

Anak Sastra, Issue 1

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Jill Widner is an American writer who grew up in Sumatra during the turbulent 1960s. She has contributed stories to the *Asia Literary Review*, *CellStories*, *Hobart*, *Kartika Review*, *Kyoto Journal*, *North American Review*, and the *Willesden Herald*. A graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop, her short stories have won a variety of writing competitions, including the University of Plymouth Press 2010 Short Fiction competition and the 2009 *Juked* fiction competition.

Jonathan Lim is the pseudonym of a Malaysian architect who is too afraid to publish under his real name. He likes to write about undesirable topics, making it hard to get published. He also likes to eat lychee pudding.

[Kristopher Williamson](#) is an American writer and editor. After completing postgraduate studies at the University of Melbourne, he moved to Kuala Lumpur, where he is the director of Literary Concept publishing consultancy. His more recent stories have been published in *Daily Bites of Flesh* and *Travel through History*.

Shaz Johar suffers from an Internet addiction. As part of his illness, he tirelessly writes in two different blogs, including a random thoughts [blog](#) in Malay, and a compilation [blog](#) of his short stories in Malay and English. In between blogging, he Tweets his every movement and comments excessively on Facebook. He is currently shopping for a publisher for his two novels written in Malay, hoping that his good looks will help to get them published.

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August 2010 featured author interview with Jill Widner

Q. How long have you been writing? And what are some of your inspirations?

I've been writing for as long as I can remember. More importantly, I have enjoyed stories for as long as I can remember. When I was very young, my father's mother used to recite fairy tales by the Brothers Grimm to me. Listening to the sound of her voice inhabiting the voices of the narrators and the characters was probably my first realization of the power words have to transport, to create a separate world in the mind of another.

Water inspires me. Being near it. Listening to it. Watching it move. I like the idiosyncrasy of people's rooms. Michael Ondaatje has a beautiful poem called "Her Room" that reminds me how much setting can reveal about character.

My first literary inspirations were Carson McCullers and JD Salinger, probably because their child characters tend to be maladjusted in a way I could identify with. In my early years in college I was drawn to DH Lawrence's sensuality, James Joyce's self absorbed stream of consciousness, Doris Lessing's sense of justice. Later I found Marguerite Duras, Louise Erdrich, Alice Munro. Most recently I've been mesmerized by Jhumpa Lahiri, Uwem Akpan, Daniyal Mueenuddin.

Q. Do you have a routine or any regular quirks when sitting down to write?

Beginning is always hard. Beginning and staying put. I've found if I can make myself continue beyond the first half hour, no matter what I think of the words that come, I find a momentum and begin to feel immersed.

I do have an odd habit. When I feel stuck or sometimes even when I'm in the middle of something I feel good about, I stop to take a shower or wash the dishes. Something about submerging my head or my hands in hot water opens me up and settles me down.

Q. You spent part of your youth living in Indonesia. In retrospect, what benefits do you find that this experience has given you throughout your life?

If you happen to be a white person in America, I think it is quite possible to live an entire lifetime without experiencing what it is like to be thought of or treated as a minority in a community. During my first three years in Sumatra, the life I led was not so different from the sort of life a child growing up in colonial Southeast Asia might have experienced. The

school, the pool, the golf club were segregated. My contact with Indonesians was for the most part with the servants. After the Sukarno coup of 1965, all expatriate women and children were advised to leave Indonesia. My family was one of the few to return. Maybe it was because I was older, I was eleven by then, but for the first time I began to realize that I was perceived as an outsider in someone else's country. And yet it was my home. It was pretty heartbreaking when I understood at the age of fourteen that we were really leaving for the last time. I always said I would return. I haven't yet. Maybe writing the novel is my way of returning.

On a more practical level, I still prefer to sit on the floor; I still go barefoot most of the time; and I always eat *cabe* (chili) with my rice.

Q. You are currently working on your first novel, *The Smell of Sulphur*, a fictional account based on your childhood in Sumatra. What made you decide to write about this topic?

I am interested in the secrets children keep. What they see and think but don't say. The people and places they know and the things they do that their parents are unaware of. I'm interested in their meanness. What scares them. What gives them courage.

The novel is concerned with the concealed or blurred line between fiction and memoir; in particular, the body of literature that explores the life and mind of the expatriate child, who, as Pico Iyer puts it, "lives simultaneously in several cultures and yet feels at home in none." I've always felt this duality. Unless you can find someone who has lived through a similar experience, it's difficult to explain. Writing the novel has been my way of trying to explain.

