

A Widow's Notes

As told to Syarifah Mariati

Once again I am transfixed, cold. Another victim has been found this morning. I see several villagers hurrying towards the rice fields, wanting to know whether it's one of their own. I have just heard the news that another corpse has been found by the dyke. A man. From the village nearby. From the people I hear that a bullet pierced his chest on the left, and that marks of torture cover his whole body.

Quickly I enter my house. I can no longer lift the pail of water I've drawn from the well, even though it's only two metres from the house. My heart races irregularly. Fear. God, whose turn is it this time? Will people always be killed? What has this man done to earn this tragic death? How big a sin has he committed?

I am still traumatised by what I witnessed almost three months before. That afternoon I had been sitting in front of the house when I heard a commotion in the street. Soldiers in uniform, brandishing weapons. More than twenty of them. I prepared to step inside my house. 'Get out all of you! Quick, get out, all of you inside. Don't pretend that you don't know we've come. See this. This is an example of what will happen to those who dare join the GPK rebels. You'll become pigs.'

I panicked. People emerged from their homes. Bang Nurdin, my mother in law, and all the other village folks. In shock I saw what one of them carried... a human head. Had my eyes tricked me? No. That was a human head. Cut off at the neck. By a machete? I couldn't bear to see. Blood spattered. Nausea rose.

'Ayo, look at this. Who else wants to end up like this? Who else? Pigs!'

Parading the head down the village road, they hurled insults. People were forced to look. All manner of emotions swirled within me. Fear, terror, nausea and pity.

Azwar. The handsome youth. Loved by the village because he was obedient, humble and quick to help. 'Poor Azwar,' said Bang Nurdin, overwhelmed by emotion.

I could remember clearly when the village folk wished to bury a corpse they'd found lying in the street. We didn't know from which village he came. Then, five armed soldiers appeared. One of them said arrogantly, 'Do you know who this is? A creator of chaos. GPK. Do you know? These GPK people are not human beings but pigs. You don't need to bury them because they're pigs.'

The people fell silent and hurried home.

News of villagers shot, kidnapped, tortured - almost everyday I heard it. Sometimes in this village, sometimes in other villages. News of corpses disposed by the wayside, in

gutters, in ponds, in rivers - everywhere. It could be a man from my village or from other villages, thrown out like rubbish here. Left unburied because the villagers were too afraid to collect the corpses.

I didn't know why village folk were being killed. Some said they were killed because they were members of the Aceh Liberation Movement. Like the corpse of the man disposed on the dyke this morning. The old man had lived in the village next to mine; he was a gardener who had cared for the school principal's plot of land. He'd been accused of membership in the GAM, of hiding weapons.

I was born 43 years ago, in the village of Cot Geuleumpang, about three kilometres from the sub-district centre Peureulak in East Aceh. My name is Maimunah.

My father was the teungku imeum, a respected man in the village. My mother too was well known; villagers would come to her with their problems. To fulfill their everyday needs, my parents had a small rice field.

One day, I was informed that someone planned to ask for my hand in marriage. His name was Nurdin. Eventually, Bang Nurdin asked me to come and live in his village, Uteun Dama, about four kilometres from my own village. We worked as paid agricultural hands during the planting and harvesting seasons. We went to the glee together when we didn't go to the rice fields.

Friday, 2 March 1991

This day is the 15th day of the month Sya'ban. It is a tradition in our village to hold a feast in the meunasah (small mosque). We call this the khanduri nifsu sya'ban - the feast of sya'ban. Around noon, Bang Nurdin went to the meunasah, returning in the evening. Suddenly, we heard the sound of trucks passing in convoy.

'It is our village's turn tonight; the soldiers have just entered,' Bang Nurdin said. 'Bang, there's an operation tonight. You shouldn't sleep in the house; go and hide in the jungle. Many of the men in the village have gone into hiding in the jungle.' But Bang Nurdin refused. 'I have nothing to fear. Why should I hide in the jungle? They are looking for members of the Free Aceh Movement. We aren't GAM. We don't need to hide.'

