

PER.EMPV.AN



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Foreword

In June 2018, Sisters in Islam (SIS) launched a short story writing competition with the objective of creating a creative platform for young women to tell their stories. The competition, which is one of a kind in Malaysia, brought together stories from all walks of lives in the country through the vehicle of words. The stories we received were so compelling, we have decided to compile them into this book, as a way of honouring these experiences.

In these pages are stories that will make you ponder, dream, laugh and cry, as you journey through some of the more intimate psyche of women's lived realities.

It is our pleasure to welcome you to the inaugural Per.Empu.An, an anthology of stories, written by women for women.

Sisters in Islam



Kisah Alia

by Nur Shuhada Ahmad

Pembaca tahu, tidak kira dari sudut pandang keluarga, masyarakat, atau kawan lelaki malahan kawan sesama perempuan; menjadi seorang perempuan itu adalah payah dan melelahkan untuk sesetengah perempuan.

Cerita yang penulis tulis ini adalah berdasarkan apa yang kawan penulis sendiri lalui. Kawan satu sekolah, satu kelas dan satu taman perumahan selama 9 tahun. Kami berjiran 5 buah rumah. Namanya Aliah.

Menjadi anak bongsu daripada 7 orang adik beradik adalah sesuatu yang sukar. Apa lagi Aliah yang hanya seorang perempuan. Aliah diajar dari kecil bahawa si abang adalah raja dan dia adalah hamba sahaya tanpa bantahan dari ibu ayah. Dididik juga bahawa anak perempuan itu perlu berkata “ya” sepanjang hidup dan harus dihumban masuk api neraka jika berkata “tidak” kepada setiap arahan. Konon dosanya sama seperti dosa manusia yang menolak hukum Tuhan jika tidak mendengar dan ikut telunjuk abang-abangnya. Aliah hidupnya hanya di rumah. Tidak boleh keluar kecuali ke sekolah. Kalau sekolah itu hanya sebelah rumah, mungkin Aliah juga masih tidak boleh ke kelas. Cukup sekadar mendengar suara guru dari laman rumah.

Ini hanyalah bidalan penulis. Jangan percaya.

Kalau.

Kalau boleh...hidupnya cuma celik mata dan membanting tulang empat kerat di dalam rumah; menjadi bibik kepada 4 orang lagi abangnya yang masih belum berkahwin. Kalaupun Aliah ada ilmu pertukangan, mungkin Aliah disuruh juga bertukang itu ini. Lagi sekali, kalau.

Di sini penulis ceritakan serba ringkas jadual harian seorang Aliah pada hari minggu:

Bangun subuh, masak nasi goreng. Tak nak roti-roti bagai serupa orang kaya di dalam drama Melayu. Nasi ya. Sudah siap masak, kutip baju kotor dari bilik ke bilik. Basuh baju. Dalam masa yang sama, bersihkan kandang kucing kepunyaan abang nombor 3 dan 4 yang totalnya adalah 5 ekor. Buang tahi. Abang-abang sudah siap makan, masuk dapur balik masuk pinggan. Emak?

Emaknya masuk ke dalam bilik mengemas bilik katanya sehingga jam 1 tengahari. Tidak diketahui besar mana bilik si emak sampai berjam-jam mengemas kerana bilik emak penulis hanya saiz *standard* sahaja. Tak sampai satu jam pun jika emak penulis mengemas biliknya. Sudah siap mengemas di dapur, kembali semula ke ampai untuk sambung menyidai kain baju. Sudah siap, pergi menyapu satu rumah. Sudah siap menyapu dalam rumah, menyapu luar rumah. Siap menyapu, masuk dapur semula keluarkan ikan ayam dari peti ais untuk masak tengahari. Lepas tengah hari, barulah Aliah bernafas sikit. Sikit. Kenapa sikit? Kadang-kadang si abang meminta buat itu ini. Tukar cadar atau kemas almari contohnya. Lepas masak untuk makan malam, barulah Aliah ada masa untuk buat kerja sekolah. Ya, pembaca, Aliah tidak menonton television bersama keluarga. Aliah lagi gemar membaca surat khabar di perpustakaan jika ada kelapangan berbanding menonton berita di televisyen.

“Pergilah masuk sekolah asrama,” penulis kata padanya. Aliah gelak. “Tak mungkin,” dia balas kembali. Kami jalan beriringan balik dari sekolah. Penulis mengeluh memikirkan nasib Aliah. Penulis yakin Aliah bukan Cinderella walaupun takdir mereka serupa.

Oh ya, Aliah juga tidak diberikan telefon bimbit. Di sini penulis tidak menulis tentang telefon pintar yang harga beribu ya. Cukup telefon yang membolehkan Aliah berhubung melalui mesej dengan kawan-kawan jika ingin bertanya tentang kerja rumah atau kami berhubung kepada Aliah jika ada sesuatu berita penting melibatkan kami sekelas.

Memandangkan penulis adalah kawan yang paling dekat, penulis kerap datang sendiri ke rumah Aliah untuk memaklumkan berita kelas kami. Di sini penulis ingin jelaskan pada pembaca yang penulis benci melihat si abang memaki hamun si adik jika ingin berjumpa dengan penulis. Penulis benci melihat si abang menjeling meluat memandang penulis di luar pagar rumahnya. Penulis tak tahu sebab musabab si abang benci dengan penulis tapi penulis pernah menggores kereta Waja milik si abang menggunakan kunci, bermula dari tayar depan sehingga ke belakang pada ketika penulis ke pasar malam. Aliah cerita

yang abangnya mengamuk sakan dan menjerit melolong meminta duit kepada emaknya untuk ke bengkel memadam kesan calar yang penulis buat. Sampai sekarang Aliah tak tahu itu kerja penulis. Dan sampai sekarang, penulis tak rasa berdosa. Tapi pembaca jangan tiru. Dosa.

Habis fasal kehidupan Aliah di rumah. Penulis ceritakan fasal Aliah di sekolah pula.

Aliah cantik orangnya. Lemah lembut. Kau lemah lembutlah orang pijak kepala kau, penulis cakap pada Aliah. Dia senyum. Macam biasa. Penulis baru habis mengamuk bila ada seorang pelajar perempuan ‘mencucuk’ seorang cikgu untuk menggugurkan nama Aliah dalam mewakili daerah dalam permainan catur. Aliah tak berbakat, katanya. Aliah menang peringkat sekolah sebab nasib sahaja, tambah lagi. Aliah angguk sahaja. Tak ada rezeki, katanya kepada penulis.

Aliah juga pernah dipersalahkan atas kehilangan duit kelas. Duit kelas itu kami kumpul bersama untuk jamuan akhir tahun. Kami nak buat di restoran mewah jadi kami kumpul awal. Disebabkan Aliah berada di dalam kelas untuk mengambil buku dan ingin dipulangkan semula ke perpustakaan, satu kelas setuju Aliah bersalah. Penulis mengamuk lagi. Aliah hanya diam menunduk tidak berkata apa. Nasib baik guru kelas kami tidak mempercayai cerita bodoh yang disampaikan oleh ketua kelas. Duit itu diganti oleh guru kelas kami sendiri.

Cerita lain.

Aliah juga pernah diserang oleh sekumpulan senior perempuan di belakang sekolah atas sebab Aliah bermain mata dengan ‘pakwe’ salah seorang dari mereka pada waktu kokurikulum. Penulis mengamuk bila Aliah masuk latihan perbarisan rumah sukan dengan muka merah padam menahan air mata.

Para pembaca, penulis memang seorang yang agak baran ya. Baran sampai penulis lempang Aliah sebab jadi perempuan lemah. Penulis lempang sebab dia sendiri tak mampu untuk pertahankan diri sendiri. Dari rumah jadi balaci, sampai sekolah biarkan diri dibuli. Sampai kawan baik sendiri pun naik hantu melihat perangai lembut tak bertempat Aliah. Nasib baik ‘pakwe’ yang

digaduhkan hensem. Tak sedih sangat mungkin. Balik dari sekolah, penulis paksa Aliah untuk tunjuk mana satu setan yang berani buli orang sesuka hati tanpa usul periksa. Penulis ugut untuk tampar kali kedua tengah-tengah tangga kalau Aliah sendiri diaman kes tengah hari tadi.

Dalam takut-takut, Aliah tunjuk juga. Penulis paksa Aliah balik dulu. Pendek cerita, penulis digantung sekolah 2 minggu atas alasan bergaduh dengan 6 orang lagi. Huh, puas hati. Berbalut jugalah 6 ekor setan tu. Sampai mereka tamat sekolah tak berani angkat muka bila kami selisih. Nasib baik juga mak penulis tak marah teruk bila penulis cerita hal sebenar.

Disebabkan Aliah adalah seorang yang polos dan leluhur, Aliah selalu dijadikan contoh dalam memilih calon isteri oleh kawan lelaki sekelas kami. Antara yang penulis ingat adalah:

Jangan cari yang macam Aliah, 'plain'. Takde cutting. Mereka gelak.

Jangan cari yang macam Aliah. Nak mekap pun tak reti. Mereka gelak

Jangan cari yang macam Aliah. Nak ajak berbual dalam bahasa Inggeris pun lambat. Mereka gelak lagi.

Jangan cari yang macam Aliah. Nanti kau rasa nak tambah lagi satu isteri. Sebab rumah tangga tak 'mencabar'.

Penulis apa pembaca? Ya, penulis mengamuk lagi. Macam biasa. Tapi kali ni penulis tak mengamuk teruk. Mengamuk sikit sahaja. Sebab penulis faham, Aliah juga tak hendak dan tak ingin berlakikan mereka yang tak tahu membaca dengan betul surah Yaasin padahal setiap hari Jumaat dibaca sepanjang tahun dari tingkatan satu sehingga enam.

Habis cerita Aliah dari sudut pandang kawan-kawan lelaki. Penulis sambung cerita serba sedikit Aliah di mata masyarakat pula.

Aliah orangnya biasa. Gemar berbaju labuh, seluar track dan bertudung bawal kosong tidak berfesyen. Tidak pakai secalit makeup. Tidak ada apa yang menarik. Di sini masalahnya timbul. Aliah, belajar make up. Senang nanti lepas

sekolah nak cari kerja ke, nak ‘interview’ ke. Jangan pucat je, kata mereka. Aliah, belajar berdandan. Macam mana boleh jadi perempuan ni? Dandan *basic* pun tak pandai, kata mereka. Aliah, nak pergi Tesco jangan pakai selipar je. Cuba pakai kasut jalan molek sikit, kata mereka.

Aliah itu, Aliah ini.

Tapi, seorang pun tak tahu Aliah tak pernah beli baju raya, kasut raya, tudung raya atau *make up* untuk belajar berdandan. Selama Aliah hidup, baju kurung sepupu sepadat yang Aliah pakai di pagi raya. Baju lama kepunyaan kakak ipar yang sudah 2-3 tahun lepas. Kalau ada yang tertarik benang, dijahit semula supaya tak tertetas benangnya untuk dipakai Aliah. Tudung lama kepunyaan emaknya yang dah dibeli 4, 5 bulan lepas. Emaknya beli tudung baru lain. Setiap kali raya, Aliah hanya menunggu pemberian saudara mara.

Abang-abangnya? Si abang semua sudah bekerja. Mereka beli sendiri baju untuk dipakai. Dipadankan dengan “makwe” mereka. Pakaian Aliah bukan tanggungjawab mereka. Tapi ya, Aliah bertanggungjawab dalam menyediakan makan-minum-pakai mereka adik beradik sepanjang hidup. Itu pegangan yang penulis lihat dari gaya abang-abang Aliah.

Dengan apa adanya yang diterima Aliah, orang sekeliling mula mengulang semula bagaimana Aliah seorang perempuan, tapi tidak tahu *basic make up*. Tidak tahu bergaya. Tidak tahu bagaimana berdandan. Tidak tahu menjadi wanita matang. Sehingga satu tahap tidak layak untuk berfoto bersama mereka yang berdandan. Aliah cuma layak di dapur. Sehingga penulis pernah ke rumah Aliah dan melihat ‘makwe’ si abang perintah Aliah mengambil air ketika mereka menonton television. Serupa mak tiri. Penulis setuju jika pembaca cakap si abang mengambil contoh sikap ibu sendiri dalam memilih calon untuk dibuat isteri.