It is easy to think of expatriates as exploitative. They often are. Maybe they usually are. I think children have a different capacity for transcending intolerance and animosity. I've recently discovered Daniyal Mueenuddin's story cycle *In Other Rooms, Other Wonders*. I hadn't realized that his mother was American or that he had attended the Lahore American School until he was thirteen. In an essay contained in the afterword, he talks about what it was like to have the advantage as a child of being nearly invisible: "Because I was a child, the servants and the villagers were not guarded against me, [were] unaware that I was watching, and therefore I learned the rhythms and details of their lives in a way that I never could as a grownup." Mueenuddin's early life reminds me of mine. His struggle to understand that he was in a unique position to write about the life he had known in a country he did not entirely belong to reminds me of my struggle to write this novel.

Q. What is your most memorable experience about having lived or traveled in Southeast Asia?

Noticing how quiet and expressive and beautiful bare feet can be.

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"Kaki Kodok"

Sumatra, Indonesia, 1963

'A *floating* restaurant!' Elizabeth looks at her mother but addresses her father. 'Why can't we go?'

'Well, for one thing, you weren't invited,' her father says.

'No one your age was invited,' her mother says. 'And anyway, you wouldn't like the food.'

'Why wouldn't I?'

'Because it's Chinese,' her brother explains. 'They eat chicken feet. They float raw eggs and birds' nests in their soup. You don't like eggs. Do you want to eat saliva and sticks in your soup?'

'You and your brother are going to the company restaurant tonight. We've made a reservation for you.'

'By ourselves?'

The restaurant is a barren room. There are only a few other people inside, men sitting alone, a steak on a large white plate, a bottle of beer on the side. Bachelors, her mother calls them. The floors are linoleum, and when someone's silverware touches a plate or a chair scrapes across the floor, the sound echoes against the high ceiling.

A swinging door separates the dining room from the kitchen. Every once in a while, a man dressed in the same small black cap and starched white uniform their houseboy wears, peeks through a window in the door. Elizabeth leads the way to a table on the far side of the room. She wants to sit close to the swinging door where she can catch glimpses of the cooks in the kitchen. She likes the rough sound of their laughter and the strings of Indonesian words they shout back and forth to one another that she can almost follow.

'I smell meat burning,' her brother says. 'I'm having steak.'

'I am too.'

The waiter brings silverware to the table and lays two paper cards on the white tablecloth. The girl pushes the menu aside. 'We want *daging*.'

'Daging?' the waiter asks.

'Steak. We want steak.'

'Oh. *Bistéék*. First I think maybe you like take meat home. Cook your house. One *bistéék*?'

'I'll have *bistéék* too,' her brother says, trying out the new word.

'It's big, you know. One *bistéék* get plenty meat for two children. One is enough for two.'

'No,' Elizabeth tells him. 'We each want our own steak.'

'How you like that?'

'Well done,' says the boy. 'Extra well done.'

'I want mine rare,' Elizabeth says.

Her brother looks at her. 'You don't like rare meat.'

'Yes I do. It's chewier, rare. I like my meat chewy.'

'It's going to be bloody.'

'I like it that way.'

When the waiter leaves, the boy points to the menu. 'Look what we could have had.'

'What?' Elizabeth asks, but she is paying more attention to the silverware the waiter has brought. 'Look at how big this spoon is. I bet it won't fit in my mouth.'

'Read this,' he says.

'Frog legs?'

'Do you want to have some?'

'Real frog legs?' She doesn't believe him.

'Come on. Let's try some. I dare you.'

'I dare you.'

When the waiter returns, the boy points to the menu. 'What is this?'

'*Kaki kodok?* This is leg from frog.'

'A real frog?' the girl asks.

The waiter laughs. '*Iyaaaaaa,*' he tells her. 'Real frog. We keep them in small cage in cooler.'

'They're alive?' her brother asks. 'Right now?'

'*Iya. Masih hidup,*' he says, again emphasizing each syllable, which is what Elizabeth likes most of all about the way Indonesians seem to speak. '*Enak, kaki kodok.* You like try?'

'What is *enak?*' the boy wants to know.

'*Enak* means tasty. *Kaki kodok* taste just like *ayam*. You know *ayam?*'

'Chicken,' the girl translates.

'*Kaki kodok* taste just like chicken. I bring you some.'

