new “Duck” motorcycle ridden by Lola, people said, was a gift from Abdulah. And the little song birdies finally came to perch on Hilda’s ears. One Sunday afternoon, when Abdulah went into the kitchen to get a glass of water, Hilda, who was then washing a frying pan, asked him this question.

“Is all that true what I hear from people about you and Lola?”

Who knows what Abdulah was thinking at that moment. First he just said nothing, his eyes fixed on Hilda and for a moment at the window. Then after his wife said, “Just tell me the truth. I would be happier to hear it from your own mouth,” he abruptly launched into a smooth speech.

Abdulah confirmed everything being said by people and heard by his wife. He ended his confession with “maybe Dulah still loves Lola,” smiling as he said this.

The blow from the backside of the frying pan on his mouth was so hard that his two front teeth just fell right out. Hearing this commotion, Ustazah Nung, who had been laying down in her room rushed out to where the noise was coming from. She shrieked to see Abdulah’s mouth all bloody. That very evening, Hilda returned to Tasikmalaya and never came back to Jakarta. Meanwhile, Lola preferred to flee the kampung. She stayed with a cousin in the Kota area. The word was that she worked in a restaurant where they also had karaoke. Once a month, she came back to her home in the kampung.

For whatever reason, Abdulah reverted to his gloomy daydreaming. His saté stall was allowed to get run down and closed three months later. His car was repossessed by two debt collectors who showed up not long after that. In the first year after that incident, and indeed over the years that followed, Abdulah spent most of his time by sitting around smoking, moving from a chair in the living room to another on either the back or front veranda. Every time his mother counseled him to remarry, he’d always reply with a shake of the head.

Until one night in the eighth year. After several weeks of standing in front of the mirror holding a comb, trying to comb to the right the clump of hair that grew on the left side of his head so that the smooth bald spot on top would look as if thinly grown over with hair, Abdulah suddenly approached his mother to say he wanted to marry Lola.

Abdulah related that Lola had met with him several times over the past month. He said that Lola, now a divorcée, loved him, and that Lola wanted him to be a new and responsible father for her only child. Abdulah's eyes misted over when he explained how in such a short time the three-year-old boy had gotten used to calling him "Papa."

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"No defect" was the term used by real estate brokers who were going all over this area when they commented on Ustazah Nung's house. Its size was ideal and all its legal documents were "clean." That old house stood right along Jalan Raya Kampung Melayu Besar. It had a frontage of 30 meters width, while its depth reached 50 meters, really excellent for a four-story concrete building. And indeed, there were already many of these four-story buildings standing to the right and the left of Ustazah Nung's house.

Not just once or twice had the developers and land speculators ask Bang Sanip, the wizened middleman who controlled all the ins and outs of land matters in this area, about her house. Bang Sanip knew by heart all the histories of the houses and land in this neighborhood, ever since it had become the target of those promoters and speculators after the construction of the overpass to the city center.

Since the flyover had begun to be built about three years ago, the prices of housing and land near the highway shot up. Most of the residents chose to sell their homes and move to the outskirts where land prices were far cheaper. Only a handful of residents remained who preferred to hold onto the homes and land that were their ancestral inheritance, and one of these people was Ustazah Nung.

"This is a golden opportunity. The price is great. Ustazah can buy a new house, and perform the great hajj or the lesser one. The rest of the money Ustazah can deposit in a syariah bank, and it won't be exhausted for seven more generations," urged Bang Sanip one evening. Three times this year he, along with two friends, had come to see Ustazah Nung.

"I am still comfortable here," replied Ustazah Nung.

After gulping down all the plain water offered to them, Bang Sanip and his two colleagues left Ustazah Nung but their throats still felt dry. Their saliva had almost run out after nearly an hour of courting Ustazah Nung with all kinds of tricks to get her to let go of her house. But the woman wearing the veil seemed to only know how to say "I am still comfortable here."

So many times Ustazah Nung had spoken these words. And each time she did, Bang Sanip and his two friends felt they were being strangled.

