



The 2018 Stella Prize Shortlist

Extract

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The Fish Girl



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In the darkness before dawn the village men row out in their boats that are shaped like the half-pods from the criollo tree, and in the heat of the day the women scale, clean and smoke the fish the men bring home.

When Junius comes from town in search of cheap labour for the Dutch Resident's kitchen, he calls out to the villagers in their Sunda dialect.

An older, leathery fisherman steps forward. 'My daughter is good with the scaling knife.' His voice grates, as if a fish bone jags his throat.

'How old is she?' Junius asks.

The fisherman stares at him for a few moments and then shakes his head. 'She comes to here,' he says, holding his fingers level with the bottom of his earlobe.

Junius's eyebrow lifts. Although he has only a quarter Dutch blood, he is paler than the crowd of under-dressed men before him, and knows how to wear trousers and a necktie. 'Bring her to me. I'll have to look at her first.'

The fisherman disappears in search of his daughter, while the others press the virtues of their family members on the man from town. Two women, still clutching the baskets they are weaving, babies nestled close to their chests in batik slendangs, cry out to him, urge him to take their older daughters. A group of men approaches from the beach, tying their sarongs tight about their hips, bare feet shuffling along the sandy earth. Some of them ignore Junius, return to their shacks clustered in neat rows behind the ceremonial hut, but three younger ones stay on, push to the front of the crowd.

Soon the older fisherman returns, followed by a slight girl, her midriff and legs wrapped in a roughly woven sarong. Her straight

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hair hangs over her face so that only a glimpse of her eyes and nose is visible. Her feet are bare and her shoulders, rounded forward, accentuate her small, pubescent breasts.

She is jostled on either side by young men and women, hopeful to gain work in the Dutch quarters. The young men call out to Junius, grinning and joking, but the girl keeps her head bowed.

Junius nods to one lean man and then another, gesturing for them to join him, before stopping in front of the girl. 'Pull your hair back.'

The girl, eyes still trained upon the ground, parts her hair with the backs of her hands, so that the shiny tresses arc like the wings of a black bird.

'What is her name?' Junius asks the fisherman.

'Mina.'

Junius's eyes linger on her high cheekbones and fine mouth and he nods. 'She will do. Have her ready to leave in the morning.'

A sob of dismay rises in the girl's chest but lodges in her throat like a frog in a tree hollow, for she knows better than to cry out. She has never roamed far from the edges of the tiny village, no further than a few metres into the forest that backs onto the beach. Even when the other children disappear deep into the shadowy folds of the casuarina trees to play, she stays behind to help her mother sweep the house or scrape the fish. How will she bear to be so far away from everything she knows?

Following her father the short distance to their home, she keeps her face lowered, away from the gaze of curious villagers. They reach their hut, elevated on short stilts, the walls a medley of bark and timber with a shaggy, thatched roof. Her mother is standing on the narrow landing.

'What have you done?' she asks, her chapped fingers clutching

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at her sarong. Her eyes switch from her husband to her daughter and then back to her husband. ‘What have you done?’

The old fisherman simply stares at his wife. His eyes are bloodshot — are always bloodshot — as if the glittering sun has saturated him with its heat. He eventually shrugs past her into the darkness of the hut.

Mina doesn’t enter as there is only the one room. She can already hear her mother’s voice, soft and plaintive, working at her father, and his low grunts in response. They very rarely exchange harsh words, the last time being two years before when her father wanted Mina to wed. Her mother succeeded in dissuading him then, saying she was too young. Would she succeed this time?

Mina walks down to the beach and contemplates the small triangles of silver fish arrayed on the nets. Her mother has laid them out to dry but it is becoming dark, so Mina wraps them in spare netting and pulls the lot up to the side of the hut, away from night-time predators. She knows that tomorrow there will be more fish, damp and fleshy, ready to be scaled and gutted. And that the next day there will be even more. She stares at her feet, at the sand and strands of grass, and for the first time feels a flicker of curiosity. What will be expected of her at the Dutch house? More fish?

