

From Frisian clay to tropical uniform

Gerda Hartkamp

Walking my Revolution Publishers

Happiness is short-lived.
Do it thoroughly,
if you want to experience it.

Happiness is like a snapshot.
A day that warms you for a while,
But never to be forgot.

Happiness, you must learn the lesson.
Cherish it in your heart,
As it is a memory collection.

Happiness, you want to hold on.
Make sure it never ends,
but you better treasure it until it's gone.

Happiness, it's over before you know.
The minute you're not paying attention
it leaves you on your own.

Happiness is it here to stay?
Does fight for it help,
or will the wind blow it away?

*As a living memory of my brave grandparents,
Anne Lighthart and Charlotte Lighthart-Breemer.*

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Preface

With a bang I shut the book in front of me and put it away. Sitting in my lazy hammock chair on my small balcony, I muse on the book I've just finished. How come I always read stories about children who find themselves in difficult or even precarious situations and yet come out victorious? The books are about mistreatment or abuse, survival in wartime or poverty. Always those extreme situations.

Could my choice of books have anything to do with my mother's past who as a little girl lived in the Dutch East Indies during the war and had to survive with little food and the constant threat of the occupiers? With only her mother and grandmother to take care of her and her brother and sisters. With the ever-present fear of the Japanese occupiers but without the protection of her strong father who was held in a prisoners of war camp.

I decide to talk to my mother and hope to break her silence. Indonesian people don't like to talk about the things that happened in their past.

'Ah,' they say, 'what has been has been! The Netherlands is now our home and looking back is only making things difficult for yourself. If you keep scratching a wound, it will never heal. *Boeang sial*, away with misfortune.'

And in my mother's case, 'I hardly remember anything.'

Because my generation does not know much about the past of their parents, I studied the history and events in the

Dutch East Indies in the years just before and during the Second World War. Also, in a small part of the struggle for independence afterwards.

Thus, I learned how my grandparents and their children became involved in this terrible period of death and destruction. It is important to know where your roots lie. Most of us know people with family who moved from the Dutch East Indies, both white and colored.

With this personal story I hope to fill gaps that have arisen in many descendants of the Dutch East Indies community. But sure, the story is also for those who are interested in the survival instinct of people. Those who take the trouble to delve into the lives of ordinary people in difficult situations.

I have written this book by delving into the history of my family. This history will not be much different from what many others have experienced under the Japanese yoke.

Indonesia is still a paradise on earth and the Netherlands has a great, emotional history there. We are drawn to this beautiful country with its mountains, jungle, beaches, and sea. Without even thinking that this is where a large part of the history of our Dutch population lies.

Indonesian people always wear a friendly smile whether they mean it or not. Smile so as not to offend or be seen as unkind. Laugh so as not to reveille the drama they experienced in the camps or outside the fence. And this legacy of being modest they have passed on to their children. We, Indonesian descendants, have also inherited the politeness that was forced upon them by the Dutch colonizer and later the Japanese occupier.

I have heard that you are an Indo when:

- You get a slap, instead of a sharp blow.
- There is a bottle at the toilet, *botol tjebok*.
- You must explain a hundred times that nasi is just

white rice and not fried rice, like nasi goreng.

- You sniff your uncles and aunts instead of giving a kiss on the cheek.
- You sit comfortably at the dining room table with guests instead of the couch.
- You are considered arrogant, *sombong*, by people, while acting normal.
- And the most frequently asked question is: Have you eaten yet?

Many of these clichés are true. But there are so many more little habits that are entwined in our DNA. The Dutch descendants have inherited the homesickness of their Dutch East Indies grandparents for a country and its customs that no longer exist.

Many parts of the story are hard and ruthless, but the hardship is true and probably worse than I have written. War brings out the worst in people, but also forges friendships for life.

My greatest wish would therefore be the impossible: ‘A world without hate!’

Part I The first step to a new life

*Here the boys from Holland come.
The ground and the houses tremble some.
But whatever shivers, they don't tremble with.
There never was a Dutch soldier who did.
They don't like to fight; only when they must.
Then they lash out, fight hard and just.*

*The boys from Holland, they seem tame.
So soft and so sweet and meek as a lamb they came.
But sometimes a stranger wants to rule the base.
Then they decently let him know he's out of place.
And if he doesn't want to leave, they make him listen.
Shoot in his foot and throws him in prison.*

*Soldier song from 1915
A. Loosely*

Sneek, 1928

With legs as heavy as concrete, Anne walks down the alley to the back door of his childhood home. He knows that the news he is about to share with his mother will not cheer her up. It is three o'clock, and his father is at work. That's fine because Anne isn't visiting him.