The brief reply given by Ustazah Nung each time Bang Sanip wrapped up his lengthy presentation brought true despair to the chief of the brokers. His two friends--whose task it was to confirm everything Bang Sanip said--were also in despair. They felt that their "That's trues" and "Quite rights" and "Totally corrects" they slipped into Bang Sanip's spiel ended up having no effect at all.

The moment they were on the other side of Ustazah Nung's fence and before moving off again, Bang Sanip looked back and gazed at the old house for a while. Ai, such a pretty house, if only the owner didn't keep repeating "I am still comfortable here."

That was the moment Bang Sanip saw Abdulah emerge from inside the house, fixing the roll of his sarong as he walked along, headed for the old sofa set in the corner of the veranda. Abdulah sat and

raised his feet before lighting a cigarette. His face was screwed up like someone who hadn't slept in days.

Bang Sanip abruptly rubbed his mouth, hiding his smile. Then he quickly walked after his two pals. His thoughts were filled with Lola's face. His memory quickly reconstructed the story of the love and the adulterous affair involving Abdulah and Lola. Bang Sanip knew where Lola could be found, and he also knew what that woman needed now.

That night, the brokers held a meeting that lasted until the wee hours.

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### Haji Syiah

SURE, Kampung Melayu Pulo isn't the only kampung in Jakarta filled with both hajjis and drunkards. But it is very possible that it was only here that two young drunks and a haji could sit on the same balai-balai in the religious study circle called a majelis taklim. That term doesn't in fact describe accurately the actual activities. Because although this fellow, our haji, delivers, from time to time the Friday sermon and discusses divine wisdom, these little groups become more often a place of casual discussion on all manner of subjects, where people exchange words and banter back and forth far into the night. But right up to the end of this story, as you will see shortly, that is what we will call that activity, simply for the ease of storytelling.

If you ever get the chance to walk along our kampung on a bright sunny day, you will quickly see for yourself that this community is really and truly filled with hajjis. No sooner have you finished taking your first step than you'll most likely meet a haji sitting on the porch of his house, followed next by a haji standing there fixing the roll of his sarong, and on the third, by a haji who, walking along has taken off off his white peci and is scratching his head. If you're in luck, on your fourth or fifth step, you'll catch a haji in the act of pinching the backside of a woman selling gado-gado near the corner.

Towards the evening you'll see those hajjis walking—whether alone or in groups—headed for the Assalam Musholla and the congregational Magrib sunset prayer. After the ritual prayer at this gathering and five or ten more minutes of personal prayers, they will return to their own homes. One of them is Haji Syiah by name. After the Isya night-time prayer and then dinner, those hajjis will yawn over and over before finally falling asleep and snoring, wrapped up in their sarongs. All except Haji Syiah.

Almost every night Haji Syiah would sit on the balai-balai on his porch and receive visitors who came to enliven his majelis taklim; these included Faruk and Ketel, a couple of pals who always come drunk. Haji Syiah never differentiated among his guests: whether drunk or fully in command of their senses, they would all be treated the same. Black coffee would be poured, cassava crisps and unshelled peanuts offered, as well as kretek cigarettes. And in the end, the majelis taklim, attended by a dozen or so young people, always proceeded enthusiastically.

The news that Faruk and Ketel joined this religious study circle in the home of Haji Syiah quickly reached the many ears of the kampung, including those of Haji Jamil, a most esteemed haji. Not

missing a beat, the next day Haji Jamil reprimand Haji Syiah. Following the Magrib afternoon prayer and after completing prayers in the Assalam Mushola, he addressed those congregating there.

“It’s not proper, Haji... your gathering drunkards in your home.”

“I’m not gathering drunkards, but I won’t refuse anyone who visits my home. Even drunks are welcome. Drunkenness is a matter between the drunkard himself and Allah. The important thing is not to bother the neighbors. If such a fellow is rude and unruly, I will give him a thrashing, not just in my own yard, but even in the furthest corner of the kampung!” replied Haji Syiah, shaking his little child-like fist. Not frightening at all.

