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Autumn Gales

SHORT STORY by MOTCHAR LUBIS
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The Manhattan Island skyline, bristling with skyscrapers, had been cloudy since late afternoon, humid with the promise of rain. A brisk wind blew through the canyon walls that formed as the tall buildings loomed up into the atmosphere. The wind pushed leaves and stray papers along the roadside, making them dance on the earth and take flight. People walked faster, tightening collars and coats, pulling hats down low. The autumn gales played on the women as they passed, making skirts cling to calf and thigh.[1]

We'd just walked out of a store in Times Square when the first drizzle began. Soon a downpour drove us from the sidewalk, sending us running for shelter in a café. Over hot coffee and hamburgers, Yunan said, "It was exactly one year ago that Hutabarat died, shot by the police. He and some guys were robbing a store. Right at the beginning of autumn."

I looked at him. "Who's Hutabarat? And how did it happen?"

Yunan said Hutabarat was a sailor, a crew member who'd worked aboard a few Dutch ships during the Second World War. When the revolution broke out in Indonesia, he and his fellows went on strike and then remained in America. There were now many Indonesians, same situation as Hutabarat, living in New York and San Francisco. Some worked in Indonesia's diplomatic offices. Some were working for Voice of America radio. A lot of them found jobs as dishwashers in restaurants or became chauffeurs. Hutabarat had been a chauffeur before he was shot dead.

Yunan himself during the war had been studying in Egypt, and from there he'd made contact with a university in the United States and applied for a scholarship. Luckily, he'd been accepted as a student, with funding, but the cost of traveling from Egypt fell on him alone. He'd worked his way from Suez to New York as a crew member on a ship. Now while studying he was working at the Voice of America office.

My mind was still on Hutabarat. When I told Yunan to go on, to keep telling me the story, unfortunately he could only say, "Oh, that's all I heard. Just that there was

this Indonesian guy who was involved in a robbery, and he was shot by the police while running away. I didn't know him myself. But some of his old friends still live in Brooklyn."

The rain wasn't letting up so we decided to splurge and get a taxi to the hotel I was staying at. Yunan didn't want to come up to my room. He said he had to go straight back to the VOA office.

Busy with places to visit and see, I forgot about Hutabarat for several days. Actually, I didn't really forget, since I did think about him once in a while and promised myself that if I had the chance I'd look for his friends in Brooklyn. The opportunity to meet them came suddenly one Sunday when Yunan invited me to go with him to Forest Hills and watch a tennis match between Vic Seixas and the Australian Frank Sedgman. On the way home Yunan said, "Why don't we stop through Brooklyn and satisfy your curiosity?"

This is the story I was able to put together, based on talking with Hutabarat's friends.

That first time I stopped through Brooklyn with Yunan we were only able to meet with one of them. Later, I went alone a few times and managed to see two others. It seemed strange. None of them really knew him. They each seemed only to know bits and pieces of his life, only the parts that touched their own lives.

"Hutabarat," said Djamil, "was a shipmate of mine before the strikes when revolution broke out in Indonesia. He was really a bit of an idealist. I've got a picture of him somewhere." He stood up from his chair, opened a desk drawer, and retrieved an envelope full of photographs. He flipped through them and then handed me one, of a group of people at the beach. "This is Hutabarat," he said, pointing at a slim young man wearing long pants and a flowery shirt. Hutabarat stood with his arms around a young woman.

"This is Lydia," said Djamil. He pointed and had a tone to his voice like she was Hutabarat's little sugar baby. "This picture's from Coney Island, at one of the swimming beaches. We were picnicking there."

He said, "Back during Dutch rule, Hutabarat dropped out of junior high. It was a rough time for him. He felt like everywhere he looked, nothing was working out. I first met him when he boarded our ship while it was docked in Surabaya. He took a job as clerk. I was a ship clerk too at that point. He seemed like someone dedicated to the nationalist movement. When we were alone, he would complain about the fate of the Indonesian people under Dutch colonialism and often talk about how angry he was at the Netherlands. But he didn't start talking to me about all this until six months after we'd been working together, after we got close. Other than that, he was an observant Christian. He devoutly read the Bible, and he always prayed before going to bed at night. He would never join in the crew's goings-on when the ship called on a port, and he would always write home to his mother.

"The way he was so strict about his religion, it sometimes led to conflicts in his heart, and he'd often say, *How could the Dutch, who are Christian, treat our nation this*

way? Doesn't the Bible forbid the oppression of your fellowman? And he would shake his head, at a loss about how such things could even be possible."