Perhaps he was right. But I continued to worry. Friday, almost midnight. Half asleep, I soothed Sukri to sleep. He'd woken up crying. Perhaps he was thirsty. Hasnah and Muhadir were fast asleep. In the next room, Bang Nurdin slept with Yusda. Suddenly there was a knock at the front door. 'Bang Nurdin, come out,' I heard a voice saying from outside. I wondered who was coming at such a late hour. Anxiously, I woke Bang Nurdin to tell him someone was calling him out. 'Who's there?' asked Bang Nurdin. 'It's me, Sidik. I live in the Uteun Dama village. Please come out; someone's looking for you.' Bang Nurdin, wearing only pants and a sarong around his shoulders, opened the door to meet the person, who was escorted by a man standing straight, his hair short, wearing a white t-shirt.

'Let me see your ID and Family Card.' The man spoke bad Acehnese. We could see that he was not Acehnese. Bang Nurdin went to get his ID and family card. From inside the room I could hear the conversation. 'They only want to see my ID card and our family card,' explained Bang Nurdin. 'Be careful, Bang.' He nodded and took the ID and Family Card to show to the soldier outside.

The man returned the family card but retained his ID. I heard him telling Bang Nurdin to get dressed to go because there was some business to take care of. Hearing that, I emerged from the room. 'Where are you taking my husband at such a late hour? Why are you taking him?' I asked the man. 'We're taking him to the guard post for a little while. Go back to sleep.' Outside, there were many other men, all wearing camouflage gear, holding rifles. In the moonlight I could make out ten people. Some stood near the fence, others surrounded the house. I grew suspicious when I saw my husband forced to go with the man in the white t-shirt. Ten other men followed them out. Bang Nurdin wore a white shirt; his red-checked sarung was slung over his shoulder. I did my ablutions and prayed, sending up a plea for the safety of my husband. I got the Al-Quran and softly recited the verses through the night.

In the early dawn some neighbours came. 'Has Bang Nurdin come home?' they asked. 'No,' I replied. They told me they had heard the sound of gunfire on the glee. I became weak. Was it Bang Nurdin they had shot? O God, don't let it be. My younger brother came and talked with the folks. They went to Desa Punti, the next village, where the command post was located, to ask permission to see the victim of last night's shooting in the glee. I heard that they had also taken Teungku Adam, the village elder. I wanted so much to go, but they said no. I obeyed and let Yusda join the group.

They found Bang Nurdin in the glee, lying on our plot of land. He'd become a corpse. The villagers continued searching for Teungku Adam but didn't find him.

Not long after, Bang Nurdin's corpse arrived at home. Weakness overcame me when I saw my husband's corpse. His throat had been cut through, leaving but a bit of skin attaching the head to his body. The checkered sarong had been stuffed in his mouth by his murderers-all the way down so that it emerged from his slit throat. I saw a hole in his chest. Bruises covered his face. The white shirt and pants he had worn were now red. Blood from the throat, blood from the chest. Then everything went dark and I no longer knew what happened after that.

In our simple house, Bang Nurdin's corpse was laid out. Only a few people came to pay their respects, and even they stayed only a short while before hurrying home. Normally, when someone dies, almost all the villagers come to mourn. They pray for the deceased and for the family. Now all this had changed. Bang Nurdin's corpse was bathed and buried by the few people who dared to come. After prayers, the people recited the Al-Quran and prayed for the soul, but they left long before midnight. My sorrow grew when I heard my daughter, Hasnah, praying, 'Allah, I beg of You, may the murderers of my father quickly die.'

Syarifah Mariati is a lecturer in Banda Aceh and on the board of the women's group Flower Aceh (flower@aceh.wasantara.net.id). Sylvia Tiwon was the translator. Excerpted from 'Catatan seorang janda' in 'Nyala panyot tak terpadamkan' (Banda Aceh: Flower Aceh, 1999).