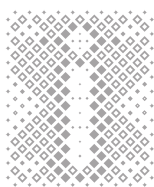




The Falling Leaf Never Hates the Wind

Tere Liye

indonesia



17.000 ISLANDS OF IMAGINATION

The
Falling Leaf
Never Hates
of the
Wind

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Tere Lye

*The
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THE FALLING LEAF NEVER HATES THE WIND

by Tere Liye

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8 p.m.: When It All Started

It rains again this evening, just like the nights before. It's comforting. The rain makes the atmosphere outside seems peaceful and reassuring. It's not really heavy, only drizzle, even that's sparse, but enough to make the flickering lights along the street look beautiful.

I sigh. Gently, I touch the frosted glass. Cold suddenly jab my fingertips, creeping up to the palm of my hand through my wrist, piercing through my elbow, my shoulder, then setting in my heart.

It freezes all feelings.

It crystallizes all desire.

Everything has to end tonight.

* * *

From the second floor of the largest bookstore in the city, you can clearly see the bustling road right in front of you, which also the major road in the city. The street is divided by a median strip of about 8 inches high. Every few meters on the median there are white round lights, along with flower pots, though the flowers don't seem to be quite lush right now. Still, those white round lights look beautiful as their light blend in with silhouettes of lights from hundreds of cars passing by.

The entire wall of this bookstore has been replaced by thick glass. Standing in here makes you feel like you are inside an aquarium. People inside can clearly see what's happening outside, and people outside can clearly see what's happening inside. It's an avant-garde style architecture. Glass, instead of concrete, becomes the best option for room dividers.

Across the street, modern large photocopy kiosks line up neatly. Ten watts neon lights, long tables for dropping off documents to be copied, and employees in uniform clearly visible from up here. I notice a customer who appears to be a college student waiting around in one of the kiosks, sitting on a high swivel chair. He is probably waiting for photocopy material for the coming exam, or he could be just waiting for the rain to stop.

A motorbike slowly enters the parking lot. Two people get off while leisurely taking off their raincoats. A couple. The girl wears a white hijab. The guy puts his arm around her shoulder. They enter the photocopy kiosk together. It's unlikely they are going to make copies of their wedding invitations in there, but it's obvious that they are intimate.

I sigh.

As expected, a blue public transportation minivan recklessly stops on the side of the road, dropping off passengers, which worsen the traffic. The driver of the minivan doesn't seem to care at all, even when the driver of the car behind him honk loudly. The minivan passengers don't seem to care either. They carelessly open their umbrellas even before they completely step out of the van. This makes other passengers who accidentally get poked by their umbrella grumble.

People who benefit from the whole incident are the teenagers gather together across the road, waiting to cross. The reckless minivan gives them a chance, so the giggling bunch makes their move. It's Saturday night. They have plenty of reasons to leave the house.

Food stall tents crowded the road as far as the eyes can see. They are packed with young people who came in two or three. Cold weather and rain makes the steam from fried rice in the griddle, or satay on the grill, or soup in the cauldron, or curry chicken in the steamer, and dozens of other types of dishes, seem very inviting.

Unfortunately, I'm not hungry tonight!

From the second floor, you can also see construction workers working on the site of our future shopping center some six hundred feet away on the left side of the photocopy kiosks. Heavy equipments with long arms and several large lights on top are busy lifting and dropping off steels, bricks, and other building materials. Wearing helmets, the workers don't care much about

the rain. They are trying hard to meet the opening ceremony deadline six months away, competing with two other shopping centers which started to be built at about the same time.

The city is growing rapidly, although people have to pay the price with many inconveniences. But who cares?

Ahead, two photo shops can be spotted. They are actually owned by the same owner. For business reasons, the original shop had to be split. A giant authorized dealer for negative films and cameras from Japan was built on the right side of the shop, while the left side of the shop has been turned into a giant authorized dealer for negative films and cameras from America. I notice some teenagers are gathering inside. They probably want some close-up photos of themselves. Auditions for singing, modeling, acting in soap operas, and various reality TV shows have been popular again lately. A stylish photo would absolutely open up some doors. Everyone dreams of being somebody, right?

I just stand here for fifteen minutes, watching the activities across the street. The bookstore is playing a soft song with slow tempo. It's cunning indeed. The type of songs are deliberately chosen. I notice this practice is also done by most other modern, major retail stores like supermarkets or department stores. What else if not to persuade visitors to stay longer and spend more.

But it'll be a different story when you visit fast food restaurants. They will likely play fast rhythm songs, suggesting that you eat quickly and immediately out of their restaurant. There are many guests waiting for an empty table outside,

especially during lunch or dinner time, when they play music with even faster tempo. They are just as deceitful as this bookstore.

There's no telling what song is playing in that photocopy kiosk across the street. What's clear though, the couple is now sitting closer together in front of a long table, facing each other, looking at each other, talking with gestures that are so easily understood. They don't seem to pay attention to the uniformed employees staring at them or the student sitting on the stool next to them. They're very affectionate with each other. I swallow hard. It must be a love song.