Djamil kept talking: "As far as I remember, he never got into any fights. Though one time he almost did. Once there was a sailor—you know what sailors are like—who punched a woman in a Hong Kong bar, and all at once Hutabarat jumped to his feet and stood right up to the sailor and threatened to punch *him* if he dared hit the woman again. We were all dumbstruck, since the sailor was a real beefcake while Hutabarat was a lightweight. But there was a frightful fire in his eyes that made the other sailor back down and step out of the bar. Sometimes even I was scared of Hutabarat, especially when the war broke out and our ship received orders to retreat to South Africa. Hutabarat threw himself more and more into reading the Bible, and I could sense a big change in him. When a torpedo hit our ship off the coast of Portugal, and we were burning and everyone was running wild, he looked at me and said in a resigned voice, 'This is from God, a punishment for mankind's sins and evil deeds.' Thank God our ship didn't sink, and that we made it safely to an English port.

"The longer the war lasted, and the more misfortune and death that Hutabarat saw befall mankind, the angrier he grew at the rulers of this world. *It's the vile men who hold power, in every country of the world—they're the evil ones, and they're who must unavoidably receive the punishment of God*—he'd say things like that to me a lot. Or, *Behold, the blameless young children perish, the mothers are wailing at home, the young are made orphans, the women become widows, and the young women are left loveless at home. For what cause?* Finally, his rage and hatred for the powerful became so great that he couldn't even look at anyone he considered to be a powerholder without swearing against them under his breath. Something was burning in his soul, raging to get out, and he kept holding it in.

"His feelings of nationalism were growing too, and very often he would rally the other Indonesians on the ship, telling us we needed to be prepared to fight for the cause of Indonesian freedom. He would tell us that the wicked and vile men of this world, those who had for so long oppressed mankind and the very children of God, would be destroyed by the fiery anger of the masses they had oppressed!

"So when our ship docked in San Francisco in 1945 and the news came that revolution had broken out in Indonesia, all the Indonesian crew members went on strike. Hutabarat became very active in the union, seeking support from several American associations, looking for jobs for his friends, dealing with the American immigration office. Then he left for New York while I stayed in San Franscisco. We didn't see each other again for a long time—we didn't even meet up again until four months after I moved here," Djamil told us. "And when we went swimming at the beach at Coney Island, it was a picnic we'd arranged to celebrate our reunion.

"As for what he was doing in New York after he left San Francisco, I don't know," said Djamil. He said for something like that I'd need to ask Datuk, who was a dishwasher at the Jamaica Inn. He gave me the restaurant's address.

It wasn't until a few days later that I had a chance to track down Datuk at the Jamaica Inn in Brooklyn. Datuk—that's what his friends called him, a title given to respected elders back in Minangkabau, his home region in Sumatra. He was already past middle age, very friendly and quick to laugh, and he liked to kid around. Apparently Djamil had told him I'd be looking for him and wanted to talk. After we shook hands, he laughed and wisecracked, "If you're looking for homecooked dendeng balado, you've come to the wrong place, old man!" He then wiped the handshake off on his apron. I glanced down, wondering if my hand was dirty.

"First thing, have a seat, take a load off. I'll be off work soon," he said.

I sat down and ordered a glass of milk. Ten minutes later he came over to the table I was waiting at. "Better if we go someplace else to talk," he said. "Stick around here and a body feels like he's still working."

We went over to the bar next door, where Datuk took a coin from his pocket, walked over to the jukebox, and selected "Tennessee Waltz," which was very popular at the time.

Before I had a chance to ask him anything, he started in with his own questions. How were things back in his hometown of Pariaman? And in Jakarta, Surabaya, and Makassar? And how does it feel to live in an independent and free Indonesia? Ah, the Indonesians who'd been stranded here in America were all too self-centered, egotistical, he said—at first we all wanted to go home to Indonesia, but when we heard that things weren't fully settled at home, we decided it was all right in this foreign land. Wasn't it easy enough to earn a living here? Just washing dishes you can make ends meet.