There are four or five pairs of legs on the platter he sets on the tablecloth. They aren't green, and the webbed feet Elizabeth had expected to see have been removed. They look like chicken thighs, only smaller. She doesn't especially like chicken thighs. She pokes the tines of the large fork into one of the pieces of meat and turns it for a while in the brown juice pooled on the plate.

'You don't have to eat it,' her brother tells her. 'We can just sign the bon. No one will know.' 'I want to.' Elizabeth leans close to the plate and lifts the fork to her mouth. She lets the meat graze her lower lip, holding it there before she bites into it, grateful that it is well-browned. She tastes the sauce first. When she notices the waiter watching her through the diamond-shaped window in the swinging door, she sinks her teeth into the flesh and begins to chew. She swallows. She bites again. She looks at her brother. Speaks with her mouth full. 'It's good. It tastes just like chicken. It really does.'

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"Fina's Skate"

Sumatra, Indonesia, 1963

The leafy branches of the frangipani trees form a canopy of shade over the sidewalk that Mina is sweeping again with the bamboo rake. Elizabeth is watching her from the doorstep of the guesthouse when she hears a familiar grating sound on the concrete. Roller skate wheels. Two girls are approaching, awkwardly lifting their weighted-down feet at the ankle to step over the parts of the sidewalk the tree roots have warped and cracked. They're tripping a little, stumbling and laughing, hanging onto each other's arms, skating toward the bowling alley at the end of the sidewalk.

The first time they pass, they don't acknowledge the white girl. When they reach the hibiscus hedge, they turn around. The smaller girl wearing the shoe skates kneels to the ground. The older girl says something to her. The smaller girl shakes her head.

Before long they are scraping and sliding and bumping their way over the broken concrete toward the guest house with the pink shutters. Elizabeth stares at their long black hair. The girls on skates are wearing shorts. Their legs are long and dark, the muscles lean and tense. They are laughing loudly now, trying not to fall. When they open their mouths, gasping for air between exhalations of laughter, their large white teeth remind Elizabeth of a snapshot her mother took in the Tiger Balm Gardens, a wild public place in Hong Kong, where monkeys run loose past statues of beasts and clatter over bridges arched over rocky pools, thick with lotus and carp.

Her mother had just positioned the family against a stone wall when a Chinese girl appeared, selling cigarettes from a wooden crate she wore strapped around her neck. Two black braids brushed her shoulders. A gold watch gleamed on her wrist. She couldn't have been more than twelve.

In the snapshot Elizabeth's father is smiling broadly at the girl and holding the package of cigarettes he has bought from her for the camera. The cigarette-girl seems to smile back, but something isn't right. Elizabeth doesn't know how to say what it is. Only that she knows the half smile on the Chinese girl's face is untrue or incomplete, and something about this comes back to her as she watches the girls on their skates.

The taller girl grinds the toe of one skate into the concrete and turns, inscribing the sidewalk with a circle the diameter of her narrow hips, and comes to a stop. The younger girl's shoe skates make her look taller than she is. Without an accent, the older girl asks Elizabeth if she knows how to skate.

'You know English?' Elizabeth asks.

'And Bahasa Indonesia. And Tagalog. I speak three languages. We both do,' she says, nodding at her sister. 'At home we speak Tagalog. In Indonesia, we speak Indonesian. At the Catholic school, we speak Indonesian.' She pauses, tilts her head toward the river. 'We're not allowed to go to the American school. We go to the Catholic school on the other side of the river. But in the Philippines, when we're in the Philippines, we study in English.'

'You're not Indonesian?'

'Filipina.'

'Why are you here?'

The girl laughs. 'My father works for Stanvac. Why are you here?'

'My father works for Stanvac.'

'*Itulah!*' she says. 'I'm Fina. Do you want to skate?'

'I don't have any skates. I mean, I do, but they're not here yet. Our things haven't arrived.'

'Your *barang*?'

'What?'

'Your *barang*. Your personal belongings. It will come on a freighter.'

'How do you know?'

'My father is the customs officer. Until then, do you want to use one of my skates?'

Elizabeth looks at Fina's skates. 'I think your feet are bigger than mine.'

'It can fit. We will make it fit.' Fina unbuckles one of her skates, pulls a flat key, which is tied to a ribbon that she wears around her neck, over her head and kneels on the sidewalk to tighten the skate around Elizabeth's tennis shoe. 'Feels good?'

The white girl laughs. 'How do you skate on just one skate?'