Habis cerita Aliah dan penulis di zaman sekolah.

Sekarang? Aliah sekarang penulis halau jauh ke tanah Jepun. Penulis paksa Aliah mengisi borang tajaan JPA memandangkan keputusan SPM Aliah semua A. Jangan balik selagi Jepun tak berperang, penulis kata pada Aliah masa penulis hantar ke lapangan terbang.

Ya, pembaca tak salah baca. Penulis dan ibu penulis yang hantar Aliah ke lapangan terbang. Keluarga Aliah masih lagi tak terima Aliah belajar tinggi-tinggi. Abang-abangnya masih tidur ketika Aliah keluar rumah pagi itu. Mak ayah Aliah hanya menjenguk dari tingkap bilik. Perempuan akan ke dapur juga. Bukan berguna pun sijil belajar tu nanti, kata mak Aliah. Aliah diam. Penulis harap Aliah boleh belajar menjawab kata nista sedikit sebanyak ketika di Jepun.

Abang-abang dia pun tak belajar tinggi, dia yang perempuan nak belajar tinggi kenapa? Nanti lepas kahwin kene dengar kata suami juga, kata ayah Aliah pula. Penulis rasa nak mengamuk sambil tendang pokok bunga mak Aliah tapi tak boleh pasal penulis pakai kain. Bukan sebab takut ya.

Oh ya, penulis tak cerita lagi macam mana Aliah boleh sambung belajar ke Jepun. Penulis datang beraya ke rumah atuk Aliah. Penulis cerita pada atuk nenek Aliah yang Aliah dapat melanjutkan pelajaran ke Jepun. Esok lusa Aliah balik dia boleh buat robot untuk Malaysia tok, goreng penulis. Dengan ‘cable’ dari atuk nenek Aliah, maka Aliah diberi izin tanpa ikhlas oleh ibu bapa dan abang-abang Aliah ke Jepun.

Sekarang tahun ke-empat Aliah mengaji ke sana. Penulis tak bagi balik. Sebab penulis yakin Aliah lagi bahagia di sana seorang diri berbanding dia bersama keluarga di sini. Penulis mungkin jahat tapi memandangkan lagi dua tahun Malaysia ingin menuju tahun 2020, seorang manusia sepatutnya lebih bertimbang rasa sesama manusia. Pada seorang perempuan. Apatah lagi sesama saudara sedarah sedaging.

Mungkin cerita ini sekadar picisan tapi Aliah adalah bukti bahawa perempuan itu boleh menjadi hanya alas kaki jika tidak dibantu atau diberi peluang untuk hidup kearah yang lebih baik. Nasib manusia di atas muka bumi juga lain-lain. Penulis sudah tulis siap-siap di perenggan pertama bahawa menjadi seorang perempuan itu payah bagi sesetengah perempuan. Hidup dengan membawa nama ayah di hujung nama sendiri adalah berat. Sama ada mahu ikut kata hati, atau kata orang tua.

Perempuan yang menjadi baik adalah susah. Perempuan yang menjadi jahat lagi susah. Sampai sekarang penulis masih tak pasti kenapa ada sesetengah lelaki mengambil keputusan untuk menjadi perempuan. Sekadar *random thought* dari penulis.

Jika pembaca mempunyai kawan seakan Aliah, berkawanlah dengan dia. Jangansisihkan. Kita selalu dengarmengenai *depression* kan? Semoga kita semua sedikit sebanyak dapat membantu golongan ‘Aliah’ ini. Jika pembaca adalah seorang ‘Aliah’, semoga pembaca berada dalam lindungan dan rahmat Tuhan. Semoga pembaca juga dibalas dengan kebaikan dunia dan akhirat. ;)



Rain

by Lia Alkaff

It was a busy Friday evening. There was barely any space, but I managed to squeeze in the coach full of passengers. I couldn't move much as I stood by the train's automatic doors. Outside, the drizzle was slowly turning into a full-fledged storm. I watched the clouds moved across the sky, pouring fat drops of water on the streets below. Traffic was bad. Cars lined up, inching bit by bit while the water rose from the ground. The train came to a halt at Kajang, where passengers rushed out onto the platform and left the coach half empty.

Feeling relieved, I settled in an empty seat. *Two more stations to go.* I honestly wished the train would break down or something. I have been avoiding him. In fact, it has been almost a year since I last saw him.

"Excuse me miss, are you okay? You dropped this," said a teenage boy as he handed me my hard-shell eyeglass case. "Oh yes, sorry. And thank you." I replied, embarrassed by my own carelessness. And I was genuinely thankful, the hand-made case was a gift from my late mom and dad. I kept it safely in my handbag as the train arrived at my destination. The rain had already subsided in Bangi and although dusk was fast approaching, I took my time walking down the platform. I was hoping that he would not be at the station but Lady Luck was not on my side. Standing on the pavement, I immediately saw his car parked across the wet road. I hated this already.

Crossing the street, I entered the 2008 Honda Accord with my hair and clothes slightly damped. I took off my glasses and wiped them dry. The car started moving. "So how have you been Nadia? Now that you're all grown up you don't even visit your only uncle, huh?" Pak Long said, his eyes on the road.

"I've been busy. Isn't the money I send to you monthly enough? There's no need for me to be around." I replied coldly. I have never loathed anyone as much as I did for this man.

He smirked. "Well, it's more than enough darling. But now that your Mak Long is gone, why don't you visit me more often?"

“Why would I?” I asked. “Listen, I only agreed to see you because of Naqib. I hope you didn’t use all the money I’ve been giving on prostitutes and gambling. He better be in good shape.” I was so angry that my voice cracked, but he only laughed.

“You’re still as feisty as ever. Your crippled brother is in good hands. He is a good boy, intelligent and pure nothing like his slutty sister.” I felt a hand on my thigh.

“Back off!” I shouted, swatting his hand away.

By then, we had reached his double story terrace house. He parked the car without even a flinch. I ignored him and got out of the car as soon as I could. Unbothered by what just happened during the ride, Pak Long stepped out, unlocked the front door and walked in. I followed.

“Assalammualaikum!”

“Wa’alaikummusalam. Kakak! I haven’t seen you in ages. Where have you been?” Naqib said with a wide grin on his face. I made my way to the sofa next to his wheelchair and sat down. “Sorry sayang, I have been busy working. How’s school?”

“Great, great. I got straight A’s for my UPSR trial. Pak Long brought me to celebrate at my favourite steakhouse. He said it was your treat as always. Thank you kakak. I really miss you.” He reached out to hug me. Naqib has always been a happy boy. Ever when the accident had left him an amputee, he was still the same.

“Really? Congrats kiddo. I’m so proud of you! Well, there’s not much I could give. Hope you enjoyed the steak!” I replied with a smile. I watched as Naqib looked up in excitement, “Of course I did!”

We spent some time catching up before I headed straight to the kitchen to cook a simple dinner for us. It was already nine when dinner was finally ready. I served the dishes and ate quietly as Naqib and Pak Long chattered with one another. I stole nervous glimpses at my watch. When everyone was done, I rushed to clean the dining table and wash the pots and dishes. It was getting late

and Naqib had already gone into his room. Anxious, I got ready to leave and was about to pick up my bag that was on the sofa when suddenly Pak Long's voice startled me.

"What are you doing? Stay the night, Nadia. Tomorrow's Saturday." Even hearing his voice from afar gave me goose bumps. I quickly reached for the door. "What's the rush, dear?" his voice echoed from upstairs. I turned the knob, but it would not budge. Frantically, I searched for the keys in the living room.

"Looking for these?"

Pak Long stood at the foot of the staircase and dangled the bundle of keys with his stubby finger. "Do you think I'm that stupid?" he raised his voice as he threw the keys on the kitchen floor. My heart pounded so loud, I could barely breathe.

"What a way to thank your uncle, who has spent the last 5 years giving you food and shelter. Is this how you repay me? You ungrateful bitch." There was no mercy in his voice. "I shouldn't have taken you filthy orphans in after the accident. But my my, what a beautiful girl you were. I couldn't take my eyes off you." He slowly walked towards me and only stopped when his face was an inch away from mine. "You're still just as beautiful now. Has anybody else been sleeping with my beautiful Nadia?"

I could feel his big clumsy hands on my chest. Cold sweat was running down my temples. In panic, everything from the past came back to me. After the car crash that took our parents' lives, Naqib and I lived here in this house with Mak Long and Pak Long. When I started attending college, I would come back only during the semester breaks. It was during one of these breaks that Pak Long first laid his hands on me, and he continued to do so until I left the house almost a year ago when Mak Long passed away. I decided to never return and began my work in Kuala Lumpur. During this time, he would threaten to hurt my one and only brother if I ever told another soul about us.

A surge of anger and sudden courage took over me. “Get your dirty hands off me, you piece of shit!” I pushed him with all my strength and ran into the kitchen. I spotted the keys but at that moment, a better idea came to my mind.

Pak Long noisily made his way towards me in the kitchen, cursing. He bent down to pick-up the keys off the tiles. “You stupid girl! You can’t even grab the bloody k-” I stabbed him once in the shoulder just as he was about to stand up. When I pulled the knife out, thick red blood began oozing out; staining his shirt. “You dumb fuck!” he shouted as he tried to grab the knife away from me but I managed to avoid him. Then I stabbed him again, then again until he finally collapsed. As he cried in pain, I stood there. I was trembling, overwhelmed by the sight of blood everywhere.

“Pak Long? Is everything alright?” I heard Naqib shouting from his room. By then, Pak Long’s curses had turned into grunts. Soon, they faded into stillness. I gathered myself and replied, “Yes sweetie, stay in your room.”

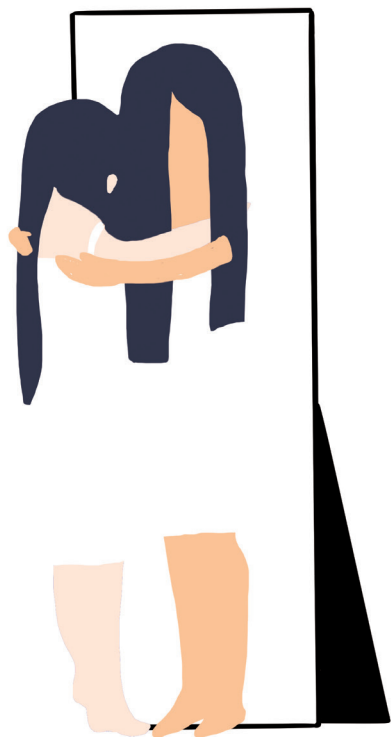
“Kakak? You’re still here?”

“Close the door!” I yelled impatiently. I could not let him see all this mess. While Pak Long was nothing more than an opportunist with ill intentions but he was a hero to Naqib. I gathered the remaining strength I have left, scrambled to the living room and grabbed my handbag. Quickly, I emptied it and found my smartphone. I dialled 999 in a hurry, staining the screen red with my bloody, sweaty hands. Once the line was connected, I barely managed to explain whatever that was rushing into my mind.

“Please calm down, miss. We’ll send help immediately.”

I sat by the window, my body shaking uncontrollably. Stray strands of matted hair stuck to my glasses. I took them off. Then, I broke down. I sobbed and sobbed until the sound of sirens broke the unbearable silence in the house.

It was raining when the police accompanied me and Naqib out of the house. Ever since the accident that took our parents’ lives five years ago, I always dreaded this kind of weather. Rain used to mean sadness and pain. Not anymore. From that night onwards, rain would forever mean triumph.



Epilog Seorang Aku

by Nurul Haswani

“Lapar?”

Aku angguk tidak, geleng jauh sekali. Sepanjang perjalanan menaiki motor dari rumah kakaknya di Malim, aku hanya mendiamkan diri. Jarang sekali aku begitu dan dia pasti tahu ada sesuatu yang tidak kena.