Although this muzzled Haji Sakur, his mouth still explodes with the sound of repressed laughter. As do the mouths of Haji Sahrudin, Haji Rozak, and all the other hajis. It’s the hardest for Haji Munip. Before he can shut it, the sound of his laugh escapes from his mouth. Who wouldn’t want to laugh seeing Haji Syiah brag about how he would thrash some young fellow?

There’s a famous story of Haji Syiah taking a spill when buffeted by the draft of a little “Duck” motorcycle racing past him. At that time, he was standing at the curb in front of his home when a Duck driven by a young scamp flashed by. The breeze from his speeding motorcycle swung the scrawny Haji Syiah around 180 degrees, made him lose his balance and land on his bum facing his house. Haji Syiah quickly got up. Then, with his left hand on his hip and his right fist shaking in the direction of the speeding motorcycle, Haji Syiah shouted, “A good thing you didn’t sideswipe me. If you had, I’d fold you up into three!”

Fold the scalawag driver of the motorcycle up into three? Forget the sideswiping business. A mere buffeting by the wind set him down on his backside. These were more or less the thoughts of the head of the neighborhood association. Quickly he mobilized the residents to build road hump from a sand and cement mixture, so that something like that wouldn’t happen again. That’s the story behind the speed hump jutting into the road in front of Haji Syiah’s house, right up to the present day. Who knows who put this story together? Naturally, not a single person believed that such a thing truly happened, no matter how wispy Haji Syiah is. But what’s clear is that the story spread and raised peals of laughter throughout the kampung.

It is thus not surprising that on that night Haji Sakur, Haji Sahrudin, Haji Rozak, and Haji Munip--the one hit the hardest--can’t hold back their laughter seeing Haji Syiah shake his fist and threaten to beat up the fellow. They remember the story of Haji Syiah falling flat on his bum.

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A year or more after Haji Syiah first received Faruk and Ketel in his home, not a single kampung resident’s faith diminished. Life went on as usual, no more, no less. In other words, apart from Haji Jamil, none of the residents thought what Haji Syiah did was improper. In fact, they were happy about it. Because, since joining in Haji Syiah’s majelis taklim, Faruk and Ketel never made a scene in the kampung when drunk.

Earlier, Faruk and Ketel had been known as the biggest troublemakers among the many of this kampung’s drunkards. They were famed for never going home unless it was feet first. Almost every night they would go to Pisangan Lama, behind the Jatinegara Station, and buy stroing drink in wholesale quantities. People said they each usually finished off ten liters a night. When they were on the first liter they would address each other familiarly with the Arabized pronouns “ane” and “ente,” like everyone else. By the second liter, they were conversing in “true and proper” Bahasa Indonesia, addressing each other with the more formal “saya” and “anda.” By the third one, they were hotly

debating in English, even though only Satan and the two of them knew what they were saying. After the fourth liter and beyond, they'd go off shouting and yelling all around the kampung.

Once when they went around raising this ruckus in the dead of night, Haji Syiah who sat by himself on the porch, came out to meet them. He rolled up his sarong high, and his unbuttoned shirt showed the bulge of his rib cage. He hadn't gotten around to putting on his white peci, making his head, on which only a clump of grey hair shone, gleam in the moonlight.

"If you dare make one more sound, I will cut your throats!" Haji Syiah let fly.

He assumed the "work horse" stance, ready to attack, his two legs slightly bent, his right hand cupped like a person asking for something, and his left hand seemingly propping up the back of his head. Nobody had ever heard that Haji Syiah was skilled in martial arts. But the report of his mastery of the supernatural sword, a practice that could bring down a foe from a far distance, had long been half-believed by the residents of our kampung—even though it wasn't clear who had spread this news. Even this mere half-belief fell like a leaf to the ground, though, when the story of Haji Syiah knocked flat on his bum by the draft of a speeding Duck spread throughout the kampung.