'I don't know. I've never tried before. Maybe you push off the ground, and once you are rolling, you lift the other foot up.'

Soon they have found a way to roll tandem, their arms interlocked, hopping a little as they push off the sidewalk. It is difficult to balance, but every once in a while, their bodies are

almost one, airborne on a layer of friction, vibrating between the rolling wheels and the concrete.

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"Malaysian by Birth"

I, too, am Malaysian. I rarely get credit for it though. In fact I can trace my lineage's history inhabiting this land back a lot further than the Malays, who make claims of being the rightful heirs of Malaysia—the bumiputera. But I am looked down upon by the Malays, and even the Chinese and Indian have low opinions of me. Am I so undesirable? Or do I remind them of a more animalistic nature of man, where the hunt satisfies and the blood runs freely?

We live along the rivers and in the rainforests and increasingly at the edge of the jungles, particularly as our lands continue to shrink with the logging and palm tree plantations that are considered of such great value to this nation. I can do without them. I need the life, the wildlife, that trods through the jungle, that sips from the rivers, that bathes in the lakes.

I grew up in these lands, surrounded by nature, thriving off of what the jungle has to offer. I take as much as I need, and move on when I am gorged, careful not to destroy what I leave behind. Why don't others follow the same example? Is it so hard to live a simpler life?

When I was young, I raised myself. Neither of my parents were around much. But I survived. Jungle life is hard and to do it without any guidance speaks to the testament of my will to survive. And I cannot imagine any other place that I would want to survive and thrive, for the land is not merely a place to live on. It lives in itself and it brings forth new life. That is something we cannot replicate and something we all need to continue into the future.

When did parents ever tell their children to raze their house and break their toys and kill their schoolmates? Why, then, as adults is it so difficult to refrain from destroying the jungles, polluting the rivers, and eradicating the precious wildlife that lives in those domains?

Despite the horrors committed in the jungles of Malaysia in the name of national development and modernization, my kind is ignored. We live in the jungles. We rely on the rivers. Without the trees, there is no large game to hunt. Without these large animals, we have limited options for food and sustenance. Yes, we will adapt and move on, but many of us will die in the process.

Despite our ravenous reputation, we are really quite fragile. I have never killed anyone and do not know any one among us who has. But I have seen my kind killed, stomped on like bugs. Nearly every Malaysian is guilty of this crime, and few are sympathetic at all to the rampant hatred and disgust against us.

I can't help it if I was born a leech.

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"Psycho Train Lady"

Fridays are supposed to be the best days of the week. For me, it was a terrible day. Why I even bothered to show up to the office, day after day, confounded me. It's not like my salary was anything to brag about. Sure, I earned enough to cover my expenses, sent some home each month to my parents in Klang, and went to hang out at the mamak and karaoke halls every now and then...but what is the point of doing enough just to get by? I can do more. But my boss did not want to rock the boat. So after a long day, I went home with my boss' words ringing in my ears: "Don't try to be a super hero. Blend in better. Be like everyone else in this office. A team player."

It's just that, though. I *am* a team player...just not for the team I am assigned to. My coworkers only ever did enough to get by. There was always some excuse to not have to do more: "I have a stomach ache. Need to MC today," or "I don't know how to do this. Why don't you ask Syafiq to help? He can help you." I never felt as if they wanted to do as good of a job as me. And my boss did not seem to mind in the least bit. After all, at the end of the day, the work got done. And if it did not, there was always the next day. Don't worry *lah*.

I got lectured in front of my coworkers that Friday because I was too ambitious. Too hard-working. And not full of excuses when there was work to be done. How about that for company policy?!? If I was not so committed to my career advancement opportunities with this company, I would have turned around that very second, marched back into the office, and let them all know what I thought. First, I would have started with my boss, let him know what a narrow-minded, uneducated, un...

"Hey! Be careful. You almost got hit by that motor bike. You should really watch where you are going, you know?"

Back to reality. What motor bike? Oh...maybe that one. Well, it wouldn't surprise me if I got hit. He was driving on the sidewalk just to avoid the traffic at Masjid Jamek. That area used to get flooded by the river all the time. Now, it is flooded with cars, stuck in the jam, and the motorbikes that zigzag between. And in this guy's case, apparently on the sidewalks too. All I had to do each day was cross the street from my office to the subway to get home. And even doing that could get me killed. Not that Friday...I was not in the mood to die, but gradually started to feel like killing someone myself.