Kami sampai di Kolam Air Panas Gadek tika jam di telefon sudah menunjukkan angka 11.55 malam. Mujurlah tempat ini beroperasi 24 jam bila dia bersetuju untuk membawaku menenangkan fikiran di sini. “Lepas mandi kita cari kedai tom yam best area sini. Kat rumah confirm makanan dah habis,” selorohnya lalu menyangkutkan helmetnya dan helmet ekstra yang kupakai di bawah tempat duduk. Dia tenang dan tidak cepat melatah meskipun aku membalas setiap pertanyaannya acuh tak acuh. Kalau orang lain, memang aku ni dah jadi arwah agaknya. Siapa saja yang tahan melayan kerenah aku kecuali mama dan dia. Aku tidak ramai kawan tapi sahabat, dialah pilihan.

Selepas membeli tiket untuk dua orang, kami masuk ke dalam dan memilih tempat yang agak jauh dari orang lain kerana inginkan ketenangan. Ya, waktu sudah hampir tengah malam tapi masih ramai pengunjung di situ dan kebanyakannya adalah kanak-kanak. *Bukan main bertenaga lagi, tak mengantuk ke?* Desis hatiku. Selepas beberapa ketika, baru aku tersedar yang sekarang musim cuti sekolah. Ramai yang datang berkeluarga, tidak kurang juga yang berpasangan. Yang berpasangan jangan cakaplah – sakit mata aku dibuatnya. Tempat awam takkanlah tak boleh fikir kalau nak bermesraan sampai begitu sekali.

Kolam mini jadi pilihan kami berdua. Selepas bergilir-gilir menyalin pakaian untuk mandi, kami duduk merendam kaki terlebih dahulu sambil mendongak ke langit. Bulan tetap setia bersinar menerangi malam meskipun tiada bintang yang menemani. Pada mulanya, aku terkejut dengan kepanasan air itu tapi lama-kelamaan aku mula terbiasa. Rasa nyaman mulai timbul bila kaki terasa hangat.

“Kerja gila,” gumamnya tanpa memandang ke arahku. Cuma ada senyum yang menghiasi bibir. Aku menjeling. Aku tahu dia maksudkan aku. “Sanggup datang jauh-jauh untuk tenangkan fikiran?”

Riak wajahku berubah. Rasa lain macam dengan ayatnya itu. “Kenapa? Aku menyusahkan kau ke?” balasku, tegang. Naik angin juga mendengar kata-katanya yang seakan sengaja menyindirku.

Dia ketawa halus lalu mengocak-ngocak air hangat dengan kakinya untuk mengusikku. “Oi, janganlah!” marahku dan melakukan perkara yang sama. Dia tidak peduli dan aku juga sama. Akhirnya, kami sama-sama ketawa.

“Tengok. Negatif kau tu sampai kiamat memang tak sudah. Aku cakap kerja gila tu sebab bila kau buat macam ni, memang menyusahkan semua orang. Terutamanya mak kau. Ni.. dah confirm mak kau tak tahu kau datang kan?”

Kali ini aku terdiam lalu melepaskan keluhan. “I know you too well...” tambahnyanya lagi dan menepuk bahu. “Aku tahu kau tengah kusut tapi janganlah buat keluarga kau susah hati.”

“Aku tak boleh duduk rumah tu, Mai. Aku takut aku akan lepaskan kemarahan aku pada orang yang tak ada kaitan.”

Dia terangguk-angguk macam burung belatuk. Entah faham entahkan tidak. Tapi mengenalinya selama enam tahun – aku tahu dia mengerti lebih dari apa yang aku rasa walaupun tanpa penjelasan. Dia bijak membaca perasaanku. Atau lebih tepat, apa yang ada dalam fikiranku. Dialah sahabatku, dunia akhirat.

“Shay... I believe your mom did it for a reason.”

“Ah, sebab apa lagi. Aku dah muak,” tingkahku dengan nada tinggi sebelum aku tersedar. Buruk betul perangai aku ni. Sikit-sikit melenting. Mujur sahabat aku satu ni bukannya yang jenis kepala angin juga. Dia seperti air yang selalu akan memadamkan api kemarahanku.

“Shay...” Dia menyeru namaku. Kali ini pandangannya tepat di mataku. “Aku tahu kau rasa sedih. Marah. Macam-macam lagi. Tapi jangan macam ni. Jangan pentingkan diri sendiri. Orang lain pun ada perasaan juga,” luahnya, kesal.

Lembut saja tapi cukup setepeh kena di mukaku. Perit. Marahku mula mengendur.

“Apa yang perlu aku buat, Mai?” Aku mula merintih. Nafasku turun naik menahan marah yang masih bersisa. Hiba rasa dada. Aku melihat bibir Mai bergetar seakan mahu mengatakan sesuatu. Tapi dia senyap buat seketika. Beberapa minit kemudian, barulah dia melontarkan sesuatu dari mulutnya.

“Baliklah, Shay. Walaupun aku gembira kau datang lawat aku di sini, tapi aku percaya mama kau lebih perlukan kau sekarang.”

Nama aku Sharlina atau Shay. Sejak kecil aku dan adik-beradikku dibesarkan oleh mama. Sepanjang hayatku, aku tidak pernah berjauhan dari mama sehinggalah aku melanjutkan pelajaran di peringkat ijazah. Aku terpaksa meninggalkan mama untuk sementara tetapi aku kembali semula tiga tahun kemudian dengan segulung ijazah untuk mama.

Bergaduh di zaman remaja itu biasalah tapi semakin aku menginjak dewasa, aku mengerti betapa berharganya wanita bergelar mama dalam hidup aku. Dia wanita besi yang tidak mudah mengalah walaupun perjalanannya penuh liku dan terpaksa dia tempuhi tanpa ada sesiapa di sisi melainkan anak-anak yang menjadi penguat semangat. Dia dicemuh orang sekeliling selepas suaminya membuat onar dan meninggalkan keluarga tanpa pesan, hutang keliling pinggang (itu semua angkara bapaku). Tapi Alhamdulillah, mama berjaya melangsakannya walaupun mengambil masa bertahun tanpa menyusahkan sesiapa. Kini, anak-anaknya sudah dewasa dan meskipun tidak mewah, mama sudah mulai dapat merasa ketenangan dan kesenangan yang selama ini hanya mampu dia mimpi.

Berbalik pada soal aku lari dari rumah - entahlah. Aku sendiri tidak faham kenapa aku keluar tanpa pengetahuan mama dan adik-beradikku. Telefon kumatikan dan aku mengambil keputusan untuk terbang merentasi Laut China Selatan menaiki burung gergasi dan menaiki bas ke Melaka.

Ketika tiba di Melaka barulah aku menghubungi Mai. Dia terkejut tapi Mai dan seisi keluarganya menerima kehadiranku dengan baik. Itulah Mai, tidak pernah menyisihkan aku hatta dengan sepotong kata sekalipun. Itulah Shay, suka buat keputusan tanpa berfikir panjang. With a blink of an eye, I'm suddenly here in Melaka.

Aku menongkat dagu di atas meja sementara menanti Mai membeli makan di kaunter KFC. Sempataku melihat sekeliling Melaka Sentral. Lengah. Hanya ada para peniaga dan segelintir pengunjung yang mungkin bertujuan untuk ke destinasi tertentu. Sama macam aku.

Atas pujukan Mai juga, aku akhirnya bersetuju untuk balik ke Sabah malam ini juga. Tiket kapal terbang sudah kubeli malam tadi dan nasib baiklah harganya tidak semahal tiketku ke KL dua hari lepas. Bila tiba di TBS nanti, aku akan menaiki pula bas ke lapangan terbang KLIA2.

“Dahlah termenung tu. Lagi jauh kau termenung, lagi banyak kau berfikir. Fikir yang bukan-bukan pula tu,” tegur Mai sambil menatang dulang yang berisi makanan. Aku sekadar tersengih. Betul juga apa yang dikatakan Mai. Tapi susah, kalau otak aku ni dah mula ligat fikir itu ini... memang di bawah kawalan aku. Lepastu hilang mood dan marah-marah. Kasihan orang yang ada di sekeliling aku. Tak bersalah tapi jadi mangsa. Mula lah aku menuduh, mulut aku cakap benda-benda yang tak sepatutnya.

Macam apa yang aku selalu buat pada mama.

Dua hari lepas, aku tinggalkan rumah tanpa sebarang pesan. Hanya ada beg galas Deuter berisi pakaian dan barang keperluan asas mcm berus gigi dan sabun. Komputer riba yang selalu aku usung ke sana ke mari pun tersimpan elok di kamar tidur. Hanya ada telefon bimbit berjenama iPhone yang sengaja kumatikan. Senang kata, aku putuskan untuk mengasingkan diri dan tidak ambil tahu pasal dunia luar.

Sepotong teks pun aku tidak hantar pada mama, memberitahu dia di mana keberadaanku. Hati aku sudah terlalu sakit. Sakit yang terlalu sakit. Tapi

aku lupa (atau buat-buat lupa) yang orang lain juga merasakan yang sama. Aku terlalu angkuh dan pentingkan diri. Aku lupa mama lebih sakit. Lukanya terlalu dalam dan mungkin sudah tidak boleh diubati.

Aku beristighfar. “Apa aku dah buat ni...” Aku meraup wajah lama. Mai hanya membiarkan sambil tangannya laju mengatur pinggan kertas berisi set Snack Plate yang dibeli. Rasa bersalah menghantui diri. Macam mahu menangis saat itu juga. Kalau aku tidak sempat bertemu dengan mama, memohon maaf darinya bagaimana? Kalau aku terkorban dalam perjalanan, adakah aku dianggap sebagai anak derhaka?

“Kau terlalu ikutkan perasaan, itu saja.” balasnya, selamba. Gadis bertopi hitam dan berkaca mata itu tersenyum memandangkanku. Tanganku dia tepuk-tepek lembut. “Ingat ni. Kau tak boleh salahkan mama kau. Hati perempuan ni lembut. Sekeras mana pun akan lentur juga. Apa-apapun, dia tetap ayah kau. Mungkin, dia terima ayah kau atas dasar perikemanusiaan. Kalau dia biarkan, merempatlah dia tepi jalan. Apa kata orang? Kau nak dengar orang cemuh dia lagi? Cakap yang kau adik-beradik tak pedulikan darah daging sendiri?”

Aku baru mahu membuka mulut. Mahu meningkah kata-kata Mai dengan peluru yang padu tapi Mai mengangkat tangan tanda masih ada yang harus dia katakan. “Aku tahu apa yang dia buat tu teruk. Zaman kanak-kanak dan masa lalu kau sekeluarga takkan kembali tapi kan lebih baik kau cuba belajar memaafkan?”

“Aku ada hak juga untuk tidak memaafkan orang yang menyakiti aku.” Kasar luaranku, keras lagi hatiku. Jangan main-main. Dia terdiam. Dia pandang, aku renung mata dia tajam. Aku tengah marah ni. Sabar, sabar. Jangan lepaskan kemarahan pada Mai. *Jangan jadikan dia mangsa kau kali ini, Shay.*

“Sejujurnya, Mai... aku memang belum dapat maafkan bapa aku. Saat aku dengar esak tangis mama aku dalam solat 13 tahun lalu dan aku nampak apa yang mama aku tempuhi, memang mustahil aku untuk beri dia kemaafan. Cuba kau letak diri kau di tempat aku. Mesti kau buat benda yang sama.”

Kali ini aku lebih tenang, lebih hati-hati dalam mengatur dan menzahirkan ayat. Aku tak marah Mai. Aku cuma bengang dengan dia mengasumsikan betapa mudahnya memberi kemaafan kepada orang yang tidak pernah peduli tentang mamaku, diriku dan adik-beradikku. Kepada orang yang hanya tahu, kembali ke rumah setelah sekian lama dan meminta simpati supaya tinggal sementara di rumah dan juga – meminta wang. Ya, aku berhak marah. Aku juga berhak untuk tidak memaafkan. Jika aku buat keputusan untuk memaafkan tapi tiada keikhlasan, apa gunanya kan?

“Baik aku faham...” Suaranya mula merendah. Dahi Mai berkerut-kerut seakan memikirkan sesuatu. “Buatlah apa yang terbaik, aku sentiasa ada di belakang kau. Kalau kau perlukan aku, kau tahu untuk cari aku di mana,” Mai akhirnya tersenyum. “Dan.. aku harap kau jangan buat begini lagi. Jangan sakitkan hati mama kau lagi.”