Even so, seeing Haji Syiah braced to attack, together with his threat to cut their throats, the reaction of Faruk and Ketel was immediately to themselves take up a fighting stanc. But whether due to the effects of alcohol or having gotten it wrong from a martial arts teacher, their spread-leg stances looked strange. Their legs were stretched out wide, and their hands were raised straight out front.

That "workhorse" business was comical, but the situation at that moment just stayed tense. Isn't it possible someone will do the unexpected when he's totally drunk? That's right! Faruk could be seen to begin to pat the small of his back, as if looking for something. A knife? Meanwhile his buddy Ketel, held his original pose, while trying hard to keep his balance. Haji Syiah became all the more wary.

Not wanting to take the risk, muttering a prayer Haji Syiah began to summon forth his science of the supernatural sword. People believed that after praying thus three times, the foe will collapse onto his knees just by blowing into his face. And so, without a pause, and after uttering the prayer three times, Haji Syiah blew roughly in the direction of those two rascals. Just at that moment, his false teeth came loose in his mouth, went flying, and landed near the feet of his opponents. There was a momentary stillness, as if the night seemed to be holding its breath along with the three of them.

Faruk and Ketel looked at each other. All of a sudden, the two drunks doubled over in laughter. Uproarious laughter that made them grip their stomachs. They kept laughing, ever more raucously and their stomachs bulged. Then, still doubled over in laughter, fell to their knees before Haji Syiah.

Faruk and Ketel kissed Haji Syiah's hands. Laboriously they did what they could to ask forgiveness. No sooner did they succeed in getting out half a word, the other half got swallowed by their laughter as tears ran down their cheeks. Luckily, after Haji Syiah rubbed their heads, the laughter of these two drunks subsided. And they avoided life-threatening stomach cramps.

Since that evening, even if they still finished off ten liters of booze in bulk every night, Faruk and Ketel came to their senses and never created any more disturbances in the kampung,. And they became the most loyal members of Haji Syiah's majelis taklim. They even became Haji Syiah's favorite disciples—if it could be put that way.

That this pair of troublemakers, Faruk and Ketel, had stopped causing trouble and became the favorite disciples of Haji Syiah are facts. But the truth of the stories concerning the sequence of events that led to the conversion of those rascals—especially the parts about the weird "workhorse"

fighting stance and the flying false teeth—cannot be proven, bearing in mind that those stories had been linked together on the basis of what Ucup Bodong said. He's the seller of coconut cakes who on the night this all happened had just closed up his little stall. He claims to have spied on the event from the back of the stall. Faruk and Ketel preferred to stay tight-lipped anytime someone asked them about this. As for Haji Syiah, of course no one had the heart to ask for his explanation.

Haji Syiah is a man in his sixties. His original name is Rohili. He is called Haji Syiah not because he belongs to the Shia sect. His religious practices have never seemed different from the residents of other kampungs. Most probably, it is all because he put up a poster of Ayatollah Khomeini on the wall of his living room, right next to a photo of Haji Ali Kwitang, the Betawi religious scholar. It is said that when he returned from the Haj some twenty years ago, Haji Jamil visited Haji Syiah at his home. On that occasion, Haji Jamil urged him to take down the Ayatollah's picture.

"Whatever are you doing hanging that picture. He's Shia, right? Different from us." Those were the words of Haji Jamil as he pointed at the Ayatollah Khomeini poster.

"There's no difference. I'm just mad about how he looks," Haji Syiah calmly replied.

So probably the name Haji Syiah issued forth for the first time from the mouth of Haji Jamil. That nickname then spread among all the kampung folk, from the mouth of one to the ear of another. Even though no one dares to call him "Haji Syiah" in his presence, but our Haji surely has to know that behind his back people are calling him that. And he doesn't care.

Haji Syiah lives alone with Nyak Mun, his wife. The two of them have voyaged across the lonely sea of life in patience and sincerity for more than forty years now. For the first five to ten years of their marriage, they—particularly Haji Syiah—still hoped for the presence of a child in their lives (he dreamed of a son) who would enliven their home life. But, as the years passed, they gradually buried that dream, deeper and deeper as time went on. Finally, at some point in their marriage, they accepted the fact that they would be a married couple who would not be blessed with children.

