

BETRAYAL IN JAVA

He was about to have breakfast. Before doing so, he looked down from the apartment window at the scene below. There was a commotion beside the rubbish-filled canal. Two people were lifting a blue and bloated body onto the pavement. Breakfast no longer seemed attractive.

He had been in Jakarta for three days. The apartment belonged to a relative. On the fourteenth floor were swimming pools, a kiosk and numerous benches. People walked and sat in the fetid air. Children splashed each other in the shallow pools. A hum of distant traffic floated over the walls.

Mutiara sat in the shade waiting for him. As he approached, he thought how the hijab actually added to Mutiara's beauty. When he had first visited Indonesia, few women had worn the hijab; now almost all women did.

He wondered about the shift in the practice of Islam that had ensured such conformity. To him, it was regrettable that so many attractive heads were now covered, but he had to concede that the woman in front of him was no less attractive because of her headscarf.

"*Selamat pagi,*" he said in his Australian accent.

"Good morning, Jeremy," Mutiara replied in almost faultless English. "What's the plan?"

"The plan is to have breakfast. My hunger was stopped in its tracks when I saw a body being lifted from the canal. Let's go down to the food court."

They took the lift to the ground floor where all types of food was on offer. Jeremy opted for *nasi goreng*, the only Indonesian dish he found palatable. His companion went for something much spicier.

As he watched Mutiara eating, Jeremy thought about how she had approached him in a hotel foyer where he was meeting a local delegation. She had been very friendly and had offered to escort him around the city and show him places he had probably never seen. He had taken up this offer because he needed to fill in a week or so before attending a conference in Bogor.

Breakfast completed, they walked slowly through the lobby to where the traffic drifted haphazardly along the busy thoroughfare. There was little observance of lanes, but the pace was so slow it didn't really matter. Jakarta had been close to gridlock for several years and, as the tollways were expensive, none but the rich would use them.

They decided to walk, with Mutiara pointing out key features of the city. At one point there was a monument to some generals who had been murdered in the 1965 coup. Jeremy walked over to inspect it more closely but was suddenly aware of several men shouting at him angrily. Jeremy was puzzled. What had he done?

Mutiara came closer. "Take off your shoes," she said hastily. "This is regarded as holy ground and you are causing offence."

Jeremy began to remove his shoes, but then he hesitated. He decided to move away. The men's anger had put him off.

They found a coffee shop in a large, modern shopping mall. Jeremy had noticed on this visit the contradictions. Modern shopping centres, hotels and apartments were being built expansively in a country where poverty and corruption were still the rule. Alongside the canals and railway lines, people lived in shacks made from scrap wood and iron mixed with cardboard walls. Children wandered on the roadways, trying to sell bottled water, or cigarettes.

"Those men were rather aggressive," Jeremy observed to his companion.

"Well, to them you are a *bule* – a foreigner- and some Muslims are getting very antagonistic towards those they call infidels. There has been an increase in militant action against bars and clubs where foreigners gather to drink and women are scantily dressed and wear lots of make-up. To a traditional Muslim, these things are morally wrong."

"So much for tolerance," Jeremy remarked.

Mutiara quickly changed the subject. "We could visit the aquarium," she suggested. "The place is cool and there are some excellent specimens, including piranha."

"Sounds good," Jeremy smiled and pushed a strand of hair back under her head-scarf.

They spent a pleasant few hours at the aquarium before returning to the lobby of the building where Jeremy had his apartment. Mutiara did not stay but agreed to go with Jeremy to a club that night at one of the spots frequented by tourists. Some hours later, Mutiara joined Jeremy. He drank beer; she sipped mineral water. It was difficult to converse in the noisy atmosphere and Jeremy used this as an excuse to get closer to Mutiara and whisper in her ear. She had not worn the hijab so her hair hung loosely about her shoulders. Her dress was fairly modest, but when she crossed her legs a tantalising expanse of thigh was exposed.

Suddenly there was the sound of breaking glass. Several men wearing head-bands and carrying long sticks rushed in and began smashing the drink bottles behind the bar. Shards of glass scattered across the floor and people ducked behind chairs to avoid being hit. Some men picked up chairs to defend themselves. Others pushed their female companions behind them for protection. However, most of the occupants of the bar either sat stunned, or ran for cover. They were obviously outnumbered. Then the men grabbed several women, including Mutiara, and dragged them out the door. Jeremy held Mutiara's hand for as long as he could, but she was pulled from his grasp, and along with the other women, herded through the door into a waiting van. The men who had lost partners looked around in confusion. Not long after, the police arrived, but they were not helpful and talked to the owner more than anyone else.

Jeremy had no clue about where to look for Mutiara. He did not know where she lived or if she had a job. All he could do was go back to the apartment and wait.