"Oh, Hutabarat," said Datuk, after I succeeded in staunching his stream of questions and stories. "He was a strange one. That's why he died like he did! So severe, rude! It always had to be *his* way. And all he ever did around here was fight with friends. People needed to play by his rules alone. Since the day I met him, I'd say to my buddies, now there's an Indonesian who's gone wrong, who's headed for a fall. He moved here from San Francisco to help out with the sailors' union. But he was really a hard one. Any fellow sailor who was on the fence or thinking about maybe going back to work for the Dutch, he had them beaten up and even sent along death threats. He had people pinching pennies and then collected their wages for a special fund dedicated to the struggle. Oh, but he was a hard worker. It wasn't long before he'd forged alliances with other labor unions in America, getting support from Americans. But his problem was, he didn't want to listen to the voice of the union. As if he alone knew it all, like he was the only one who really got it. Like he was the very son of God. But everybody went along with him since he was making it happen, getting results when he went looking for support from other labor unions in America.

"He worked hard like that in 1946, 1947, up to 1949 and the transfer of sovereignty," said Datuk. "He was getting ready to go home to a free Indonesia. In the meantime, Indonesia sent an envoy to open an office in New York and Hutabarat was expecting that his service would be rewarded. But he was sorely disappointed, since

he didn't get the kind of treatment he thought he deserved. And then when news came that American immigration would be forcing Indonesians to return home, Hutabarat felt still more troubled and angry. One night he came in to where I worked, already half drunk. Ever since I'd met him, I never knew him to get drunk or even touch alcohol. He took hold of my shoulders and said, 'Datuk! Let me tell you something. Listen, mankind must become one with God. But God—we only know Him one-on-one. Do you understand me? When God says, do good, He means you should do good for your own self. I never understood until just now. Man is surrounded by his enemies. And those enemies are his fellow men. You, Datuk, are my enemy! But I love you! Because God said to love your enemy. It means, *Love yourself*. And Datuk, now I can my love myself.'

"I had already suspected," said Datuk, "that Hutabarat was only pretending to fight and sacrifice for the revolution and was really only working for himself, to gain fame, the praise of men, and that he expected to be recompensed with a high position in the future. I heard from his friends that he'd hoped at least to be appointed Indonesian consul general in New York.

"After that, he was just like any other Indonesian—hitting the bottle, drunk, playing the field with the ladies. A month before getting shot, he was living with a woman, Lydia was her name. Who knows where he found her but she sure wasn't a lady on the up-and-up. Hutabarat had already gotten in on some shady stuff with some American longshoremen, and he always had plenty of money. But he didn't have any friends who dared give him any advice. It was like he'd gone crazy! Of course, from the beginning I'd said, this one's not gonna make it."

"Where is Lydia now," I asked Datuk.

"She's hard to find," he said, "but sometimes she comes in to the Jamaica Inn. Who knows if she's still living in the room she used to rent back then. Try looking there."

Datuk wrote Lydia's old address on a piece of paper. "If she had a telephone, write that down too," I said. After thinking for a minute, Datuk wrote the number.

I tried calling Lydia a few times, but she was never in. Finally, a woman's voice answered, maybe a friend.

"Lydia's out. It's just me here."

"Ah, don't mess around with me," I said. "I really need to talk with her. It's very important. Will you give her a message for me?"

I left my name and hotel phone number and asked her friend to tell Lydia to call me.

"Your voice sounds sweet over the telephone," said the friend. "Are you sweet in person, too?"

"I've got a face that's puckered as a gorilla's," I told her. "And I'm serious, don't forget to give Lydia my message."

It was three days later, after I'd nearly given up on meeting her, that Lydia called. Her voice sounded indifferent.

"Ellen said you called," she said. "That it was very important. I don't even know who you are. What is it that's so important?"

"There's something I want to ask you," I said, speaking quickly. "I'm new here from Indonesia, Hutabarat's country."

"Ooh." She sounded a bit startled.

"Nothing to worry about," I said. "I'm just interested in his story, and you can help with that. Could you and I meet up?"

"Uhm," she said, sounding reluctant.

"I'll take you out to eat," I said quickly. "Meet me at the Jamaica Inn. We'll head out from there to get something."

She was quiet for a long time, unresponsive, until finally I worried she'd hung up. But then she said, "Okay, tomorrow night at seven."

She let me wait at the Jamaica Inn until half-past seven. When she came in, Datuk nodded toward the door from the bar. Lydia stood there surveying the room, and then she just walked right over to my table. She was young and had a friendly face.

We shook hands and I said, "I'm hungry. Let's go get something to eat."

We found a table at a place nearby. "What is it you wanted to ask me about Hutabarat?" Lydia said after our food arrived.