I climbed up a dozen stairs, only to have to take the slow escalator down three levels to the ticketing counter. As I rode down the escalator, I listened to the group of girls, perhaps recent school graduates, who were chatting about how boring their jobs were. Clerks, receptionists, customer service call center staff...that's what it sounded like to me. But while I usually talked with my associates about the work that I completed that week and

what needed to get done the next day or be planned for next week, these girls found it more interesting to talk about cute boys who worked for different companies on different floors that they had seen around the office's canteen. How would they be prepared for tomorrow's work day if they only thought about cute boys?

I was tempted to ask them just that, but they ran off at the bottom of the escalator, almost bouncing up and down when meeting another friend already downstairs. So *gedik* and giddy. Never mind. I had more important things to do that night than to worry about giddy girls and their lack of career ambition.

As I walked up to the ticket gates, I reached into my purse only to remember that I used the last of my credit that morning. No ticket. Slightly embarrassed, as if this was the first time I tried to use the trains, I turned away from the gate, people pushing past me to get inside. I hurried over to the ticket vending machines along the wall. Kerinchi-1 ringgit and 60 sen. I was not used to paying for single-trip tickets. I rode the trains several times a day so I used a stored value ticket. It was easier than waiting in line or having to deal with broken vending machines...like the one I was standing at. "Out of service." Ugh.

I waited for the next machine. What was taking this guy ahead of me so long, I did not know. The ticket machines are not too difficult to figure out. As he finished, though, I moved forward to purchase my ticket only to read: "Paper money not accepted. Thank you." Thank you? Digging deep into my pockets, I needed RM1.60 in coins. OK. Fifty sen, fifty sen, twenty sen, ten sen, ten sen, ten sen...and that was the last of my coins. Ten sen short, I grumbled my way over to the ticket counter, pulling two ringgit from my pocket. I would smack them at this point if they told me at the counter that they also would not accept paper money.

There were two queues to the ticketing counter. Mine, of course, was the slower moving of the two. Almost five minutes later, I was finally next in line. As the man in front of me took his ticket and exited the queue, an elderly Chinese woman brushed past him from the side, pointing at the ticket vending machines. Her Malay was broken, but she was obviously (and rightly so) complaining that the ticket machines were either out of order or not accepting paper money. What was not right, I noticed, was that she used her complaint as an opportunity to cut the entire queue (money already in hand) to buy a ticket. And with that she walked off with her ticket and a grumpy look on her face as if she were the only one inconvenienced by the broken ticket machines and had every right to cut the entire queue.

That day was so filled with little annoyances. I accidentally marked my white blouse with blue ink that morning while trying to write a note to myself on the train into the city (mental note: write on the notepad, not your clothes). At lunch I dropped my half-empty cup of iced lemon tea on my shoe (mental note: do not stand anywhere near an anthill). And after I got back from lunch, my ID card would not work anymore. I had to go down to HR to get a temporary one and apply to get a new card made. Because of that wasted time, I did not finish my work for the day.

"Oh no!"

Just as I was about to validate my ticket, I remembered the huge stack of files I had left in the conference room to take home with me over the weekend. Luckily, I did not waste my ticket. So I ran back upstairs and across the street (watching like a hawk that time for any stray motorcyclists on the sidewalk). At the security gates to my office, though, I came across another roadblock. My temporary ID card could not open the gates. The guard asked me where I was going, to which I replied with my classic are-you-kidding-me face.

I told him, "Uncle, I have worked here for nearly six years...longer than you have even. Do you really need to wonder what it is I am doing here?"

"Where is your ID card?"

After several deep breaths and a bothersome explanation of what happened, he decided that he did recognize me finally and let me in. I ran upstairs and grabbed my high stack of files. I put as many as I could in my bag but had to carry the rest that did not fit. I hurried back downstairs and thanked the guard on my way out. I rushed down to the trains only to find that I just missed mine. Fortunately, at peak hour, they come every few minutes so I did not have to wait long.

It was a good thing that the wait time was short too as my workload, stacked precariously, was starting to tire my arms. Since the train had just left, my platform was mostly empty. I took position behind a tall, skinny man, waiting next to the gate for the train doors to open. I noticed that the yellow-lined no-standing area immediately in front of where the train doors open was faded. Still, it was clearly marked, and I always grew impatient to see people waiting there. A few minutes passed and my platform became increasingly crowded as we waited for the train.