Anne was called up for military service a year ago. He wasn't happy about it, but when you're called up as a special conscript you must go. He would be exempt from that duty because his big brothers have served. But with war recently over, the nation's defense apparently is short of men.

Anne has difficulty with the strict regime within the barracks. Still, when he received the flyer with which he could register for a tropical country, it seemed like a nice escape from his hopeless existence.

There is little work in Friesland and the relationship with his father is, to say the least, bad. He wants to be as far away from him as possible. Despite not seeing him for two years, he still feels his piercing eyes.

Not only the flight and the adventure invite him, but also the extra pay he receives for it. Maybe later he can start his own business or something like that.

He certainly has no intention of ending up as poor as his parents. During his childhood there was hardly any food on the table. But now that he's made the decision to leave, it's up to him to tell his mother. It is certainly not easy.

He is stationed in the Prince Frederik barracks in Leeuwarden. Here he follows his AMO, the General Military Training. Extra boys are called in because support is requested in the Dutch East Indies. The soldiers are encouraged to apply for overseas service with higher pay and an additional bonus.

This is what Anne wants. Gone from under the yoke of his father. The Dutch East Indies will give him the freedom and happiness he seeks. He's sure of it. And now is the time for the first jump. He is going to inform his mother. He doesn't care what his father thinks, but his mother is a different story. He hasn't seen her for a while and now he comes in with the news that he may be leaving the Netherlands for a long time.

He lets out a deep sigh. His mother is a small woman, no taller than five feet one inch. She is not very intelligent, but she has a strong will and a good character.

He never understood why she married his father. That old man is a bully with the heart of a rat. Mom is way too kind to him. His father is a sturdy guy with a big black mustache. A gruff fellow with loose hands. He usually walks in neat clothes because he goes by the houses to sell his wares. But his mother walks in rags. He's sure his mother deserves better.

Anne's parents, Aaltje and Harmen Ligthart, live in a shabby slum in the Brouwersteeg in Sneek. This is where Anne and all his siblings were born. When he is older, he wants a large family too. But he is going to take good care of his wife and children. He's sure his father didn't want this many children, but then he should have controlled himself better.

Anne walks through the dark, dirty alleyway with the sour smell of urine and feces. The alley runs from Oosterdijk to Kleinzand. It's not wide, maybe a meter or so. A smelly, filthy gutter runs along both sides of the houses. He covers his nose with his scarf. He had forgotten how much this takes

your breath away. Even the desolate November rain doesn't dispel the stench.

The house, or rather barn where his parents live, is halfway down the alley. When he stands at the door, he knocks carefully so as not to startle his mother. Then he gently pushes the door open. His mother looks the same as always. Her hair in a bun at the back of her head. He can already see some gray tufts on her temples. She wears a dark dress with a black apron with red flowers over it. She also wears a pair of thick wool socks and slippers. She has a round, but pleated face.

When she sees who is coming in, a big smile appears on her tired face. She hugs him and says,

'Son, am I glad to see you. It has been a long time.' He smiles at her.

'Yes mother, I know.'

They sit together at the dining table while the water boils for coffee. She takes the old green cookie jar that belonged to Grandma, and she gives him a cookie. Cookies are only for special occasions. They don't even have money to eat properly let alone have cookies. But this is such a special occasion. It's the first time she's seen her son since he left the house two years ago. After they have talked about small things for a while, Anne suddenly says:

'Mother, I want to tell you something. I am doing my military service and still have a year and a half to go. I have applied to go to the Dutch East Indies. It's time for me to see the world.'

Aaltje doesn't quite know how to react. But he's nineteen, so old enough to decide for himself. Her son is a sweet boy who had a very hard childhood.

She looks at his serious, blue-grey eyes that are so much like hers. He is nothing like his father. Anne has a handsome, elongated face. His nearly black hair cut in a quiff and kept in place with hair cream. One lock falls loosely over his forehead, unwilling to stay put.