Aku hanya mengangguk. Wajah mama sudah terbayang di mata. Rindu datang menjelma. iPhone di atas meja kurenung lama. Skrin gelap. Aku masih tertanya-tanya sama ada untuk menghidupkan semula telefonku atau tidak.

“Mama...”

Aku mendapatkan mama yang sedang duduk di atas kerusi malasnya di beranda. Dia bingkas bangun dan memandangkanku tanpa sepatah kata. Wajahnya sayu dan saat aku berada di hadapannya, tangannya cepat menarik aku dalam rangkulannya. Aku membalas pelukan itu. Erat. Aku tahu gelagat kami diperhatikan oleh keluargaku yang lain di dalam ruang tamu termasuk *dia*. Ah, aku peduli apa.

Aku kini berada dalam pelukan mama. Wanita berusia 62 tahun yang sudah lama bersara tapi masih gagah ke sini sana. Ligat menguruskan kebun mininya yang diusahakan sejak dia pencen 2 tahun yang lalu. Wanita yang tidak putus asa membesarkan kami semua walaupun dia ada alasan untuk berbuat sedemikian.

Kalau aku di tempat mama, mungkin saja aku sudah mengalami depresi dan mengambil nyawaku sendiri. Tinggal lah anak-anak terkontang-kanting. Tapi tidak mama. Dia kuat. Lebih kuat dari yang kami sangkakan. Setitis air mata pun dia tidak pernah tunjuk di depan kami. Derita – dia simpan sendiri. Bahagia – dia tunjuk di wajah. Ah butanya aku untuk menilai selama ini...

“Adik minta maaf, mama...” Mama sekadar mengusap-usap kepalaku dengan penuh kasih. Lembut saja.

Tiba-tiba, abang sulungku Along muncul dari rumah, “Adik buat semua orang risau. Along sikit lagi nak report polis.” Wajahnya bengis tanpa senyuman. Tapi pantas kakak iparku yang datang dari arah belakang menarik lengannya. Membawa Along masuk ke dalam. Dia tahu kalau dibiarkan, pasti banyak lagi beban Along. Aku menghantar pandangan terima kasih kepada isteri Along, Kak Mia yang cukup mengerti situasiku. Aku perlukan privasi dengan mama.

“Yang penting adik selamat,” balas mama, perlahan. Usapan tidak berhenti. Sese kali dia mencium ubun-ubunku. Satu tabiat yang mama selalu buat terhadap anak-anaknya. Kini, menurun pada cucu-cucunya.

“Adik keluar sebab adik tak boleh terima dia mama. Kenapa tiba-tiba muncul? Kenapa bila susah baru cari mama? Cari Along dan Angah? Adik marah sebab mama pun senang-senang terima dia tinggal di sini.”

Mama meleraikan pelukan. Pipiku dielus lembut. “Mama hanya ada satu jawapan. Perikemanusiaan.”

Bibirku terkunci rapat. Mai juga menyebut soal itu.

“Tak semestinya mama terima dia di rumah, itu bermakna dia tinggal di sini selama-lamanya. Bukan bermakna mama terima dia balik dalam hidup mama. Mama cuma mahu tolong sesama manusia. Jangan terlalu prejudis, Dik... Kita bukan selamanya di atas.”

Aku hanya diam. Mataku mula berkaca. Aku faham apa yang mama sampaikan. Cuma hati ini yang masih degil untuk menerima. Adakah aku rela untuk belajar menerima semula?



Mama says, “Girls Don’t Fly”

by Lee Chow Ping

Krriikk...

“Alamak!” Chen Ling mutters under her breath. That sounded like ripping trousers, or maybe panties. It’s hard to tell the difference. She dismisses the thought and focuses instead on her grip as she clambers down the water pipe of the double storey terrace house. She can feel her satchel bag straining against her left shoulder, her *Airbus 330* keychain swinging from the side zip.

Then something shifted in her pants.

Arggh!! My pad is out of place! I hope I don’t leak blood all over! Kacau wei having period - She lands on the ground with a solid thump. Climbing out of her bedroom window was easier when she was a kid. Now at 18 years old, what she has gained in womanly-charm, she has lost in agility.

After confirming the unmarred and decent state of her attire and sanitary pad, she peer at her escape portal. Light pink curtains flank the window frame, dancing gently in the light morning breeze. The window itself, is void of human life. Save for her neighbour’s cat Si Comel and the sound of a nearby *kapcai*, her surroundings are deserted. Nobody saw her Spider-Woman type escape.

Chen Ling gives Si Comel a wink and sighs in relief.

Good. Nobody can ever know.

“I know, ma, I know!” Chen Ling shouted over her YouTube video.

She hit pause, slammed her laptop lid shut and leapt off her bed, narrowly missing the prized *Spitfire* aircraft model on the nightstand. She caught a brief glance of the World War II single-seat replica before racing out of her bedroom. The staircase rumbled as she came bounding down two steps at the time.

Mama stood impatiently at the foot of the staircase. “Ah Ling ar, that’s the third time I’ve called you for dinner. And can you be more lady-like please? A girl should be seen and not heard.”

Chen Ling hit the stairs landing and planted a kiss on her mother's cheek. "Mmmmm... dinner smells good," she grinned and plopped down at the dining table next to her twin brother, Chen Loong. Papa was seated at the head of the table, typing away on his iPhone X. A plate of lightly steamed fish with ginger sat on the middle of the dining table, accompanied by a plate of seasoned *Pak Choy* and a pot of steaming ABC soup.

"Took you long enough," Chen Loong looked at her, "thought I was going to starve to death."

"Ha ha. Hilarious," She retorted as she dug out healthy servings of white rice from the cooker. "Pa, Ma, eat."

Chen Loong and Chen Ling were born 3 minutes apart. They have always been close. Since young, they would play under the rain and roll in the mud, climb the occasional tree, and crawled under Papa's Range Rover together. They have so much in common: same jet-black hair, same double eyelids, same taste in movies, not to mention the same love for asam laksa... but one love tops it all: their love for aviation, and a shared ambition of becoming pilots.

Since they were old enough to leave the house unchaperoned, they would often sneak to the nearby airport. From their secret spot accessible only via a broken fence, they would watch aircrafts takeoff and land from a lone 3000 meters runway. Although the track doesn't see a lot of mainstream airline action, they've already spotted an entire directory of miscellaneous aircraft- MD-11 cargo planes, lots of Cessna 172s and Piper Warriors, the occasional Global Express private jet, and at one point, a F/A-18 fighter jet.

During their secondary school, they would spend hours spotting aircraft, and matching them to the Aircraft Recognition Guide they had bought from the bookstore with their pocket money.

Chen Ling excelled in school. It was no surprise when she outdid her brother's SPM results, but that didn't matter to her because they were both going to soar the skies as pilots.

What they weren't prepared for was what came next. Papa and Mama had no qualms enrolling Chen Loong in flying school, but not Chen Ling. It's not like they couldn't afford it. Papa's PR firm was raking in millions by the fiscal year. Let his brand-new BMW 5 Series and Audi RS5 be a testament to this fact.

This was why, seated at the dining table, she decided to try again. Chen Ling drew a deep breath, "Pa, ma, about flying school..." It caused her parents to pause. Chen Loong seemed to hold his breath mid-bite. Mama began rearranging the fish on her plate - *twice*.

"Ah Ling, why not consider something else? You could be a teacher? Or a flight attendant?" Mama said quietly.

"But I don't want to be flight attendant. I want to fly the plane! What do you have against me flying? You have no issue with Loong Loong in a cockpit," Chen Ling replied.

"Loong Loong is a boy, sweetie. Flying is a man's job. There are jobs more suitable for girls. Besides, a flying course is a lot of money. Money that will be wasted when you quit your job after marriage or kids." Mama quickly continued, "Just like your cousin, Siew Ting. Her parents spent so much on her medical course in the UK. Then a few years after graduation, she resigned to be a homemaker."

"Siew Ting's decision to be a homemaker is her own. Why do you assume I will quit my job after having kids? Maybe my hypothetical husband will quit? Maybe I won't have kids?" Chen Ling asked, her heart heavy in her chest. "Maybe I won't even get married?"

"Choi!!!!" Mama tapped on the wooden table. "Silly girl, don't say things like that."

"I mean it, ma. A husband does nothing to define my self-worth." Chen Ling let out a sigh, feeling the frustration rising from within.

Suddenly, Papa spoke too, "We just want to protect you, Ling. Is that so hard to understand?"

“Then why don’t you protect Loong too? What’s the difference between us? In fact, I did way better in SPM.” By now, Chen Ling couldn’t help but throw her hands up in exasperation.

“He’s a boy.”

“But, Papa...”

“That is the end of this discussion. Now, silence!”

Chen Ling is seated in a quiet, dark room about twice the size of a Perodua Alza. The chair she is in – placed at the top right corner of the room- actually feels pretty comfortable. Rows of buttons illuminate on the side, above and in front of her. Slight below her eye level are two square screens. Her eyes are focused on a glowing green cross on right screen. Her right hand firmly holding a thick, black stick that is attached to the structure of the tiny room.

A stern male voice rises behind her. “As you know, this is an Airbus 320 simulator. When I say GO, press the red pushbutton on the side stick you are holding to disconnect the autopilot. The green cross on your right screen consists of the FD bars. They are the lateral and vertical depiction of your desired aircraft attitude. That tiny square you see is the representation of your sides stick position. I will direct the FD bars into various maneuvers. Your job is to hand-fly the aircraft so that the FD bars are always centered in the square. Understood?”

“Yes, sir.” Chen Ling’s heart pounds against her chest.

“Go!” Cues the voice.

She disengages the autopilot with a click of her thumb, and then another to silence the aural warning that followed. Suddenly, the FD bars spring upwards and left. Chen Ling calmly guides the tiny box to match those dancing green bars. A few seconds after the bars were centered, they begin to speed diagonally across the screen. She smoothly and confidently chases the green sticks.

All those years of playing *Microsoft Flight Simulator X* with Chen Loong were finally paying off.

After 15 minutes of various drills, the gruff voice returns. “Alright, that’s all for today. I have the control. You may now release the side stick.”

Chen Ling obeys. Turning around, she faces the man who is busy jotting down notes on a piece of A4 paper. After a short while, he looks up to meet her gaze and his expression softens when their eyes meet.

“Good job. You know, we get girls every now and then. But the aircraft cockpit is a boy’s club. As a girl, can you make it in a male dominated industry?”

“Yes, sir. I believe that training and professionalism is what makes a good pilot. Gender is irrelevant. Besides, it is my opinion that the general public rarely questions a girl’s flying skills. Instead, any doubt they may have stems purely from their perception of the male leader - the male protector. And public perception should do nothing to undermine an individual’s ability to proficiently carry out a task, sir.”

The middle-aged man cracks a half smile. “I have a young daughter,” his smile slightly widens, “I hope she grows up to match your tenacity.”

“Thank you, sir,” Chen Ling responds, flattered.

As she makes her way out from the poorly lit simulator room, she tries to read the comments on the A4 paper but the dim light is making it impossible. The only thing that are visible are the block letters printed like a letterhead: AIR RENDANG AIRLINES CADET PILOT RECRUITMENT PROGRAM.

If Papa and Mama refuse to pay for my flying license, I will find another way. Through this cadet pilot program, I would obtain the necessary funds to earn a flying license. Once I realise my dream of flying, then all those days of sneaking out through my bedroom window to attend cadet pilot interviews will be worth it.

Determination rises in her chest.

I will become a pilot.



Stories of Married Women

by Ika Farina

There are plenty of stories of married women who are going through divorce and divorced women abused by their husbands or former husbands due to our inept legal system and authorities.

It makes me wonder: why would any woman still want to marry with all these cases abound? It's even more baffling how some women are so desperate to get married that they would tie the knot with whichever man that comes their way; even if there were signs that these men are, or would be, dismissive, disrespectful and down-right abusive to them. These incidences are terrifying but what I found out recently was much more harrowing. Even within the so-called modern and more progressive circles, such pervasive ideas that allow abuses are alive and well in our society.

