

LICHTER DAN IK

Dido Michielsen

Fragment – pp. 7-17 (het eerste, en deel van het tweede, hoofdstuk)

vertaald door Marjolijn de Jager

*For my mother, my grandma, my great-grandmother,
and all the mothers whose names we do not know.*

I am the penulis

The writer

As far back as I can remember I have been called Tjanting, so you may call me that as well. I don't know what that nickname was supposed to mean and until recently I couldn't see any resemblance with a *tjanting*¹, a batik pen. Perhaps my head has the rounded shape of the tjanting's copper reservoir? Perhaps hot wax flows from my mouth? But now that I'm forty-four the name Tjanting may well be applicable. You know how they make batik, don't you? A tjanting draws lines with wax, making invisible designs that the dye bath cannot touch. The image doesn't reveal itself until a later stage. I, Tjanting, am the writer but I'm not inventing anything. I write down what Isah whispers to me and shape her words into sentences. I am her pen, her interpreter, and I help guide her stream of thoughts. They are *her* figures, flowers, birds, and plants that for now remain invisible. That is intentional. It's up to Isah to decide when the wax should be removed, when everything may come to light, although she's asked me to lend her a hand with this. Until then everything will stay submerged in an impenetrable bath, betraying nothing, relinquishing nothing.

Isah is my friend. She, too, had another name initially, but she'll tell you about that herself. She's been around at least fifteen years longer than I, so she could have been my mother. She knows everything there is to know about herbs, *serimpi*-dances², and what Javanese princes like to eat. She can also read a little bit, but she doesn't write well, she speaks Javanese, marketplace-Malayan, and fairly good Dutch. I know all three and, more importantly, I can take down her words in Dutch, the language of those for whom this is intended. It's a great sign of trust that Isah asked me to do this, but the reason why she wants it is something she'll have to put

¹ A glossary is provided at the end of the book, but for the purposes of this fragment I am providing footnotes instead. MdJ

² Serimpi dances: Javanese royal court dances.

into her own words as well. It's her story, she is the first person narrator of this account. I'm merely the recorder, although I won't refrain from adding a small footnote when I feel it's needed: Isah's outlook on life isn't always my own and I suspect that on occasion her words may need some clarification. When I tell her so, she calls me meddlesome, but whoever reads this will be grateful to me.

One morning a few years ago, Diti, my cook, turned up with Isah because she thought we were looking for a new laundress. We actually didn't need another laundress at all, the one we had did excellent work, but something about Isah aroused my curiosity. That is, she had none of what you look for in a domestic servant: no subservience, no display of respect or willingness to comply with your wishes. What I saw was a thin woman, built up of straight lines, dressed in dark colors. Her nose was straight and narrow, as were her face, hips, and feet. I could just make out a slight curvature of the breast, other than that she was a vertical line. The look in her eyes wasn't friendly but not unfriendly either. A bit haughty this one, I concluded. In any event, Isah gave anything but the impression of wanting to be working as a domestic, and definitely not doing the laundry of my large family with five children. I'm round and fat and I was sitting there, sweating, with stains on my white *kebaya*³ – looking much in need of a laundress – stuck in my rattan chair on the front portico to catch as much of the early morning breeze as I could. I clutched the keys attached to the narrow colored strip of cotton around my waist, to remind myself that I was the mistress of the house here. Why had Diti brought her to me? After all, she knew I wasn't looking for anyone.

Yet, I couldn't immediately bring myself to send the two of them away. When Isah knelt down before me, I had to suppress the inclination to get up and help her back to her feet. 'Tell me,' I asked, 'where did you work before, Isah?' She looked up and her eyes seemed to smile, as if she were seeing something pleasurable. She mentioned names, addresses, mostly in Djokja and environs. I've forgotten them now, but I still know that the areas where she'd worked and lived were an odd assortment, ranging from an exclusive residential neighborhood for government

³ Kebaya: a loose fine cotton blouse, usually white.

officials to shabby districts and *kampongs*⁴. She'd been a domestic servant as well as many other things. It only increased my curiosity.

Perhaps I recognized something of myself in Isah, although in appearance we couldn't have been more different. Before meeting my husband, I, too, was a simple, illiterate girl from the *kampong*. I had the good fortune to encounter a man with modern ideas: after our third child was born, he decided to marry me, me, a native *njai*. Turning your housekeeper and concubine into a legal spouse was not customary at the time. But Ferdinand went a step further, he taught me to read and write so I could help our children, who were at the European Elementary School, with their homework. Thatje and Chris are our smartest kids, and their father makes no distinction between girl and boy, he wants to send both of them to high school later on.

