

## After The Star

How might I explain this to you – I am a star, a Bintang: A symbol that you so proudly hung up on your wall under the Qibla. Positioned in a way, that even with only one lamp on, it would glint, ostentatiously and insistently. I often wonder if you realised what you were doing, when you hung up that Bintang, and my life along with it. Encased, flickering light from afar.

When I was old enough to acknowledge it, I asked you about it over dinner. And you, with a grin that only licked the edges of your mouth, had told me what it was: A Bintang Gerilya. You laughed when you I asked what the award was for, "It's just how it was back then."

But I had only realised the extent of what *was* later, after Ayu finally took my head in their arms and kissed me outright in the stock room. On the exhale, when I had taken fistfuls of their hair and felt the crackle of energy zip through my body. Their hand slipped into my underwear, but nothing came of it.

Or again, in the clearing behind the house, when we tried again. And on the last, I watched the lake beyond us as Ayu's hands coiled around my abdomen. Ayu's soft exhale vibrated a content groan. I closed my eyes and their felt soft kisses along the back of my neck like butterflies landing on my spine. I craned my neck to meet Ayu's lips. For months, we had been chasing a high but even then– *Nothing*. The crackle would not break. There was no climax to reach, just a steady incline of pleasure that never came to a head.

Until finally, they sat up, faced the water, and hugged their knees. Concession washed upon them like the drawl of the waves below, a tide under a waning gibbous. What was left of the moon gave a sheen of milky, glowing white on the lake. And Ayu's back set against it, their hollowed shadow, shaking.

Only after this picture, I had felt it, my shape, your star. Hung up, against the wall, watching as Ayu wept and mourned and grieved for body parts that did not want them.

\*

*There are other ways to get there, you know, you said, after I came home from the clearing with red eyes brimmed with frustration. You put your hands on my head, you really are my daughter: tricky.*

You levelled yourself with me, when I was sitting on the last step of the staircase in the dining room, *If you place your hand between your thighs,*

*you can squeeze and put pressure on the front. If you put enough, it'll send you over. And you don't even need to put anything up there. It's better alone anyways.* You gently did as you described, and traced the spot above the pad.

*Why?* I asked, as I grabbed your arm to pull it away from the spot between your legs.

*It's more sanitary,* you said, as you resisted my pull. It had been decades since the war, and yet you remained strong. I knew I was never going to win a physical fight, but something about you telling me about this spot had irked me. And I just had a notion, a deep, visceral vibration that nearly shook me, that this wasn't how it should be.

*I don't like it*—I had begged, as I began to pull your arm away with both my hands. But you wouldn't stop, and so my hands shot back to attempt to pull them away again—quick and biting.

*Because the opening is not for us—let me show you, Reza*—You said, as you began to tear away from me. *It is for the filthy foreigners!* You had yelled and then shot up straight.

I closed my eyes and felt you gently put your hands on my back. Like touching fire, I instinctively moved away.

\*

I hadn't wanted to give you the satisfaction, when later, a soft heartbeat pulsed below as I pressed my hips into the mattress. It seemed like what you showed me would work, but, as you said, it was a solitary thing. And so it was also the anti-thesis of Ayu. And even as their face began to materialise in my mind, I spurred harder, faster, and pushed it away. My first climax came as I squeezed my thighs together, hard.

It felt so good, the hugging of these taut muscles surrounding my clit. A heartbreaking beat of muscle cramps, that made one more lock and jail bars in the hymen. The first climax of my life had sent me into a relaxation that I might have never known.

I saw stars, hundreds of age-old, glinting Bintangs desecrated my ceiling as I lay on my bed, my limbs stretched out in each direction. I had heard you then, in the crevices of sleep, what you had confessed to by looking at the Bintang on the wall:

*I was the first. Not only to see it, but to really feel it. Across the valley, in the mountain over, a horseshoe hole had been carved out on the side. It spanned maybe three fourths of the whole mountain. The lines clean, gaping to make one dying, bleeding, screaming opening.*

*I didn't know what it was. Then, I would, when they pierced the sky. We'd sit on the opposite mountain, shrouded behind bushes, and listen to the plane drone by and pierce the sky as they injected themselves into the opening one by one. Their plumes of smoke expanding and spilling out like a hymen broken.*

*And then, legions of men, dressed in green khaki, newspaper hats with rifles hooked on their shoulders.*

*War was my daughter. She mine. She mine more than anything I'll let be.*

I awoke as quietly as the sunlight had crept in. Everything was damp. My hair stuck to my forehead, as did the t-shirt onto my back. The sweat created a layer of sticky ooze between me and bed. I felt it hard to get up. But when I did and took my underwear off to pee, there lay a milky substance, sticky and viscous, white and clear, that looked much like water reflecting moonlight.

\*

From then on, it was just a matter of waiting—

We had been going at it in the stock room again. But since that first time by myself, whenever I was with Ayu, I began to see stars and the planes that flew among them. I began to see myself in them – that constellation of stars that the planes had woven between as they went to war.

Back on the ground, Ayu touched my something— my shoulder, perhaps. In response, I moaned.

They pulled away.

*What is it?* Ayu asked, as they grabbed my arm. I shrugged, looking up at the ceiling again. I was searching for something, but I only found the Qibla.

I had barely even noticed it again, in one of the final times Ayu would come to the house.

*How young were you when you started fighting?* Ayu had asked. I tightened my grip on my chopsticks. Had I not begged them to avoid the topic of military service?

*Not young enough, I had a good few years in me that I should've given,* you had smiled. I remember I had huffed out some air quickly.

*You tried to enlist multiple times?* Ayu had persisted, even through the glare I had shot their way.

*Only once*, you said. My eyes flitted between you in the chair and the wall behind you, where the Bintang Gerilya laid. It persisted to catch the light, even after years of wear; of being encased, framed and set aside, *but I wasn't ready then*.

We were watching an old sit-com on the TV, when I asked about why you couldn't enlist the first time. We sat on the dilapidated couch, sinking deeper into the crack where the cushions met. I felt as if we'd been there forever.

You answered it like it was funny, *Because when he stuck his fingers up my—*

In that moment, you reminded me how liberation of any kind was merely a transition of power. And when I confronted you about your crassness, with a voice yelped like a kicked dog, you simply looked at the star on the wall. *Because nothing could be taken from me*, you said between breaths of laughing along with the audience in the TV, *if I had already given it away*.