Standing at the corner of the hut, next to a cluster of freshly salted sardines strung to the end of a rod, she listens for her parents, but all is quiet now. Her father comes out and sits on the end of the landing and lights a rokok, the aura of clove and tobacco smoke rising above his head. A metallic clatter of cooking echoes out from the back and she joins her mother at the fire. She’s frying chilli and fish paste and despite herself, Mina feels hunger stir in her stomach. She squats down and begins to break apart some

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salted fish to add to the pot.

‘Do I have to go?’ she asks.

Her mother wipes the side of her nose with the heel of her hand as if to brush away tears, although she’s not crying. She nods. ‘Yes.’

‘But why? Have I done wrong?’

There are creases between the older woman’s brows from when she frowns against the glare of the sun and privation. These lines have become deeper with time, and now resemble keen, inch-long slices in her forehead. She shakes her head, chopping kangkung to add to the fish. ‘No. No, it’s not that, Tak-tak.’ Mina knows she’s not in trouble when her mother uses her nickname, starfish. Her mother tosses the greens into the pan and stirs them about, and then wipes sweat from her upper lip. ‘Your father thinks you will be better off there. You can work, and maybe even send us things sometimes.’

‘What things?’

Her mother shrugs. ‘Food? Maybe clothing.’

‘But how?’

‘Your father says you will exchange your hours of work for things we need, like more spice and tobacco.’

‘But how will I do this?’

‘I am not sure,’ her mother answers, shaking her head slowly. ‘Your father thinks your Dutch master will allow you to visit us once in a while, so maybe then you could bring us back some goods.’

Mina rests back onto her haunches, and sniffs at the salty fish crumbled against her fingers. ‘What work will I do there?’

‘What you do here, I expect. Cooking, sweeping, washing.’ Her strong, bony hand squeezes Mina’s knee. ‘But you must

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behave yourself. Remember where you come from. Remember your father and me. Remember one day you must return to us, Tak-tak.' Her voice is quivering now, and Mina feels the force of tears against the back of her eyes. 'And never let anyone see this,' her mother adds, folding back a corner of the girl's sarong.

They stare at the scaly, red rash that covers her inner thighs.

Mina swiftly re-covers her mottled skin, conscious of the fire's heat upon the weeping sores.

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The three of them have their meal seated around the fire. They eat the rice and fish from banana leaves with their fingers, and Mina asks, licking the seasoning from her shiny fingertips, 'What will I eat there?'

'Food,' her mother says.

'Yes, but what kind of food? Will it be the same as here?'

Her mother glances at her father, and she knows her mother is trying to gauge how long until he loses his temper and slopes off to smoke. 'I'm not sure, Tak-tak. Shh, now.'

And what will she wear? What is the town like? Who will she work with? She asks herself these questions, a tremor of excitement finally mingling with the dread in her stomach, making her feel pleasantly sick like when she eats too much sirsak, the sweetness of the custard apple curdling in her stomach.

The evening sun sets as they clear away the pots, food and drying fish, and they retire to their rattan mats in the hut. Mina wonders where she will sleep in the Dutch house. She has only ever seen a white man once. He was tall, as willowy as a kanari sapling, and he wore strange clothes like the man from town. He'd trod through their village, peering into their huts, as curious as the villagers were as they gazed upon him.

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Through a gap in the wall next to where she sleeps, Mina watches the swaying, frayed leaves of the coconut trees on the beach. The waves roll and clap further out to sea, and she hears the familiar hum of the ocean calling to her. Her father snores softly, but she knows her mother is lying awake too.