I was recently invited to wedding reception of a close friend of mine, whom I have known since school. As I had another commitment during the reception, I promised her that I would come for the solemnising ceremony instead. When I arrived, I was ushered by her parents to the bride's room where she was getting ready. Surrounded by friends gawking and fawning around her, small talks of work, recent overseas travels and families filled the room.

Suddenly, one of my friends turned to another, "Hey, how did your holiday with your family went? Did you all have fun?"

The said friend's face contorted, "I had to cancel on them..." This answer was returned with gasps as all eyes landed upon her. We knew how excited she was about her family's first outing together ever since her father's passing.

"But why?! You had your leave-approved right? What happened?"

Her face was still twisted in discomfort, obviously wishing we stopped asking her about it. "Yes, but you know my husband got his placement in Melaka, right? I had to go down there and help him settle down in his new place and all. My mother-in-law insisted I helped him out too."

It's funny how her husband, who kept treating her like she was incapable

of taking care and managing herself, still needed her to clean his place. Such a fine example of an adult and a leader he is. In all honesty, I never liked him. I've heard, and seen, how condescending, dismissive and rather controlling he is of her; all in the guise of fulfilling his responsibility as her husband. I had called out on his behaviour as abusive to the others before but to my disappointment, most were fast to go all "Whooooaaaa, hold it!" on me. It was frustrating to know how people refuse to acknowledge abuse other than the physical kind.

In the room, I could hear the others expressing their displeasure. How it was unfair of him. In response, she simply shrugged, "Oh well what to do, *dah kahwin*." When I heard this, I closed my eyes and took deep breaths. No matter how many times I hear that line from different mouths, it still never fails to infuriate me.

Later, the wedding photographer came to take photos of the bride and the rest of us waited for the groom's entourage to arrive. After some time, the bride asked him how long the ceremony would usually take based from his experience.

"Won't be long," he answered curtly, "a little introduction, some *khutbah kahwin*, the solemnising part and then we can get ready for the reception!"

Khutbah kahwin? I can't even remember the last time I was at a solemnising ceremony, not that I was paying attention to what actually goes on during one.

We were soon called into the main hall after the groom's entourage finally arrived. It was easy to tell who belonged to which entourage just from the colour of their outfits: blue for the groom, red for the bride. We made our way to a spot before the wedding dais; the groom's side would be seated on the left and the bride's, on the right. My friends and I made ourselves comfortable next to where the bride was seated, closest to the dais. In front of her, a group of men took their places in the middle of everyone else in the hall.

I kept shifting my eyes from the bride to this group of men, noting how

she was kept separated and distanced from them. It's weird to see how she appeared excluded from the main part of the ceremony even though she's the one getting married to the groom. I know the solemnising itself is between the *kadi* and the groom, but the distance alone made her a mere spectator of the officiation like the rest of us here.

The father of the bride stood up. He welcomed us all to his daughter's wedding - *fair enough, he did pay for it* - and announced the agenda of what's to come before symbolically handing over the responsibility to the imam, who also acted as the *kadi*. I could hear one of my friends made a cheerful remark to another, "Oh, he's so happy to give her away!"

My eyes bulged. I wonder if anybody else found that notion disturbing.

On cue, the imam cleared his throat. "Assalamualaikum warahmatullahi wabarakatuh," his voice rumbled into the microphone that was attached to the lapel of his shirt. "We thank God for we are blessed on this fine day, to witness the union of this pair in marriage, a completion of half of their *deen*." My eyes rolled in their sockets. This is the sort of things that give people the idea that unmarried people are lesser humans than those who are married. Even though it is usually more likely for the unmarried ones to help and care for other people, especially their elderly parents.

After finishing the introduction, he went on to explain the roles of the husband and wife, beginning with the man, "... Husbands should provide for their wives, as stipulated and to not abuse them, physically or mentally..."

Sure, you can always abuse them emotionally. The sarcastic voice in my head quipped as I was reminded how some men would use the "I can marry two, three, four women" line on their wives without any care for how these poor ladies were feeling.

I expected that as a husband, who is the head and leader of the household by default, the list of reminders given ought to be longer and more thorough but what I was hearing from the Kadi were just the basics: to provide and guide the wife towards the true path. To his credit, he didn't mention that part about

husbands and fathers having to carry the burden of their wives and daughters' sins, which clearly contradicts the Quranic teachings.

Once he was done, he proceeded with the roles and responsibilities of the wives, beginning with how wives should be *taat* to their husbands, "... so long as it is in accordance with Islam."

From my experience, what is "in accordance with Islam" tends to vary from one group to another. There are men that consider it to be "in accordance with Islam" to beat their wives black and blue over the smallest 'infraction' like talking back.

This also reminded me of a particular night that happened years ago while I was studying abroad. A senior of mine came to my place unannounced and while at first, she appeared to be her usual cheery self, the façade cracked as soon as she asked if she could stay the night. Just to clear her mind, she said. When she finally opened up, she told me about the fight she had with her husband over her failure to answer his calls on her way back home. Her phone had unfortunately died on her and when she tried explaining this, the husband refused to listen. The entire situation escalated into a shouting match and ended with him grabbing and throwing her phone at her, hitting her square in the arm. I could see an obvious bruise when she pulled up her sleeve to show me.

"But I shouldn't have talked back, right? He is my husband after all."

It took all I had to contain the rage inside. What sort of conditioning had this outwardly strong, highly educated woman been subjected to?

"No *kak*, whatever you did, you did not deserve this beating from him, especially him! *Kak*, he's your husband! He's the one who should be protecting you, not hurt you, not in any way and definitely not like this!"

I can't recall how many times I have had to repeat that same speech. But she finally made the call when he threatened her with a weapon. As it happened in a country that took domestic abuse seriously, the authorities didn't hesitate to

convict him on accounts of these abuses. If it was to happen here, however, I doubt she'd be so lucky.

The imam continued, explaining how it was the responsibility of the wives to take care of their husbands' properties and affairs while he's away and to care for her *kehormatan* as well as his. My mind played back the part when he was addressing the men but couldn't recall even the slightest hint of husbands having to care for their own *kehormatan*. Is this why when a husband cheats with another woman, the conversation would always be about how immoral the other woman is or how the wife has failed to cater to her husband's needs? There is hardly any conversation about the husband's failure to preserve his own *kehormatan*.

Just when I thought the imam was finished, he added, "... wives should also respect their in-laws." I certainly did not remember him telling the husband to do the same towards his in-laws. At this moment, it finally dawned on me that my dear friend is not only under her husband's thumb but also her in-laws' too!

I glanced around the room to see everybody's reactions. Apart from smiles and happy tears, no one else was frowning like I was. Nobody was taken aback by what he just said. Memories of what had happened earlier in the bride's room rushed back - I've had enough.

"OHHH NONONONONO, HOW DARE YOU!"

I leaped up from where I sat and approached the imam, "Don't you dare tell wives to be *taat* to their husbands AND their in-laws if the same is not expected of the husband! Her family raised her and for what? For her to be given away to some dude and his family and placed under servitude?! What happened to 'marriage bringing families together'?! HAH?! Isn't THAT what marriages are supposed to be? A union, not a one-sided agreement where even the wife's family risks losing her to a selfish guy?! How does this go in line with the concept of *adil*? HOW?!"

I snapped from what felt like a nightmare as I heard soft clapping around me. Unfortunately, the only part that wasn't real was that of me screaming in rage. I did my best to compose myself as more claps and cheers filled the hall. The marriage was now legalised.

It was strange to be so angry when everybody else was celebrating. I kept looking around, wondering if maybe I had missed out on faces that could relate to how I was feeling at that moment. There had to be at least one face in this crowd of mostly middle class, well educated, urban and proudly modern people... but there were none.

It seems that regardless how progressive a group may be, its members would never be exempted from such abuse especially when ideas that allow it to happen are still openly propagated. Even worse, they are accepted without question.

As soon as I could find the opportunity to congratulate the newlyweds, I excused myself from the event. Driving away from the ceremony, I was fuming. I swore to myself that as long as these ideas are still accepted in our society, then marrying would be the last thing I'd do.



The Songket Weaver

by Bunga Syahiera

She was called Songket by the people who personally knew her; these included her clients, friends, the uncles and aunties from the *pasar* and of course, The Lady. It was The Lady who first bestowed her that name. She loathed it. The name reminded her of her namesake, an extravagant piece of clothing worn only on special occasions. Just like her.

“MinMin ah, tonight you got customers or not?” Popo was staring at her intently, searching the girl’s face for any signs of fatigue.

“Got la as usual. Why Popo? Want to belanja me dim sum is it?” She rested her head on the old woman’s shoulder, missing the scent of *bedak sejuk* she had grown accustomed to ever since she was little. But the scent was no longer there, replaced instead by the repugnant smell of disinfectant so common in hospitals. Popo was admitted two months ago, and her diabetes has continued to eat her fragile body slowly away. The Lady hated coming here as it reminded her of Death and her own mortality, ticking and threatening to consume her body in due time. So it became Songket’s responsibility to come and visit Popo almost every day. So far, she has been diligent in doing so. The only few days that she couldn’t make it was when she had to be with special clients.

She gave Popo a teasing smile and the old woman laughed softly. “I miss you MinMin. Sini so bosan you know. Can you stay over tonight?”

Popo wondered if her eyes could implore the girl to stay the night. She knew Time was not on her side but yesterday, the doctors finally confirmed what she had already expected. The diabetes was inching closer to her brain and she had only another month to live. When they told her this, Songket was the first person who popped into her mind. Popo knew that she must reveal the secret before it was too late. Her only hope was for Songket to be able to forgive her for all the sins she had committed all those years.

“Popo, are you listening?”

Songket's pretty face loomed in the periphery of her failing vision. She coughed to mask the heavy sense of dread. "Hah? What did you say ah?" Songket laughed, amused by Popo's expression.

"Ayyo Popo. I said I will cancel my clients for you lah. So tonight, you can have me, free of charge I kasi, just for you."

Later when she spoke to Ma about Popo's wish, The Lady hesitated before agreeing to let her stay. It was a risky decision to make since they were expecting big clients to come over that night, but she knew Ma would not let Popo down. Family always comes first in Ma's life and Songket herself was taught the very same principle since young. The only irony was she did not have a proper family of her own. The closest she had to one was Popo and Ma. Every time when she is reminded of that fact, she would quietly shrug off the melancholy. Songket was no more the crybaby she used to be.

Later in the evening, she tiptoed across the hospital room and tried her best not to disturb Popo from her deep slumber. Placing the dim sum on the bedside table, she proceeded to plop on the nearby sofa. She thanked God that Ma was generous enough to get a VIP room for their dearest Popo. If not, she would be forced to brace the stares from the hospital crowd every time she visits. The lewd ones she could dismiss easily but it was much harder not to be affected by the harsh looks she gets from the elders, especially the group of makecik in a nearby ward. Why did it bother them so much to see her walk down the hallway in her Christian Louboutin, her red lipstick and thick black lined eyes? That was her signature look, after all. The one that would drive The Usuals crazy. The one that made her famous from the first night she began working at the motel. *Pshh. For all they know, one of their husbands could be her client and even a frequent one at that!* She chuckled, thinking of the naïve trust some of these women have for their spouses. But at the same time, she thought to herself, people like her were the ones who feed from such naivety. "Hmm... win-win situation *mat salleh* says." She whispered to nobody before dozing off to sleep.

But it was not meant to be a pleasant dream. Songket tossed and turned on the sofa, nearly toppling the dim sum off the table. Popo was instantly woken by the noise in the room. “MinMin, you okay?” The girl jolted out of her sleep upon hearing Popo’s familiar voice. She nodded weakly, beads of sweat hampering her vision. The instance her finger brushed her cheeks, however, she was surprised to find that they were tears. She faked a smile at Popo, careful not to let her crumbling emotions seeped through the façade. The street has hardened her physically and mentally, and Songket would not allow her demons to slip and manifest in front of anyone today. “MinMin,” The old woman beckoned, “got something to tell you. Come here.” She abided, glad to push away the intruding thoughts from her mind.