"God has not given us one," Haji Syiah always replies every time someone asks how many children he has. Naturally Haji Syiah wholeheartedly accepts his fate, but deep in his heart, the seed of desire to have offspring seems not to have really and truly died and been buried. That seed has grown and appears in the form of love of young people. In the middle of conversation in his majelis taklim, several times Hajii Syiah has said, "If God had given us one, he might have been your age."

It's as if Haji Syiah saw the image of the son he dreamed about reflected in those young people, even the drunks. Haji Syiah felt all the more love for the drunks. He looked upon Faruk and Ketel with the loving eyes of a parent towards his child. As gently as he could, he tried to draw those two youngsters from the pit of intoxication, from hard drink which, in his view could damage their health and their futures.

"If you drink, do so in moderation; don't go overboard. If you drink and don't keep an eye on how much you're drinking, how's that nice? And also, how long are you going to go on like this? God doesn't lose anything if you're drunk seven days a week. The ones who lose out are you yourselves. Your bodies will be ruined, and your thoughts all tangled up. You've got to think about your futures," advised Haji Syiah one day.

Several months after the dispensation of that advice, Faruk and Ketel were still coming to Haji Syiah's home staggering and groggy. However, it is absolutely true what people often say, that signs



from God can come quickly and from unexpected directions. Who would have thought how quickly Faruk and Ketel would change into totally different people. Only about seven months after saying good-bye to Haji Syiah to run an internet café owned by Ustad Jaiz in Pandeglang, Faruk and Ketel reappeared in their kampung looking very different. They were wearing long-sleeve shirts, trousers with legs that reached down to their ankles, and had black marks on their foreheads, the sign of frequent prostrations. Their mustaches were shaven clean, while their chin hairs were left uncut.

According to word spread around the kampung, while in Pandeglang they followed the religious study of Ustad Jaiz's madrassah, not far from the internet café they managed. Having completed a lecture course on syariah canon law in Mekkah a year or so before, Ustad Jaiz, still considered a cousin of Faruk's, had built a madrassah and several businesses, such as the internet café and a rice agency in Pandeglang. People said that soon Faruk and Ketel were going to go back to the madrassah in Pandeglang to join an intensive six-month program before departing for Mekkah. In that holy city—with scholarships obtained thanks to the good relationship between Ustad Jaiz and a missionary foundation in Saudi Arabia—they would deepen their religious knowledge.

Of course, Haji Syiah was delighted to hear such news, and very much wanted to meet with Faruk and Ketel. It had been more than a week that he had heard of those two young men's return from Pandeglang, but they had yet to visit him. Haji Syiah did indeed meet with Faruk and Ketel one evening, exactly ten days after their return, and this had been quite by accident—Haji Syiah ran into them in front of the Yong Put variety store. At first he didn't recognize them, and only after their eyes met for two or three seconds, did Haji Syiah happily shout out, "Faruk! Ketuk!"

The holders of these names didn't reply. They turned and continued on their way while one of them, Faruk, sprayed the ground with his spit. Haji Syiah, was, as the saying goes, "speechless in a thousand languages." He stopped short for a moment or two, staring at their backs until they were out of sight. A thousand questions swirled about in his mind. He didn't understand what this was all about.

Those thousand questions still kept swirling about in his mind until the evening, when he sat alone on the balai-balai on his porch. Why had Faruk and Ketel done that to him? Was it because they felt they had been reborn pure and untainted and thus disgusted with their former, filth-ridden lives? Or was it for something else? Haji Syiah could find no answer whatsoever.

Then quite suddenly, Haji Syiah felt very tired. He leaned his head against the wall and shut his eyes. When he opened them again a few moments later, he seemed to vaguely make out Faruk and Ketel opening the gate into the yard and then walking unsteadily across the yard. Hajii Syiah rubbed his eyes. The night was so quiet. A strong wind was blowing, bending low the tamarind tree that grew there.

*Translated from Bahasa Indonesia by George Fowler*

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