As the train pulled up to the gates and the doors opened, a mob of people simultaneously came from behind (and into the no-standing area) trying to push their way on the train just as nearly as many people tried to get out. The result was a train wreck, figuratively speaking. Wanting to follow my basic common sense, I stood to the side to allow time for those exiting the train to clear the aisle. That was not possible, however, with the group of people trying to push their way inside (and cutting the queue at that).

I followed the tall man in front of me. Somehow he managed to slip inside, but I was too wide. I did not know if it was all of the files in my arms or my widening hips, but there was no room for me to squeeze in. I watched as the doors closed—me still standing on the platform—and took a deep breath. This was irritating. I missed the train for following the rules, while a dozen other people rudely pushed right past me, creating a mosh pit on the no-standing area.

Trying to stay positive, I figured that there was no way for me to miss the next train as I was standing immediately in front of the doors...in the no-standing area. I felt like a moron who could not follow simple instructions standing there, particularly as more and more people queued up around me on the perimeter of the no-standing area. Nevertheless, as the

next train arrived and the doors opened, I found myself being pushed from behind by the mob that rushes the train as soon as its doors open, as well as from in front of me, as irritated commuters found me standing right there, an obstacle in their path to get out of the train.

I would not call myself claustrophobic, but I was not comfortable being in the center of two opposing forces, pushing me like a blade of grass in the tide. But I stood my ground and used the rude people pushing me from behind as momentum to get into the train. Even inside I was being pushed to the side by those still trying to get out as more and more people entered. There were even empty seats, so I made my way over to them, glad to finally rest my arms from the heavy stack of work I had been carrying since leaving the office the second time.

With my lack of luck that day, I should have known that I would not be so fortunate to get to sit down. What I had not expected, though, was to be shoved aside by a petite Malay woman wearing a *tudong*. Her modest dress, unfortunately, did nothing to hide her immodest manners. She knocked half of the files out of my hands as she pushed past me and took the seat I was standing right in front of. I stood aghast while she glanced at me and the mess she made indifferently and pretended like I was not even there. More people crowded onto the train, stepping on my files and trampling past me to get the last remaining seats. Two teens behind me started laughing quietly at my misfortune. As I turned around to look at them, I found that they were using their phone to videotape the whole incident.

“Excuse me,” said an elderly lady as she walked over my files to get past me.

The boys continued to laugh, while covering their mouths, thinking that would hide what they were doing. I looked back at the woman who had stolen my seat and knocked my files all over the train. She sat there with a snide look on her face. I wanted to smack her. I wanted to throw the boy’s phone out the window. I wanted to just scream.

So I did.

I let out a screeching whine from the middle of the train as loud as my voice could muster. What that screech was communicating, at least I thought quite clearly, was that I had suffered my way through one of my most infuriating and frustrating days ever, and I needed for it to end right then and there.

It certainly got everyone’s attention, whether it communicated my point or not. The people standing near me moved as far away as they could in those cramped quarters. The people seated near me, of course, did not move an inch though, continuing to pretend that I did not exist.

I smiled. It felt so good to let it all out like that. I turned and smiled, making eye contact with everybody around me. I was not going to be embarrassed about what had happened. I needed to do that. I deserved to do that. And chances were that I would never see the vast

majority of these people again, nor would they likely remember my outburst by the time they got home.

After a relaxing and low-key weekend, I felt fresh and revived walking into the office Monday morning. Everyone else seemed to be in a good mood too, laughing and goofing around while watching videos on the computer instead of doing their work. Typical. As I walked over to say hello to everyone, they got really quiet very quickly. They were watching a YouTube video of my near psychotic episode on the train that Friday.

And now I am known across the Internet as the psycho train lady.

* * * * *

"Ramadan Horror"

I had one good Imam who taught in my school. His name was Abu Bakar. He was very strict—always carrying a *rattan*, both hands behind his back, and looking straight past you without smiling as he walked. Everyone was scared of him, including me. But he was well-respected by everyone. Any time we had a funeral service, his name would be the first chosen to read the *tahlil*. At weddings, he had a reputation for giving advice before marrying the new couple. It was the same with divorce cases or any other Muslim festivals for that matter.

My parents loved him. They told me to obey whatever Imam Abu Bakar said. They wanted me to be just like him—pray five times a day, fast everyday in the holy month, and hopefully someday when I earned enough money, I would be able to go on a pilgrimage or study in Mecca, just like him. And I agreed.... up until something bad happened that changed everything.