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There is a damp breeze from the water as the sun rises. Mina's father strides onto the beach and glares out at the fishing boats already bobbing on the waves, fidgeting old netting between his hands. Moving back to the landing, he cracks pumpkin seeds between his teeth, making a slight whooshing sound with his lips as he spits the shells to the ground. Her mother stirs coconut milk and palm sugar into Mina's breakfast rice, a sure treat, but Mina is afraid again and almost unable to eat. She forces the meal down, gagging, determined to not waste the food that her mother would never allow herself. Finally she stands and her mother carefully wraps her own good sarong around her daughter's hips. The patterned batik is still stiff from the wax stamping, the colours earthy, with streaks of ocean blue. Mina tries to protest, for this is her mother's special sarong for ceremonial days, but the older woman clicks her tongue and ignores her. They are both weeping now, as her mother tucks and pats down the edges of the fabric, and tucks a little more, until her father grumbles that it is time to go.

Mina trails behind her father to the centre of the village, wiping snot and tears onto the back of her hand. When her father leaves her with Junius, the man from town, he squeezes her upper arm — reassuring or cautioning, she's not sure. He doesn't

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look at her. He glances above her head for a few moments, as if contemplating the branches of the mango trees, and then turns and leaves. She watches his sinewy, dark legs from behind and she feels a fissure of hatred for him. Fear slices through her anger. Oh, the gods will have something terrible in store for her for thinking such things.

‘I hope you have eaten and drunk well this morning,’ says Junius, as he swings up onto his pony. ‘It’s a long walk to Wijnkoopsbaai.’

There are two brown ponies. One is fat and carries Junius’s gear on one side of its saddle and two baskets of fish on the other. Junius’s own pony is taller, yet his feet dangle only a foot from the ground as he sways along. Mina falls in behind the two young men — Yati and Ajat. Yati is short, as squat as an eggplant, but Ajat, one of the chief’s sons, stands tall, has the broad shoulders and trim waist of a fine fisherman. They walk slowly from the village. A few friends clap the men on the shoulders, grinning, demanding they bring back some cinnamon or nutmeg. One even calls for them to bring back prospective wives, and he’s slapped playfully across the top of the head by his companions. It becomes awkward, for the young men don’t know when to stop their cajoling, when to stop following, but finally Junius frowns down upon them and they pause under the fragrant kenanga tree that marks the edge of the village. After a few seconds one of the young men left behind calls out to his friends to bring back a peci to replace his straw hat, but the ribaldry is done with.

The first part of their journey is pleasant enough as they walk in the shade of row upon row of India rubber trees. The sun is still low and not yet punishing, and the ground is damp and cool. But by mid-morning the girl, who is not used to such long periods of

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trudging, is weary and hot. She sees glistening perspiration ring the necklines of the young men ahead of her, and her mother's sarong is damp around her waist. The mountainous terrain becomes dusty, the straggle of bushes offering little shade. Her feet are sore, and the tip of her right big toe bleeds from where she jabbed it on a rock. By the time they reach Wijnkoopsbaai she is wilting, her skin greasy with sweat.

Here the roads are wider, no longer single tracks, arcing a path through a verdant patchwork of tea plantations. Small houses, square and neat with sloped roofs, line the roads next to large plots of rice paddies. Clothing is cast over shrubs to dry, and children and chickens watch them as they walk past. Mina marvels at the never-ending stream of houses.

They come to a crossroad, where the boulevard widens, leading down to the seafront. Oxen laden with baskets plod past white men on horseback. Junius pulls his pony up in front of a gate at the top of the road, and a boy runs out to open the latch. The girl stands on tip-toe but cannot see over the orderly hedges that surround the property. She is the last through, lagging behind the others. She can't resist staring at the creamy orchids or reaching for a fallen bunga raya, its happy red petals having narrowly escaped the heavy tread of the ponies. The road is steep but finally they see the house. It's much larger than even the ceremonial hut back in the village. It is stark white, with timber shutters, columns and wrought iron balustrades. Even Yati and Ajat are struck dumb by its majesty.

Junius hustles them around to the back of the house. Kneeling in the shade of a frangipani tree are two kitchen maids, dark and slim, grinding seeds in a mortar and pestle. They lean into each other and watch as the young men from the village take

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water from a pail. The maids each wear plain white kebayas over matching brown and black sarongs, and have their shiny black hair pulled into low ponytails. They look so smart Mina is glad she's wearing her mother's good sarong after all.