“I hope someday you can forgive me, *sayang*. I’ve made very terrible mistakes in my life, but this one I regret *sangat-sangat*.” Heaving a sigh, Popo began to unravel the secret Ma had told her to keep twenty years ago. She prayed to God, closed her eyes and opened her mouth.

“She’s your mother, MinMin.”

“W..wh..who?” Popo could hear the fear in Songket’s question. She continued, “Ma. She is your mother. She loved you so much MinMin, so she decided to keep you. She got beaten by Tauke Long for keeping her baby but Ma has always been *keras kepala*. So she gave birth to you...”

“NO!”

“... and then gave you to me. She named you Aminah as per the request of her lover. She had no other job to feed your little mouth, so she resumed her work with Tauke. When Ah Long got shot not long after your sixteenth birthday, Ma had to keep the motel running. Business was bad so that’s why she had to...”

The old woman paused, her eyes brimming with tears, Under the harsh hospital light, her cataracts gleamed. She longed to soothe the tension building from within Songket’s body, but she knew her touch would not mend

the broken soul. Her little MinMin was long gone, replaced by a world-weary Songket in front of her.

“Sell me... I just got my period that day Popo. Then Ma asked me to wear this very pretty dress. She said it was a *hadiah*.” Songket was eerily calm at this point. She was recalling the first time she was forced to give up her body for the sake of Ma’s Motel. “It got frills and all, so fancy lah. I told her I felt like a princess and she gave me her most beautiful smile. Then she told me to wait in the room. She came back with a friend and then she kissed me goodnight.”

Popo watched as she slowly rose from the bed, her eyes vacantly staring at the window. “Then she locked the door. I heard the click and I was afraid, Popo. Then Ma’s friend hugged me from behind. I tried to escape but his hands...”

“MinMin, stop it. I’m so sorry for everything. Please forgive me.” She reached for the girl’s arm but it felt cold as ice. It was as if she was a living corpse, devoid of any emotions. It sent chills down her spine and she knew there and then that she had lost her MinMin forever.

It all made sense to her. The dreams of being abandoned in the dark alleyway, the groping hands out of nowhere and Ma’s voice calling her *sayang*; they were all true. She was struck by the harsh truth and almost stumbled in her fake stilettos. She stopped, calming herself down. The gravity of the whole situation was too much to bear and it was threatening to swallow her down into a bottomless pit of darkness. The issuing catcalls from the nearby mamak stall unfazed her. She squared up her shoulder, ready to face Ma in a minute. She knew life would never be the same after this.

When she reached, she slumped into the rattan chair and ignored the ruckus coming from upstairs. She caught Mell staring - eyeballs rolling frantically- in her direction and she chuckled loud enough for her to hear. Mell smiled, her hands still steadily arranging the folders on the receptionist desk. The whole motel had heard about the family drama but Mell was unruffled by

Ma's tumultuous rage. That was one of the reasons why, other than the fact that she was blind, that made her the perfect man for the job.

"Sorry to hear about the messy *jejak kasih*, Songket."

Songket shrugged wearily, too tired to muster a word or two to acknowledge Mell's show of sympathy. "But we have a guest waiting in the special suite and he has requested for you. Said he saw you and was reminded of his first love. *Psshhh*." Both girls laughed heartily. Some men never failed to spout nonsense every now and then. Songket thought she has had more than her fair share of ludicrous flattery from the four years of working here but this one certainly topped the list. No doubt.

"Lady Ma doesn't know that he's already here but he's quite impatient, and he's one of The Usuals. So I promised him that you'll be there. You know the code, right?" That was the custom when dealing with The Usual. They were the motel's special clients, who frequent the establishment almost every month and Ma would give them exceptional treatment in exchange for their loyalty. They could call up any girls without any prior arrangement. Songket nodded but then remembered that Mell could not see her.

"Yes, amoi. I know. Alright lah I cover him. Later please tell Ma."

"Songket!"

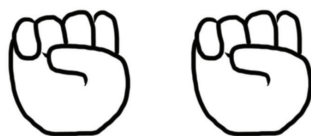
Ma thundered down the stairs, demanding to know her daughter's whereabouts. Mell's answer, however, turned her world upside down. Songket had already gone for a good hour. She broke into a cold sweat, and from the reflection in the hallway mirror, Ma looked terrified. The ghost from the past had finally come calling. She prayed her little girl would not be further trapped in this web of sins.

When she reached the door, it dawned on her that it was the same room where she had sacrificed Songket years ago. She swallowed the rising guilt that was threatening to engulf her completely. A single tear rolled down her cheek, which she quickly wiped off. She needed to be tough for Songket's sake. Bracing

herself for the worst, she unlocked the door and pushed it open. But what she saw knocked her breathless. Ma frantically gasped for air.

“Abang, that’s our Aminah!”

#SPEAK UP



#heard



#SURVIVOR



#TOGETHER



#STANDUP



not alone



The Inconvenient Truth About Sexual Crimes

by Siti Nadhira

Despite the many voices that try to put an end to victim-blaming, it still happens and unfortunately, it exists within most of us. Even if the words do not escape our lips, there would have been at least one occasion when the thought of blaming the victim comes to mind.

Why didn't she wear a tudung? Why was she wearing such tight clothes? She shouldn't have been out that late at night. She shouldn't have been so messy in front of her husband. She shouldn't have stayed with that man. She knew that men are not to be trusted, right?

Sometimes we blame them for complying, while other times we blame them for going against these so-called norms. It's most unfortunate how our brains are programmed to have certain expectations about people. But people are not robots. They have feelings, can be unpredictable, and won't always meet our expectations. As William Shakespeare once said, "Expectation is the root of all heartache."

As someone who was once sexually harassed in a train, I know too well how it feels. That feeling of panic, painfully aware of how little you can do as your body is frozen with fear, too scared to do anything.

Whenever someone posts online about being sexually harassed in a public space, too often that people would start asking them instead about what they were wearing. Others would quickly point out that the person did not do anything to fight off the harasser. But I wish it was that easy.

I know that many people are saying things like "instead of teaching women self-defense, we should teach men not to rape, harass or abuse." Yes, we can teach the younger generation of men. However, most of the ones we're dealing with now are sadly beyond the point of education.

What we need now, apart from stricter laws and better enforcement, is for people to set aside their expectations. We need people to get rid of their judgments, and give these victims (women *and* men) a chance to speak out.

When Ke\$ha spoke up about the sexual assault and harassment she had experienced, there was a number of disparaging misogynistic and sexist reactions that suggested how she probably “asked for it” and that she was possibly lying. Because of her appearance and demeanour, they *expected* something like that to happen to Ke\$ha.

Another example is the recent case involving Terry Crews. When he first began speaking out about being sexually assaulted, many celebrities and public figures openly mocked him. Initially, this left me completely perplexed. If Ke\$ha was judged solely because of her gender, what was happening here? Terry Crews is a man who was sexually assaulted, so why are they still blaming the victim?

After I have given some thought to the matter, I realised that it wasn’t only about *who* was sexually harassed, assaulted and victimised but rather *how* society wants their expectations of an ideal world to be realised. In this idealised world, how could a muscular man like Terry be assaulted by another man? Why didn’t he just fight the man off? Why couldn’t he just push him away?

But that’s the thing. Most of us tend to see the world from a binary point of view: Yes or No. Black or White. 0 or 1. Push or Pull. In their minds, if Terry, Ke\$ha and the other victims didn’t push their attacker away, then they must have pulled them *closer*. And this is what actually makes sexual crimes more traumatic. The perpetrator himself (or herself, for that matter) is already guilty of the crime but it is the action of the people around the victim that makes it worse.

I know we are all human, which means that it’s hard not to think about a person in a certain way. We also can’t (and shouldn’t) try to control how a person thinks. We can, however, hold our tongue from hurting someone who has already been hurt so much.

Victims of sexual crimes, any crimes in fact, do not deserve to be blamed. Hopefully our society can begin to realise that the pain faced by these victims is not something that can disappear overnight. That they deserve so much more support and empathy from us.

So, take a minute or two to reach out with kindness and support. It could be someone you know or even a stranger on Twitter that you don't even follow.



Log 0820

by Arina Anesse

Wasting is a habit of the devil.

Her body tensed slightly in her seat. Her mother would always say this line. She avoided her mother's busy gaze as scoops of rice landed sloppily on her plate, the steam carrying its fragrant smell.

She pitied her mother. It has been three hours since she arrived home and she was still in the same baju kurung she had worn to work earlier. Her lips were stiff and when El's father descended the wooden staircase, she could see the reluctance in her mother's eyes to meet the expecting gaze of her father. She was smart enough to see the invisible tension between the two adults; it has become a normal thing now.

Using her eyes, her mother gestured her to pour some tea for her father.

The tall man sat down, his smile still intact though not completely oblivious to his wife's passive servitude. "What time did you get back?" he asked. He had a natural tone for starting unwanted conversations.

'Half-past five.' She still refused to look at him. She was now gracefully spooning out vegetables onto his plate and a large piece of steamed fish. "I had consultations and got a bit carried away. My students start their finals in three days' time, you see."

El bit her lips as she looked down at her plate. She had half the portion of rice her father was given. She passed the side dishes to her brother, whose eyes saw nothing but food.

"The food's good." Her father tried again.

"El helped me out. She called asking what she could help me with for dinner." Her mother's tone was less of a compliment than it was an expository narration to a guest.

El could smell the faint sweat soaked in the fabric of her brother's jersey. He had been out playing football after school and only came home a short five

minutes after her father did. Turning away, she began helping herself to large portions of vegetables. They filled up more space on her plate than her rice.

She felt a temporary sense of relief.

“El, aren’t you hungry?” El nodded hastily at her father. She downed a glass of plain water before placing her hands on her food. “When is Erin coming back?”

“She has night class.” Her mother answered his in a nonchalant tone.

“She does?”

“She sent her schedule in the family group at the start of the semester.”

“Oh.” Silence, again. The fan creaked above them. El wished she could stay out as late as Erin, but who would help her mother at home then? She looked at her brother, who was helping himself to a second plate of rice, then back at her father. His phone began ringing on the coffee table and without even excusing himself, abruptly rose from the dining table to answer the call.

We must sit together and eat. It’s what families do.

His words momentarily echoed in her head before they were overshadowed by foreign words uttered by her father. Something about a meeting and names of people with titles were being exchanged over the phone. When he returned to the table, he announced that he would be leaving for Bangkok this Friday.

My mother barely looked fazed by the announcement, but she did pause; as if trying her best to formulate an answer that showed some level of concern. “For how long?” By then, El was slightly amazed at how long her mother has managed to avoid eye contact with him.

“I’ll be back on Tuesday.”

Her mother calmly nodded at this information. El’s face lit up slightly, but then she frowned. Her mother caught this mixture of expressions and gave her a sympathetic, almost hopeful smile. She smiled back.

Returning to her food, El slowly picked up the pieces of vegetables. *Chew 44 times, she reminded herself. Always eat the vegetables first.*

Her brother pushed his chair back loudly and while still chewing, took his

empty plate to the kitchen. She noticed bits of fish and rice on the tablecloth where he had eaten but El ignored them.

“Did you save some food for Erin?” By now, her father was also done with his food too.

Of course she did, El wanted to say but she kept quiet.

“Yes.”

El knew that Erin would always tell their mother not to. That she will look for something to eat after class. *Don't worry about me*. But mothers always worry, and in this case, her mother always made sure to save some for Erin. Her father on the other hand - “Make sure she eats.” It was like listening to a crab telling a bird how to fly.

“It's delicious.” El said to her mother after her father had left the dining table.

“Of course, it is. You made it.”

“Using *your* recipe.”

“You want to follow your father to Bangkok, don't you El?”

She felt hopeless. Would he even let her? The last time she suggested it, her father had laughed it off.

“I'll talk to him.” El watched as her mother walked to the kitchen.

“Don't forget to pray with your mother.” El's father was combing his hair now. It was a quarter past seven, and in five minutes the mosque two blocks away from their house would sound the azan.

El kept her quiet. Her rice felt cold to the touch, but she patiently waited for her father and brother to leave for their maghrib prayer. Her mother had already told her that she was going to take a shower upstairs.