I briefly thought that Ferdinand Wiggers, my husband and the father of my children, would be the right person to take down this story. He attended university, he used to be an inspector, is now a journalist and translator, so his sentences would undoubtedly flow more smoothly than my scribbled notations. But he pointed out that Isah is my friend, that she trusts me. Besides, being Javanese, I'm closer to her than he would be, an Indo-European of mixed blood and with a European education. I presented this to her and she agreed with him – which I could have predicted, she's always timid around men she doesn't know too well. So now Isah comes to our house almost every afternoon and tells me her story in the heat of the day, while everyone else is napping. It's the only time I'm available and it makes no difference to her, she can't fall asleep anyway. Not during the day and, as far as I can tell, not at night either.

The fact that Ferdinand is encouraging us to write down Isah's story is because he's anxious. He thinks our society is changing too much. The Dutch who arrive in the East Indies no longer 'go native' as they did before – now everything has to be done according to European customs. Even the wearing of sarong and kebaya is going out of fashion. Not only the *Belandas*⁵ from the Netherlands, but even the locally born *totoks*⁶ dress in modern style. And the Eurasians allow themselves to be influenced, exchanging their traditional dress for trendy kimonos as well.

⁴ Kampong: small local compounds or villages.

⁵ Belandas – Whites

⁶ Totoks – full-blooded whites, usually Dutch

According to my husband it's all because of the British. The opening of their Suez Canal made possible what the Company, the Dutch Government, had been wanting for years but never managed: now that the journey no longer takes months but only four to five weeks, more and more Dutch women come to the Indies and settle here. They accompany their husband or are married by proxy in Holland and then arrive here afterwards. For many native women, these developments are disastrous. Where in earlier days they – married or unmarried – enjoyed a semblance of respect, they're currently exiled to the servants' quarters or, worse, sent back to the *dessa* or *kampong* from whence they came. Sometimes with their children, sometimes forced to leave the children with the father, but generally the poor souls depart without a penny. These are tragedies that no one attempts to fight and that are slowly but surely swept under the carpet. That's why it's good when women like Isah tell their story before their name is forgotten and their existence nullified.

Besides, I hope that telling her story will ensure the disappearance of Isah's demons and have her make peace with her fate. No human being should die tormented like this, and certainly not when you realize that Isah never acted out of any self-interest.

Tjanting Wiggers

Weltevreden, November 1910

Anak Mandja

The spoiled child that can do no wrong

I have been alive now for more than sixty years. It seemed to be high time that I accept it's Allah who governs my life. I had secretly decided to just sit and wait to die. I blocked my memories with everyday activities as much as possible. I cleaned vegetables and cooked for the hotel guests, I'd visit my friend Tjanting, and in the evening I'd shuffle off to my *tikar*⁷ to get some rest. Same thing every day. My private life seemed equally pointless to me: I have no children or grandchildren to care for and, with the exception of a few friends, nobody would feel any regret if I were to not show up one day.

But then my mother came to see me. To my surprise she was wearing a sarong with the *parang rusak*, the pattern of the large knife on the diagonal, exclusively reserved for the sultan's family.

Her eyes were set so far back in her sockets that for a moment, as she stood there before me, I wasn't sure whether she was alive or dead. Her mouth was moving slowly, she was chewing a betel quid, unruffled by its juice dripping down from her mouth. This would have been inconceivable in her lifetime: my mother always looked immaculate, not a hair escaping from the bun she created from her long hair every morning, as if at any moment she'd be made to have an audience with the sultan. If she did chew on a betel quid it was only to freshen her mouth, so she claimed, definitely not because of the slight high that makes betelnuts so addictive.

She seemed to be looking for something—holding a costly dagger in her right hand, she was turning my bedsheets and my clothes upside down. Her left hand grasped on to the mosquito net as if she were afraid she'd lose her balance. 'What are you doing, mama?' I asked but got no

⁷ *Tikar*: mat.

answer, which made me wonder if this was actually my mother rummaging around my room, or else an evil spirit with malevolent intentions. When her search turned out to be useless, she looked up and stared at me. Using her dagger she carved a deep cut into the palm of her left hand and spat the betel quid into the wound. Then she closed her hand, dropped the dagger soundlessly onto the floor, and came toward me. I stood there in the room, paralyzed, as my mother wrapped her arms around me in an embrace that felt strange but which I craved as well. She held me in silence for a long time. I sniffed the familiar scent of the mixture of spices my mother always brewed to perfume the batik fabric of the royal family, and then I gradually relaxed. It really was she. Only my mother could smell like this, white-shrouded spirits would smell of rot and decay. Just as I was about to surrender to her embrace, she flew away.