It was 6.00am on Friday, the thirteenth. I still remember people making a big fuss connecting that day with *hantu* or ghastly horrors or murders or even the undead. I didn't believe any of that. My main reason was because I have never seen a ghost before. And besides, this was the month of Ramadan, the fasting month for all Muslims. It was the month where Satan and other devils were chained and kept far away from humans to help us remain devoted to Allah without distractions or temptations. So if they were chained or kept away from us, logically how could they still mess around and disturb people, right?

I put my hair cream on earlier that morning. Usually, I just used coconut oil but that day, I felt like dressing up a little nicer on my way to school. I put my white shirt on before tucking it into my long, blue pants. And then I pulled on my socks, which had a hole on both sides of the toes, and looked at myself in the broken pieces of my mirror and smiled. My mom screamed from the kitchen, "don't forget your flashlight!" When she saw me putting on my white shoes at the front door. My house was so remote and very far from our nearest neighbors. There were no streetlights along the small lane connecting our house with the main road, so a flashlight was a necessity for my family.

I always sang Allah's ninety-nine names while walking to school. It was the first song that Imam Abu Bakar taught me in class. Honestly, that song helped to distract me from other things and pass the time. I played memory games by singing the names in order, and if I forgot one or got them mixed up, I made myself start over from the beginning. It seemed tedious, but it actually helped me to remember them all.

"Assalamualaikum!" I heard as someone stopped me from behind. It was Imam Abu Bakar. I

didn't know where he came from. That was the first time I saw him smiling as he asked me, "going to school?"

"Yes sir," I answered, smiling too.

"Alone?"

I nodded.

"I'm on my way there too. Do you want to come along with me? I parked my car around the corner there. It's a bit of a detour, but if you don't mind walking with me, you will get there much faster than walking. Plus, you shouldn't walk alone in the dark. It's dangerous."

"Yes sir," I answered as I said to myself "that's why I have my flashlight with me."

"So are you coming?"

I nodded my head and followed him.

Forty-eight hours later, my face was plastered on flyers attached to every electric pole, tree, and phone booth. I believed that my father lodged a police report when my principal and teachers told him that I didn't turn up to school that day. My mother wouldn't lose hope either. She would talk to my friends, schoolmates, neighbors, and try to find me in cyber cafes, video game arcades, cinemas, and karaoke boxes all around town center. She would just want to know that I was still alive.

I was not. My body was buried under a large, old tree in the jungle not too far from my house. Imam Abu Bakar put me there. I'm sure he didn't plan for that to happen. It all started when he tried to kiss my neck on our way to his car that day. I told him to stop, but he was persistent. When I tried to run away, he grabbed my arm, smacked my face, and told me to shut up. I managed to land a square kick in all the chaos, but that was a mistake because it made him very angry. He clobbered my head with a big tree branch. My body instantly felt very weak and the next thing I knew, well...I was dead.

So here I am now. Dead under a large, old tree in the jungle not too far from my house. My luck too...I am right next to a small anthill. Am I a *hantu* already? I don't think so. I haven't been chained or locked far away. I also don't go around haunting people or drinking their blood. That's not what *hantu* do. A real *hantu* does much more than that. A real *hantu* could be anyone we know. It could be our family members, our teachers, or even our friends. We just don't know.

I imagine that my parents will invite someone to my house to recite a *yassin* to help them find my body. They will seek Allah's help to find me, no matter where I am. Can you guess who will be the head of the service?

Yes. Imam Abu Bakar.

* * * * *

"First of Syawal Collection"

Aris still remembers that day. It was the first of Syawal, the day of celebration that came after exiting the fasting month of Ramadan. He woke up very early that morning. Perhaps it was because he was excited to put on his new clothes. Then again, they were not that new. Technically, his two elder brothers had worn those same clothes before they were passed down. Still, they were new to him. Aris has four elder sisters, two elder brothers, and two younger brothers, so he knew that in being the seventh of nine siblings in a poor Malay family, sharing was definitely caring. His mother said that if he promised to keep the clothes in good condition, his two younger brothers might get the chance to wear them too.

His mother worked as a rubber tapper on a small estate behind their *kampung* house. His father was a retiree and, unlike other men in the neighborhood, he spent the rest of his life sitting at home doing nothing. Aris knew he was too sick to do much. He could hear him coughing every night. His mother said he had asthma, probably from being a hardcore smoker for years. Since they did not have enough money to get him treated in the hospital, his father could only ease his pain with a warm drink and white rice soup.