Mutiara entered the room adjoining the mosque and bowed respectfully toward an elderly, bearded man sitting cross-legged on the floor. An open copy of the Koran was in front of him. He continued to read for a few moments, then he looked up.

“You are all right?” he asked kindly. “The people who raided the club treated you well?”

Mutiara replied in High Javanese. “It went well. He suspected nothing. I was taken away, just like the others, and to him it would have appeared that I had been treated the same as everyone else.”

“Do you think he is ready?”

Mutiara bowed her head. “In a day or two, we can accomplish our mission.”

“Just remember to keep yourself pure,” the imam advised.

“I will. He has done nothing improper, and I do not stay with him alone in his apartment.”

“Just focus on your mission.” The imam laid a hand on the open Koran. “It must be done soon. Our war against the infidels must not falter. Bless you, my child.”

The elderly imam raised his hand in dismissal. Mutiara backed towards the door, bowed, and left.

The next morning, Mutiara phoned Jeremy from the ground floor of his apartment building. A few minutes later, he met her. He noticed that her body was completely covered.

“I am so relieved to see you. Are you OK?”

“Fine. They let me go after a lecture about modesty and how women disrespect men if they show any flesh at all, except for the face and hands. My lipstick was wiped off and I had to wash my face. Otherwise, no harm done.”

“Sometimes I think this country is primitive.”

“It is better to respect cultures and try not to impose Western values on an Asian setting. Come, I want to take you to a beautiful part of the coast. We can have a lovely day relaxing.”

With that, Mutiara took him to a car park where an attendant handed her a key and directed them to a late model car. She signalled for Jeremy to get in and Mutiara occupied the driver’s seat. Before long, they entered the slipstream of Jakartan traffic. Jeremy could not believe the noise and the way cars weaved from one lane to the other; anywhere there seemed to be a space. Every time that the car stopped, boys would appear selling bottles of water, or cigarettes. At the side of the road, near an overpass, there was an old man with a monkey on a chain. The monkey danced, and drivers were expected to throw coins into a cup.

The road ahead seemed blocked. Smoke was rising from a group of cars, and flags and banners were being waved above the tops of the cars. People were rushing in all directions, some carrying banners. There was no sign of any police and the crowd seemed highly agitated.

“What’s going on?” Jeremy asked.

“Must be a demonstration. There have been a few lately,” Mutiara answered.

“What’s the problem?”

Mutiara replied: “It’s part of what we call *perjuangan* – a struggle. First, it was the struggle against the Dutch; then the struggle for independence. In 1965, it was the struggle against the Communists, and now it’s the struggle to retain religious purity in the face of increasing secularisation, materialism and Western influences.”

Jeremy shrugged. “You mean modernisation?”

“That’s part of it, yes. But it’s also because many Muslims fear that their faith is being undermined and that Islam needs to undergo a process of renewal.”

Jeremy frowned. “It seems as if this renewal, as you call it, is often violent and has given rise to terrorism and economic disruption.”

“Well, to some it is a *jihad* – a holy war, and the only valid result is a restoration of Islamic values.”

Mutiara eased the car into a side street.

“I know a way out,” she said confidently, as she slowly avoided street hawkers and motor-scooters. Jeremy was surprised at the number of people and the amount of activity evident in such a narrow passageway. However, he also noticed that many windows were boarded up.

After a few minutes, the road became less crowded. More and more people were on foot, carrying baskets or simply trudging along with no particular intent. Increasingly, rice-fields appeared on both sides of the road. Every patch of arable land had something growing on it. Dwellings were ramshackle, but those who sat on their haunches in the front of them smiled and waved as the car passed. Jeremy had read somewhere that the poorest people were the happiest, and he was beginning to believe it.

A while later, the sea became visible. Some boats were a little way out, their occupants probably fishing. Other boats rested on the sand with nets draped over their prows. Mutiara kept driving until they stopped at a picturesque spot. They moved away from the car.

The beach was secluded. They walked along the sand until they came to a clump of coconut palms. Mutiara said, “Look at the sea, Jeremy. I love it here because it is such a quiet place in a very crowded island. Step forward and take in the view.” She moved behind him, raising her arm as she did so.

Two men appeared quickly. One held Jeremy and the other slashed his throat with one stroke.

Mutiara continued to look out at the gently moving water. She ignored the activity behind her as the two men carried the body away. After several minutes, she turned and headed back towards the car. In the distance she saw the imam and two attendants looking down at the

beach. A shiver of remorse passed through Mutiara. She could not look directly at the imam and when she reached her car, she slumped into the driver's seat and gripped the steering wheel until her knuckles turned white.

Jeremy was reported missing, but was never found.

A few days later, a lone seabird was flying above the Java Sea. It looked down to see a corpse, blue and bloated, rolling across the waves.