"My question—it's hard to know where to start," I said, "but I'm interested in his story. I've heard from a couple people about him. One of them said he was obsessed with the difference between good and evil, between sin and holiness, that he was focused on the Bible, preoccupied with justice and cruelty. The other one told me he was stubborn, narrow-minded. That Hutabarat thought he knew it all, that he was a tough guy, that he was mean and cruel."

Lydia scraped at the tablecloth with her fork and said, "I met him at … church. I'd just lost my mother, my father passed away a long time ago, and my brothers and sisters and I weren't living close to each other. Everyone had left the church building, but I was still sitting there praying for my mother when I heard someone sobbing in the pew in front of me. I moved close to him and asked if he was alright, and that question seemed to soothe him. We started talking and walked out of the church together, and that's how we met. It was about a month before he got shot, and he came by my place regular, with flowers, sweets, books. He'd read to me from a book or put on a record, and just sit for hours. It was strange. He didn't try anything like those other guys when they get with the ladies, and behind his eyes it was like you could see this terrible sadness. He seemed like someone who felt completely alone in this world. And he was so gentle. Every Sunday we'd go to church and pray together.

"To me it still feels like a dream," said Lydia. "Oh, poor Hutabarat … when I heard he'd been shot dead during a robbery. He hadn't told me anything about his work, he just always seemed to have the money he needed. But he must've known it was dangerous. He arranged for a friend to come over and give me his money and Bible, if something happened to him."

I asked Lydia if there was any way I could talk to this friend.

"I don't even know who he was," she said. "He just stopped by with news that Hutabarat was shot and brought the money and Bible."

I took Lydia home. And when I got back to my hotel, I still didn't feel satisfied with the story I'd been able to put together about Hutabarat. The next day I went looking for Datuk and together we found the police station that handled the robbery and Hutabarat's death. It turned out the police sergeant who'd shot him was there, and we talked over some Coca-Colas.

"He was a very bad shot!" Those were the sergeant's exact words. The sergeant said Hutabarat didn't even seem to know how to shoot a gun. And he might have been out of his mind. All his friends ran for it. But the officer said they were now closing in on those friends, and he suspected it wouldn't be long before they were arrested too.

The sergeant thought back to a year ago. This gang had been pulling off jobs for months, but they'd never been very big. Then on Hutabarat's unlucky night it so happened the sergeant was walking his beat, and when he ordered the guys to stop, they ran. But Hutabarat turned around and started shooting.

The more I thought about it, the less satisfied I felt with Hutabarat's story. Like there was a missing link in the chain, something still incomplete. Two days before I'd be leaving for Europe, Datuk telephoned, saying that the guys who'd done the robbery with Hutabarat had been arrested and were being held at the police station. I just wanted to ask these men one question. Luckily the police were okay with this. And one of the men they'd arrested, when I asked whether Hutabarat was good with a gun, gave me an answer, swearing, "Damned if he wasn't the sharpest shooter of us all. He *wanted* to die!"

That's all he said, and he wouldn't say more.

Soon after, I left New York for Amsterdam. When the plane took off from the airport and circled above Manhattan, I looked out the window and glimpsed part of Brooklyn, reminding me of Hutabarat. What was his real story? Was he a dedicated student of the Bible, someone absorbed by questions of good and evil, justice and wickedness? Was he mean and cruel? Was he lonely and gentle? Why did he join a gang? Was robbery his means of bringing in money to finance the strikes and propaganda for the revolution? Why didn't he shoot the police officer who'd been chasing him? Did he miss on purpose because he didn't want to commit murder? Had he really wanted to die then? Or did he think that in shooting in the officer's direction but not *at* him, he could still make a run for it? What yearnings or intentions did his heart harbor toward Lydia?

They were questions I couldn't answer myself, and that I hadn't succeeded in finding answers to. I dozed off. When the airplane landed at Gander Airport in Newfoundland and then rose again for the next leg of the journey, my heart swirled with memories. I wondered if Hutabarat was a casualty of all he'd inherited from his generation—confusion, chaos, fear, failure, lies. And had he hoped to find truth in it all? Whether in New York or Indonesia, those who are bound and burdened by this human legacy will meet the same fate.

Translator's Note

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[1] This translation's source text, titled "Angin Musim Gugur," appeared in Mochtar Lubis, *Perempuan: Kumpulan Tjerita*[2] *Pendek* (1956; second printing, Djakarta: Timun Mas, 1962), 31–42.