On the first of Syawal, it is a Malay tradition to cook nice foods and give *ang paw* or gift money to kids. The evening before he went to bed, Aris made a promise to himself. He vowed to visit every single house in his *kampung* to make sure that he collected enough *ang paw* money for his father to get treatment. He started recalling all the neighbors that he knew, starting with Pakcik Abu, the head of the *kampung*. Aris knew Pakcik Abu was quite rich, so he was sure that he would get a ringgit or two extra there compared to other houses. Then he decided he would go to Bidan Limah, the respected midwife of the *kampung*. Bidan Limah loved children, so there would always be the chance that he would get an extra ringgit or two there as well. The next house would be Tok Janggut. He was a *tok mudim*, an old man who circumcised young boys when they reached puberty. Despite looking so serious and fierce all the time, Aris heard from the other kids that he always gave them not less than five ringgit each holiday. That was one house he was willing to try. Then, there was Nek Wok, the *mak andam*—the middle-aged beautician who makes up brides on their wedding days. Nek Wok did not have any kids and never married. She was always lonely, and Aris used his spare some of his time to accompany her on her errands. He hoped that he would get something from her from being so nice at least.

The list of names went on until he reached a total of fifty. Fifty houses to visit—that was quite a lot—but he thought if he managed to visit every one of them, he would get at least fifty ringgit. He never had the chance to hold that much money before. He did not know how the fifty-ringgit note even looked like for that matter.

The day came. He started his first of Syawal quest after prayers in the mosque. As planned,

he carried two pieces of paper with him that morning. One was the list of names of the people whose houses he wanted to visit, while the other outlined just how much time that he could spend in each of their houses before needing to move on.

He started with his teacher's house. It was empty. Then, he quickly ran off to another house about half a kilometer away. From afar, he saw a bunch of kids outside of the house waiting. Aris knew that they would be his competition for getting any money, so he joined them. Those kids did not eat any of the food on offer. They had a sip of water and sat in silence. Aris asked: "Look at the *ketupat* and *rendang*. They look so delicious. Don't you guys want to try any?"

"No, we want to keep some room in our tummies. There are lots more houses to go after this one. We can't possibly eat everything that we come across," whispered one of them.

"So what are we supposed to do now? Just drink?"

"No, just sit and wait."

Aris agreed, so he just leaned back and waited with them.

"Not eating?," asked Puan Latifah, who came out from the kitchen with more baked goods in her hands.

"No thanks, Makcik. We need to go actually," said another one.

Puan Latifah smiled, "OK, line up. I haven't received my monthly salary yet so don't complain if it isn't much!"

All the kids were excited and lined up. One by one, they came to her and kissed her hand before pressing it to their foreheads as a sign of respect. Aris was the last one in line. "Nice to see you, Aris. How's your father?" she asked.

"Not good," he answered with a sad face.

She rubbed his head and gave him a small, green envelope that contained some money. As a courtesy, Aris would not open the envelope until he had left the house. But as he walked out the doors, one of the other kids had ruined the surprise, grumbling: "Alah, fifty sen only?" He then knew that his first ang paw was not as big as he had expected.

He received less than one ringgit at each of the first ten houses that he visited. Some families did not give him anything at all. In the subsequent twenty houses that he went to, he managed to collect at least one ringgit each. At thirty houses, Aris had collected a total of thirty-five ringgit and twenty sen. Aris thought this was quite an achievement.

He did not stop at that though. There were still another twenty houses to go, and he was

aiming for an average of two ringgit from each house now. "Hey guys, let's go quickly to the next house. It's getting late!" he told the other kids.

Pakcik Abu gave him five ringgit. This might have been because Aris spent a little extra time there, eating and drinking, even though his stomach already felt bloated with too much food and drink. The next house was someone that he did not even know. Still, they gave him one ringgit. He did not get the chance to visit Bidan Limah's house because it looked empty. She probably went out to visit her relatives.

On his way to the next house on his list, house number thirty-four, Aris bumped into one of his elder brothers, who seemed to come out of nowhere. He asked, "Where are you going? I've been searching for you all over this *kampung*!" He was frowning. Aris was not sure whether he was angry or sad.

"I am just collecting *ang paw*. Why?" He asked him back.

"Ayah," his father, "he passed away!"

Aris was stunned. He quickly hopped on his brother's bike, both crying as they cycled back home.