As they all gradually left her sight, she carried her still half-full plate to the kitchen and threw all the uneaten food down the rubbish bin. Gathering some used tissues, she piled them on top of the evidence.

Leave no traces.

She washed her plate and placed it on the drying rack. There was a faint

meow coming from outside the back door, and El quietly cursed herself for having not thought of giving the leftover fish to the cat instead. She sighed.

You can't undo what's already done.

Or maybe you could.

Checking again to make sure that no one was downstairs, she made her way to the bathroom. El stood there in the cramped space, took off her t-shirt, hung it on a small hook on the door. She tied up her hair, and after checking one last time for any unwanted presence; kneeled in front of the toilet.

You can't undo what's already done.

You can't un-eat what you've already eaten.

Yes I can

The walls of her throat felt as if they would rip. She could taste the acid wearing off the flesh on her insides. Her heartbeat quickened, and tears lined the rims of her eyes.

Not enough, a voice said from within.

So she repeated it, again and again until the voice ceased to be, and felt as if she had un-eaten everything she ate earlier. Rising to her feet, she flushed down her mother's cooking. She wiped a small stain of puke from the corner of her mouth and washed her face aggressively until everything was clean.

Leave no traces.

El exhaled and smiled. She performed her ablution and wore her t-shirt again. She drank another glass of water. Purging makes one's body dehydrated, she once read somewhere. She could hear her mother calling her name from upstairs.

"Coming!" she answered.

Her mother was on her bed in her praying clothes, the mat already laid out on the floor. Her eyes were however, glued to her phone.

"What is it, Ma?" El asked.

"It's your aunt. She found her daughter cutting herself."

“Nana?”

Her mother nodded. “Such a dangerous thing to do. Harming yourself.”

“Why is she cutting herself?”

“She doesn’t know. She thinks it’s the stress from school. How stressed can you get from school?” El sensed that her mother was not interested in the answer. She looked annoyed. ‘Taxes, children, husband, work – now *those* are stressful.”

“You know how Nana is.’ El said quietly, careful not to aggravate her mother’s anger. “Always with the straight As.”

“So was I when I was her age!” El said nothing to her mother’s raised voice, wishing her sister was here to argue with her mother instead.

“Besides, putting yourself in a harmful situation is forbidden. It’s a sin. That’s why smoking is forbidden. Thank God I made your father stop when I was pregnant with your sister.” Her mother was clearly irritated now. El put on her praying clothes.

“Keep your cousin in your prayers. Who knows she might snap out of it and stop making your aunt too worried.” Her mother shook her head and made her way to the prayer mat. “Don’t do those kinds of things, do you hear me?”

El nodded.

“If something’s bothering you, you tell me. Don’t keep it up inside.” Her voice softened a little when she said this. “Now let’s pray.”

Yes, let’s pray. Maybe one day God can make me snap out of it too.

Allahu-akbar.



Mother

by Santini K

Within the 20 years of being in this world, I've felt all kinds of pain. Sprained ankles, fractured bones, broken fingers, torn-out nails, and even self-inflicted pain. There were also heartbreak, loss, betrayal and longing.

Up until this age, I've always thought that I was strong for fighting each wave; creating a self-image of a weathered young lady marching against strong winds amidst fire and destruction. I used to think that I was alone in this fight, and that nobody else could understand how torturous it was for me to continue living in this place I call home. So immersed was I in shaking my fists at the world that I almost didn't notice my mother in the corner of the room, going through her own hell on earth while carrying the burden and sorrow of the rest of her family.

While most babies have clothes and towels wrapped around their bodies when they were born, my mother was wrapped in responsibility and expectations. Growing up, she never had the chance to enjoy her childhood.

My grandmother was a cleaner. On days when they were lucky, the family of three would share a cold chicken drumstick brought back from my grandmother's workplace. But most times, rusty water from the tap was all they had.

Being Indian Hindus, they were very conservative in their religious beliefs and practice of the caste system. They were proud *Naidus*, a term derived from the word 'Nayaka', which means 'leader' in Sanskrit. It is a title used by many castes including the *Kamma*, *Baliya* and *Kapu*.

At the age of 16, my mother was forced to marry a man who was almost the same age as my grandmother. My grandmother, a status-conscious woman, had chosen him solely because he was also a *Naidu*. But he was abusive and vile. He didn't care that she was underaged or that he was old enough to be her grandfather. All he wanted was sex and the control over a naive, vulnerable girl he could keep as a pet. A life-sized doll of his own. My mother never told me how

long that marriage lasted, but I knew for a fact that it didn't last longer than a month.

It left her scarred. She felt dirty and disgusted, not with him, but with herself. It was my mother who told me so many real-life horror stories of sexual assault and abuse. In my eyes, she was both a victim and a survivor.

For centuries, Indian families are known to treat their new born sons like god reincarnate while their daughters, dead or close to death, would be discarded like trash. Other times, they would be kept as living relics of the family's disappointment. My mother was treated no differently.

My grandmother doted on her beloved, innocent, sweet and precious son. He was given everything he wanted and placed at the top of her priority list. My mother lived in his shadows for most of her life. She never fought for my grandmother's attention because, even at that young age, she knew it was a losing battle. As she did not know how to swim, it was safer for her to float along with them at sea. One wrong move and she would have been left to drown.

Whenever the night makes it harder for me to hold the weight of the sky, my mother's strength becomes my beacon of light and strength. At 53, she is almost as old as my country, yet young enough for her youth to illuminate her face. Strong enough to rise from the rubbles of her past and build a life for herself and her family, but not from the tumours currently growing in her body.

Ever since she stepped into motherhood, my mother had kept me safe in a bubble she made just for me. From a young age, I was taught that my body, chastity and purity would play significant roles in determining my worth as a person. That, they were more important than my opinions and contributions to the society. It never occurred to me on how flawed that logic was until I began venturing out into the world as reckless as a child with overprotective parents could be. Wandering aimlessly through different crowds, I was amazed by the diverse backgrounds my friends grew up in. It was a secret that I carefully kept away from the watchful eyes of my mother. Although I knew she meant well, I no longer wanted to stay in my mother's bubble of safety. I somehow knew that

there was so much more to learn about life and society, and I was eager to be a part of this newfound rebellion.

As the years passed by, however, the differences between me and my mother became more and more painfully obvious. While my mother was quiet, obedient and conservative; I was loud, rebellious and sufficiently 'liberal' to shock my family. But just like my mother, I am also strong.

There was a period in my life when the sun was never out and the storms were constant. During this time, I fell into what seemed like a bottomless abyss, in which I struggled to crawl back out from. But I remember growing up, watching as my mother braved through her emotions, troubles and pain with an iron fist and a face so determined that it would have put any man to shame. And so, I buried my feelings. All the anger, fear and agony brewing inside my mind and body were pushed down. As a coping mechanism, I resorted to self-harm simply because I was too ashamed to let people know what I was going through. I wanted to tell someone about this non-stop cacophony in my mind so badly, but there was that little voice that kept whispering how people would forever look at me differently if I ever did. If me being a woman is already viewed as weak, meek and silent; then speaking out about what I was going through would end up with me being called unstable, unable to handle pressure and crazy.

This was what my mother had to endure when she was battling her depression. The stares, the whispers and the fake shows of concern. The condescending remarks and the heartless laughter. She was treated like a deranged clown; laughed by everyone and helped by no one. Out of the fear that I would suffer the same thing that she had gone through, my mother constantly dismissed my mental illness as a phase. I was told to put up a facade, and that was what I did. It was only with the help of supportive friends and other family members did I learn that I had nothing to hide. That my pain was nothing to be embarrassed about.

But these events happened ages ago. My mother and I have since learned so much from each other as well as our experiences outside of our bubbles. No

matter how strained our relationship was, I would remind myself time and again that she was brought up in a different age with different cultural and societal norms. I could either help her ease into the new world that I've embraced, or agree that our way of life is too far apart to reconnect and abandon the ship.

Even today, my mother continues to conceal her pain in a bid to avoid the dark past she so desperately wants to leave behind. She is a mother, a wife, a daughter, and the pillar of strength that our family pretends we don't need. Often, she would describe herself as an empty person and I used to dismiss her for being dramatic. Now that I am older, I have stopped rolling my eyes and started to listen instead. It was only then did I begin to understand.

Nobody, including me, has ever given her credit for all she has done and gone through. For my part, I've always thought that her suffering was part of her choice to be a mother. What she had signed up for. I thought it was normal. If she wanted the song, it was only fair that she faced the music, right?

I don't think that way anymore, especially now that I am older and aware of the ways of this cruel world. It's appalling that I couldn't even find it in me to empathise with her back then. We grow up expecting women to throw themselves under the bus because deep in our consciousness, we see them as sacrificial lambs. Not humans. We *expect* them to give their all. We *expect* them to do the work we don't want to do. We *expect* them to take it upon themselves to carry everyone's burdens on top of their own.

Why? Because we can. Because we make them feel like it is a given part of their responsibility as mothers, daughters, sisters and wives. We make them feel like they are here only to clean up our mess. We make them feel like they are important only when it benefits us, and anyone other than themselves. We make them feel like their sole purpose on earth is to give; be it giving away, giving in, or giving up.

As rocky as our journeys have been, my mother and I now share a deep understanding of both the benefits and detriments of conformity. The only thing

that differentiates us is that while she is comfortable with conforming to boundaries, I am comfortable breaking them.

To many, when they hear the word woman, they would think of *martyr*. No matter how ghastly our journeys have been, they tell us to just go with it. No matter how horrifying the aftermath is, they tell us to forget about it, move on from it. Hardly anyone takes the time to try to understand where the pain is coming from, or why it won't go away. Women have always been told that their pain and suffering were brought upon themselves by none other than... themselves. No matter who, or what, had inflicted them.

A martyr for the cause of loved ones. A martyr to the society.

My mother has given everything she's ever had and ever was to bring our family to life. She had lost it all for her family when she was a young girl. She lost it all again for her husband when she married my father, and now, she's losing it all over again for her children. I know, she won't stop giving until it's her time to finally leave. Until then, it will never end.



Perempuan, The Transformation

by Mardiana Dickson

“All my life I had been looking for something and everywhere I turned, someone tried to tell me what it was. I accepted their answers too, though they were often in contradiction and even self-contradictory. I was naïve. I was looking for myself and asking everyone except myself questions which I, and only I, could answer. It took me a long time and much painful boomeranging of my expectations to achieve a realisation everyone else appears to have been born with: That I am nobody but myself”

Ralph Ellison

“Why wasn’t I born as a male in the very first place? Things would have been easier for me that way, wouldn’t they?”

Diana sighed. She was convinced that her dad hated her. She could see it in the way he behaved differently towards her compared to her siblings. Shouldn’t rules should be equal for all? That was not the case. Her father’s behaviour gave her nightmares and there were times she felt like she was adopted. An *outcast*.

Maybe she was too young to understand why she was always being constantly pressured to ‘think like a man’ and to have a ‘first-class’ mentality. Growing up, she was no stranger to insecurities, constantly worrying that she would not measure up with the rest of her peers. Gradually, she began to hate herself. She kept questioning her mom as to why her dad had such high expectations for his eldest daughter. But her mom would brush off her complaints, saying that he was doing this for her own good. That he knew what he was doing. That saying all these did not mean she was taking her father’s side. Each time she asked, her mom would always come back with the same answer: be patient and that one day she would learn the wisdom behind her father’s actions.

Until when? She often wondered. Diana was not someone who was going to accept that blindly. It was very difficult for her to digest the fact that they

were all done for her betterment, especially when none of her friends received a similar treatment from their parents. She was far from satisfied with her mom's answer, but always chose not to reply back. Instead, she would storm into her room and sulk in solitude. But solitude could only take her so far. It is practically impossible for you to keep your family out of your thoughts, isn't it? Thus, she found solace in music. Music made her feel better. Additionally, she would pen down her thoughts in a diary and hoped that nobody would find it or worse, read it.

School was an alternative means for her to have the life she had always dreamt of. Being the kind of person she is, she was blessed with a lot of friends. Even today, their friendship is as pure as it was on day one. The teachers favoured her as she would always actively participate in class and school activities.