When your mother appears to you in a dream it's never without significance. As I lay staring at the ceiling the next morning, I wondered what it was she wanted to tell me. What exactly was she looking for? I looked around the room; my clothes were still neatly piled up. I noticed vague red stains on the floor that I'd never seen before. It could be blood or betel juice, or perhaps a combination of the two. A large round spot seemed to be fanning out like a star toward a series of smaller specks, as if the red substance had been smashed to the ground with great force. Perhaps that is what my mother had wanted to make clear to me: that I was not alone, that I, too, have left my traces. Somewhere in this world, maybe on this island, my descendants are wandering around, unaware that it is my blood that flows through their veins. Mixed blood. I couldn't just die like that without making myself known to them. Without allowing them to pick up the trail that leads back to me and my family. Even at this age, I still had a duty to perform.

The next morning I went to see Tjanting. As usual, she was sitting on her front portico gently waving her fan. Her two youngest children were playing at her feet with a litter of young puppies, tantalizingly holding out to them an old slipper of their father's. At a short distance, the mother dog lay watching the scene, prepared to leap up should her babies be in danger. Tjanting raised her eyes when she heard me approach and warmly pointed her fan to the chair beside her.

'Have a seat, Isah, have a seat. Would you like something?' For Tjanting, eating and drinking is a must, and I quickly asked for tea, so she wouldn't get started on her long list of all the delicacies she could offer me.

‘I’m actually here to ask you for help,’ I said.

‘What’s going on?’

‘I want to record the story of my life. But as you know I don’t write Dutch that well. Would you be willing to help me with this?’

‘Why the sudden urge?’

I told her about my dream and how I sensed that my mother was designating me to relay my story to my grandchildren. Tjanting was instantly enchanted.

‘But that’s a fantastic idea!’ She enthusiastically clapped her hands, startling the mother dog who jumped up and barked, which made the children laugh loudly. The puppies calmly continued gnawing on the slipper.

Tjanting’s expression grew serious. ‘Perhaps it’s better if Ferdinand does it. He writes much more beautifully than I, he creates cleaner sentences. It will make a better impression, don’t you agree?’

‘You think so?’ I’d hoped that Tjanting would want to do it herself, so that I could also confide all my misgivings to her. Because recording something for your progeny was merely the first step, but giving it to them afterward, giving it to those unknown people who may very well want nothing to do with you, was a completely different thing.

‘I’ll discuss it with Ferdinand’, Tjanting said, seeing my hesitance. ‘Why don’t you come back tomorrow morning. Or would you first like something else with your tea?’

* * *

I was born on 2 Sapar 1779, Setu Wage, which according to the colonial calendar was presumably sometime in December 1850. My mother made batiks and was the dressmaker for the female members of the sultan’s family. She gave me the name Piranti, the Javanese word for instrument. This can be interpreted in two ways, of course: my mother wished that throughout my life all the forms and kinds of instruments I’d need would always be available to me – but

perhaps she unconsciously gave me this name so that I would myself be the instrument by which to improve our life.

I came into the world in the kraton of Djokja, the walled-in palace-city that for us, Javanese, represents the center of the universe. Not just any place, obviously, although I grew up in the outer perimeter, the tailors' district now known as Kampong Ngadisurjan, where my mother owned a small yellow stone house, with a covered portico, a small outbuilding, and a garden with a miniscule pond. It was a tiny oasis, set amid a jumble of alleyways and surrounded by huts with walls made of woven bamboo matting and with a roof of foliage.

This maze of little streets was fascinating as if each turn I'd take might lead me on a new adventure. I knew my way there blindly, literally. Often, I would close my eyes and give myself an assignment. Walk to the southern gate or find the Pelataran Kedaton. I knew my way so well that during my wanderings I rarely touched the walls of these narrow alleys, although I'd sometimes walk right into sopping wet laundry that had just been hung out. The closer I came to the palace, the greater the chance that one of the *abdi dalem*, the kraton's servants, would grab me by the shoulders and lead me neatly to the center of the path. I could count on the *abdi dalem*; of course, I knew that the small army of courtiers was there to serve and protect the noble family but I, too, felt safe by their presence. My mother was one of them as well, the *abdi dalem* devoted their lives to the sultan and were more or less his serfs.

During my ambling I tried to avoid the statues and masks by the entrance to the forbidden part of the kraton, which I found creepy. With their bulging eyes, sharp teeth, and wide tongue stuck out, it was as if they suddenly popped up, ready to snatch you with invisible arms and tentacles and slowly suffocate you. They seemed to disseminate a perilous stench. The *abdi dalem*, on the other hand, were anything but menacing figures who'd want to harm you. With their silent, discreet gait, they safeguarded peace and quiet. They shuffled almost invisibly on their bare feet, moving like ghosts in their dark clothing, just like shadow puppets.