Once the soggy baskets of fish are unloaded from the horses, Junius tells her to stay in the courtyard until she is collected, and he leads the village men and ponies away to the stables. Her legs feel heavy so she squats down onto her haunches, and watches the servant girls go about their work. They finish with the seeds, and start slicing chillies and lemongrass on a wooden board on the ground before them. They talk to each other, but they do not talk to her. One of them rises to lug the heavy baskets up the back stairs to the kitchen verandah, her back arched with the weight of the fish.

An older woman comes from the kitchen to inspect the fish and, noticing Mina, descends the stairs with crablike steps to allow for the girth of her stomach. She stands in front of the girl and looks her over, like she is a piece of fruit at the market. She makes Mina turn, and even squeezes her upper arms, feeling for muscle tone.

'You will call me Ibu Tana,' the woman says. 'I am the master's head cook. You will work for me in the kitchen, but if you are no good, you will have to be one of the cleaning maids. Do you understand?'

Ibu Tana is shorter than Mina. Her hair, black with wires of grey sprouting at the hairline, is pulled into a severe bun, and her skin is saggy and lumpy. She reminds Mina of a toad.

'Do you understand?' the cook repeats. 'Pray to the gods, they didn't send me someone who doesn't speak the language, did they?' she then says, exasperated, to the other kitchen maids.

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Mina nods. ‘I understand.’ Her mother was born in a village on the outskirts of Wijnkoopsbaai where this language of trade was used often. As they knelt in the shallows together, scooping the muck and worm-like innards from the fish, she’d taught Mina many of these words, and told her of bold women like this Ibu Tana.

The cook wraps her steel fingers around Mina’s arm again and pulls her to a hut at the back of the courtyard. Inside is the servants’ mandi, the tub filled with clean water. Ibu Tana grasps the end of Mina’s sarong and unravels it from her body, her gnarled fingers rasping the girl’s skin. Mina covers the rash on her thighs with her hands, but Ibu Tana pushes her towards the mandi and tells her to wash with the sandalwood oil, to change into the servant’s sarong and kebaya neatly folded next to the wash bucket. The mandi door slams shut behind her. Mina has never washed like this before, for a modest sunset soak in the sea is considered ample cleansing in the village. She picks up the small bucket by the mandi and dips it in the water. Lifting the bucket above her head she lets the cool water sluice over her body. She repeats this three times, until she is shivering.

Looking around, she can’t find anything to dry herself with. Ibu Tana has taken her mother’s sarong and all that is left are the servant clothes. She feels a flutter of panic; she doesn’t want to keep Ibu Tana waiting. Quickly she wraps the new sarong around her wet hips. It is the same as those worn by the other servant girls. The pattern is far fancier than any she has ever seen before; a shower of black tadpoles in symmetrical russet swirls. The kebaya feels strange as she gingerly pokes her hands into the sleeves and pulls the blouse onto her body, for she’s not used to the feel of fabric against her back, rubbing against her shoulders

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and breasts. She's not sure how she'll ever become used to the confinement.

She climbs the back steps to the kitchen slowly, but once there, her trepidation turns to amazement as she gazes around the huge room at the number of stoves and pots. She's never seen an oven built into a fireplace before. There are glass-front cabinets, bowls and plates stacked high. One of the kitchen maids is washing crockery in a large tub while the other one stands in front of a bubbling pot of oil. A houseboy pauses in his sweeping and grins at her.

Ibu Tana turns from the oven to look at her. A slow smile curls the side of her mouth. 'The fish girl has brought the smell of the sea with her,' she says. 'You'd better be careful or we'll accidentally fry you up with the crabs.'

The kitchen maids titter when Mina bends her head to sniff her arm, but Ibu Tana shakes her head and tells her to shell the beans.

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