By the time she graduated from high-school, she had already developed strong leadership skills thanks to all the years being a school prefect. She was on the verge of reaching adulthood and she had dreams of her own. She was full of vigour and enthusiasm that even when life came with its own challenges, Diana successfully overcame every hurdle stronger than ever. Instead of breaking her apart, they moulded her into a better and more matured individual.

Of course, growing up came with its own pros and cons. One of them being crushes! She did admire a few guys whom she thought were really cute but could not muster the courage to go and speak to them directly. Instead, as always, she decided to speak her heart out to her best friend - her mom!

"Mom, is it normal to like a guy?"

Her mother did not see that coming and smiled. "Baby, this is just not the right time. When the time is right, Allah will send the right guy to you."

"But ma, all the girls at school have started dating"

"You want me to ask your dad to speak to you about this?"

Nothing was scarier than the thought of talking to her dad about boys. Surely,

he would not let her reason even if she wanted to fend her beliefs!

Diana soon learned that in order to keep her petty and unnecessary thoughts at bay, she must keep herself busy. So, she signed up to be the secretary of the Science Club, joined the inter-school drama competition, played in the basketball club, sang and entered debating competitions. During the weekends, she would take care of her younger siblings and help her mom at the school canteen. As the eldest in the family, she was also in charge of tutoring her siblings and helping them prepare for their examinations. When their results finally came out, she was the first person they would run to and give a celebratory hug. The hug would always be reciprocated with a big sigh of relief and tears of joy, knowing that she has helped her siblings reap the same success that she had enjoyed years before.

Her father was mostly absent from their lives as he was often away on business trips. Fret not, this part of the story is not about her parents neglecting their duties. They simply did not have helpers to do the house chores and babysitting duties. This was where Diana would step in, filling her parent's responsibilities. This has nurtured her into a more responsible adult and a protective sister. Whenever the siblings needed something, they knew exactly who to reach out to.

But while everything seemed to be going well, no one knew what was going on inside her. Deep down, Diana was still a child overburdened by responsibilities too big for her age. She was living a life for others but what about her own? She was a simple girl with not so simple dreams. Still, she was more than willing to walk that extra mile to make her parents proud.

Things took a much-awaited positive turn when the family was blessed with two more children, her youngest siblings. Children, they say, bring out the best in men and that was exactly what happened to her father. The person who once only wanted to dictate Diana's life, began taking the first few steps towards

a father-daughter friendship.

Life is unpredictable, she thought to herself.

Unknown to her family, she had been secretly applying to universities in the United Kingdom to further her career. Her efforts did not go unanswered and she was offered a scholarship at a reputable university, which also relieved her and her family from any financial burden. There, she enjoyed every single moment of the three years she had abroad. Aside from completing her studies, she travelled around Europe with her friends; did a one-month internship in India; worked part-time as a casual conference assistance over the summer; did volunteering work at her university museum; attended conferences; participated in marathons and basketball games; and even got involved in a final year project which had nothing to do with her Electrical Engineering discipline! She even went on a solo trip to Venice and Rome, which was a trip that will forever be etched in her memory. She was truly inspired and in the process of finding herself, found a sense of purpose in life too.

In 2013, her father came to visit her in the UK, which turned out to be a meaningful visit for her as they both shared a conversation which they never had before. Maybe her father missed her a lot but he put his ego aside, and he told her “I knew my daughters are rare and my boys are an endangered species.” At Heathrow Airport before he left for home, her father told her that he was proud of the woman that she had become.

When she returned to Malaysia after graduating, Diana brought back her versatile way of thinking. It has led her to where she is now: on duty at an offshore platform somewhere remote, leading a sea of men. Staring across the blue horizon, she reflects upon on the image of her younger self. She was the naïve and sweet little Diana who once had so many dreams. Now, most of her dreams have turned into reality. Who would have thought that at the age of 27 years old, she would be invited by her former lecturers to give motivational

talks to inspiring electrical engineers as well as encourage young women to be involved in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics?

Female; or in Bahasa Malaysia, *perempuan* (per.empu.an) derives from the word 'empu', which is an ancient Javanese honorific term given to teachers to signify their roles in society. Every woman, just like Diana, is believed to have the important social role of teaching and empowering the society. So, what does it mean to be a female in the 21st century? The pace is getting faster. One has to be versatile to avoid being left behind. Men and women may have different roles, but their rights are always equal. Women can, and ought to be applauded for their achievements the same way that men are being recognised.

Never again should a father be ashamed of raising a daughter. Every parent out there should not clip their children's wings, especially those of their daughters'. Allow them the chance to explore the world. As long as their parents provide them with proper guidance, they will come back transformed into strong and independent women. So ladies, what are we waiting for? Dare to dream and inspire. Do not just wait for the change to happen. Be the change.



“T” for Discrimination

by Dayana Sobri

As I’ve honestly never had a positive experience with the tudung, it’s hard for me to talk about that piece of head covering so many Malaysian Muslims are obsessed about without being biased.

Speaking as a free-haired Malay woman, not wearing the tudung (or the hijab) is kind of a political statement. Many may see it as an act of disobedience, or me sinning by going against God’s commands but it’s simply a reflection of my personal belief and views regarding the subject matter.

Some of you might be asking, “Why don’t you wear the tudung?” The truth is, I have issues with the mainstream interpretation of the Arabic word *khimar* used in surah 24, verse 31 of the Quran. In my understanding, the command was to cover their modesty (bosoms) using what they were already wearing i.e. the veil. This did not mean to cover their head. Plus, there is also the geographical context. Since the Malays live in the tropics, it makes sense that they wear what they’ve been wearing for hundreds of years: loose-fitting tops and long kain sarungs. Aren’t these modest enough?

This opinion of mine, however, has resulted in people accusing me of being a Quranist simply because I believe that covering one’s head is not a compulsory religious act. In their eyes, I’m misguided and should be brought back to the right path.

Don’t get me wrong, I welcome any friendly advice about the hijab and the covering of one’s awrah. But what seriously gets on my nerve is how people can be so patronising up to the point that I am shamed for these choices of mine.

My first experience with the tudung occurred when I was only 11 years old. While my peers had already grown breasts and curves here and there, I was underdeveloped and as sexually unappealing as one could imagine. Turns out, I was wrong.

I would often go to class later than everyone else after recess because I had to finish my duties as a library prefect first. Most teachers would usually give me leeway of 10 minutes but on that fateful day, it was not meant to be. As fate would have it, the Pendidikan Islam class was already in session. It was just my luck that they were discussing about the awrah or parts of the body that can or can't be shown to a non-mahram. As soon as I walked in, all eyes were on me and I froze.

I tried explaining to the ustaz why I was late but instead of telling me to take my seat like all the other teachers would, he told me to stand in front of the class instead. He then continued with his lesson, "This is the kind of woman you need to watch out for. They have the power to lure you in and steer you away from the right path." As he said this, he pointed at me before warning the entire class, "Never trust uncovered women. Stay away from them."

Imagine hearing this as an 11-year-old child! I've never been so humiliated in my life. It was shocking to see this full-grown adult, who was a teacher, treating a young girl with such contempt. I wondered if it was because I was the last and the only girl in my school whose head was still uncovered.

From that day onwards, people would find every chance they could to mock me for that same reason. It took them a week before I unwillingly came to school with a tudung on and I watched as everyone cheered at my transformation. I was bullied into conforming to their expectations.

Although this incident happened 18 years ago, I still remember it like it was yesterday. You can never forget something like that. It changes you. What happened that day made me realise that as long as my hair remained unveiled, I was a sitting duck in a place where it is hunting season all year round.

Further incidents continued to confirm this belief of mine.

When I was 15 going on 16, my high school organised *Permata Wanita*, a talk that was mandatory for all its female students to attend. Held at the school hall, I remember how a female teacher told us during a 'heart to heart' session that we women must always cover ourselves so that we can become a valuable

part of society (and by society, I assumed she meant men). Thanks but no thanks. While the teacher moved on to another topic, I told myself that I would define my own self-worth.

That same year, my father hired a few private tutors to help me prepare for my PMR examination. One of these tutors was a man who was probably around his late 20s to mid-30s, whose subject of expertise was science. It was him who advised me, completely out of the blue during one of our tutorial sessions, to wear something that was ‘less sexy’. I was distracting him with my appearance, he said, and would prefer it if I were to cover my head and dress more appropriately.

That night, I took a long look in the mirror. Back then, my outfit of choice was usually a plain short-sleeved shirt and a pair of baggy pants. I wasn’t showing much skin except for my arms, and I was sure that my unkempt hair ala Hermione Granger was enough to turn anyone away. But once again, I was proven wrong. That experience left me so disturbed that I asked my father to replace him with another tutor.

Another incident happened when I attended the National Service training programme in Kelantan. The day before I left home, I had a light-bulb moment. Maybe I should just put on the tudung, just to be on the safe side. Upon my arrival at the camp, I quickly learned that I had made the right choice as I watched the trainers openly chastising the free-haired Malay girls. “Kau datang sini nak melawa buat apa?” Their voice, loud enough for everyone to hear. The very next morning, I noticed more heads covered by the tudung than before. I guess nobody else wanted to be shamed in public.

The same thing happened at the beginning of my life as a university student. During Orientation Week, free-haired Malay girls were singled out and repeatedly warned to wear the tudung ‘or else’. But the university’s official dress code only required its students to dress modestly and professionally. It was never mandatory for Muslim students to cover their heads. So, I quickly went back to my authentic self when orientation was over: a free-haired mousy girl

whose only mission was to get good grades. I wasn't the only one who took off her tudung. Much to the dismay of our seniors and several members of the faculty, others did the same.

It seems that things haven't changed much since my university years. My younger sister, who was accepted into the same place as I was, once brought back home a pamphlet from the university. Reading it, I discovered that it was a detailed guide on how to dress properly as a 'righteous woman', complete with illustrations.

When I approached my sister about the pamphlet, she told me that it was given out to all the female students at a talk on women's honour and morality. Not surprisingly, their male counterparts did not have to attend a similar talk about men's honour and morality! She also shared with me how her male classmates used to treat her differently before she decided to cover her head. How they would ignore and not acknowledge her presence. While she appeared unaffected as she recalled their behaviour towards her, I was visibly upset by her story.

I felt the same surge of emotions about three years ago when I got engaged to a wonderful man. On the day of the engagement, I approached my relatives and my mother's close friends to personally thank them for attending the ceremony when I heard them go, "Oh, so this is the older sister? Where's your hijab, dear? Don't you think it's time to wear it?" Needless to say, my mood was completely ruined.

To this day, I still find myself having to deal with those who carry themselves with a holier-than-thou attitude. I've had men whistling and yelling at me on the streets to be a proper Muslimah. "Dah barang free, siapa tak nak?" I have had friends sharing Facebook posts about the importance of covering one's awrah, while saying nasty words about free-haired women in their comments.

One of the more popular posts that have been circulating on social media for quite some time now is the lollipop comparison. I am sure you have seen it: two lollipops are placed side by side where the unwrapped lollipop is shown

covered in flies while the wrapped one is left untouched. While I do try to understand the message behind the post, I don't appreciate being likened to an inanimate object that has no thoughts, feelings, and aspirations of its own. Is that what women really are for? Are we created for the sole purpose of being reduced to a walking, talking, breathing object for men to use and discard whenever and wherever they please?

There will always be an army of strangers on social media ready to judge women and having no intention of being 'Islamic' whatsoever. Recently, I read a post about a high-achieving woman receiving a prestigious award and instead of congratulating her, the comment section was bursting with typical Malay Muslims' responses that are not only rude but completely out of topic. These comments range from "Tudung mana tudung?" to my all-time favourite "Tak guna setinggi mana pun kejayaan kalau tak tutup aurat."

I wish more Malay Muslims are like my parents. Instead of forcing me to wear the hijab or treating me like I'm a child, they would simply point out my responsibilities as a Muslimah in a respectful, non-threatening manner. But the reality is, being a Malay woman in Malaysia is a curse. I experience this every day, this tension in the air. As long as my head is uncovered, I'll continue to be treated with discreet hostility by my society. In their eyes, there is no place for a woman like me except for the seven levels of Hell. If only they knew that from where I stand, it feels to me that I'm already in one.

sisters in islam

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