Oh, well!

* * *

I come to this bookstore every night.

It became a ritual for me for the past week. I have been recognized by the security guy who often steal glances at me. The female clerks who diligently tidying the books on the shelf know me too, including the two cashiers who work in turns near the escalator.

I always buy a book every time I come here, even though I rarely read them. Think of it like an entrance fee for using their second floor as a place to release emotions I have buried deep inside. A place where I can stand and recall everything. Everything about my past.

This place gives me pleasure. Strolling along the bookshelves, touching one or two books, reading the back covers, flipping

through unwrapped books. Looking at customers who are busy doing their own business helps me make peace with my old feelings. This place really means a lot to me because it holds many important memories in my life.

“Alone, Miss?” one of the male clerk asks, making small talks. He’s pretending to organize a pile of books about learning to read that is already neatly arranged two steps to my right.

I grin flat. The question is only pleasantries. I know it full well. He knew, as well as the other employees of this store, that I always come here alone every night.

So why asked?

What for? Tonight he finally has the courage to greet me. I notice he has been stealing glances since last week. He pretends to be around me as I stand staring out the window. He must have had mustered the courage all afternoon just to greet me with edgy voice and expression as tense as this. He must have had encouraged himself all week long to say something to the girl he has a crush on.

There’s no harm in giving a reward for his bravery. So I give him a faint smile, a very faint one even by turning my head slightly toward him but don’t look him in the eye, then quickly stare back out the window.

I have absolutely no desire to be bothered by him right now.

The guy sighs softly. He smiles awkwardly, then slowly retreats. He walks away with his head down.

* * *

I don't understand why my presence in the bookstore every night has attracted his attention at all. And it has probably made him restless this past week as well.

I was equally puzzled at what my old friend, Adi, did a year ago. It was even crazier than just greeting me like what the guy earlier did. This incident also happened in this bookstore.

It was raining at the time, just like today. Heavy rain blanketed the city. The sound of millions drops of water crashing down on earth was loud even from the inside. Adi, who happened to accompany me looking for a certain novel, suddenly grabbed my arm.

"I want to show you something!" He looked at me seriously. His face was tense and uneasy, just like the guy earlier.

"What?" I frowned, not interested.

"Come on!" He was pulling my hand, reluctant to explain.

I was forced to follow him. He tightened his grip.

Down the stairs to the first floor, I followed him with growing concern as he continued to walk toward the door.

"Where are we going?" I asked, curious.

Adi didn't answer. He headed to the front yard of the bookstore while still pulling my hand.

"My umbrella!" I tried to hold up. I wanted to get my umbrella at the counter where I checked it in earlier. It was raining very heavy. How could we walk through it without an umbrella?

Adi turned to me, shaking his head. No need.

By that time I was even more confused. Adi managed to pull me into the rain. Water flooded the curbside of Margonda Street.

We were soaking wet. He grabbed my arm. We stood face to face. I didn't understand what the purpose of all this. People standing along the street carrying umbrella noticed us. People who were standing and looking outside on the second floor of the bookstore, downstairs in the lobby of the bookstore, inside the photocopy kiosks across the street, as well as those eating in the food stall tents, were all watching us closely.

"Do you know that I can stop this rain?" Adi shouted, trying to compete with the sound of water hitting the cobblestones and cars honking in traffic jam.

I shook my head. That was not my answer to his odd remark, but rather, I was asking him to stop. *Please stop this nonsense*, I sighed silently, brushing my wet long hair out of my eyes.

"Rain... Please stop!" Adi shouted. He was looking up, didn't pay attention at my objection, wanting to be back inside as soon as possible.

"What are you doing!" I hissed.

Adi once again shouted to the sky. He didn't care. I tried to let go of his hand but instead, he gripped me tighter, then he lowered his head.

"Please know, Tania, I can stop this rain.... But I can only do it when I wasn't with someone I love.... And tonight, looks like I can't do it..." Adi looked at me thoughtfully.

I was flabbergasted. Five awkward minutes passed. I grinned clumsily. I got the message loud and clear, and all of this was ridiculous. I let go of his hand with force, then went running back to the bookstore, leaving him behind.

“Tania!” Adi shouted hoarsely, falling down to his knees helplessly in the rain. The scene made people who were watching grinned as they swallowed hard.

It was an interesting scene indeed. It was probably a more than worthy subject in their conversation throughout the rest of the evening when meeting with their friends. Five minutes “drama” in front of the city’s largest bookstore.

* * *

I know I’m beautiful. I’m well-proportioned with beautiful long jet-black hair. According to *someone* who will be critical in the affair of this evening: “There’s something that makes your face looks radiant, Tania.... Intelligence, maturity, positive manifestation from your life experience, all of these are reflected in your face.... And you know, you have mysterious eyes too. Guys like women with mysterious eyes....”

I laughed at that explanation. A happy laughter. I was happy because *he* praised me. Let alone a compliment, his gaze alone would be enough to cheer me up all day and all night.

Ah! It’s too bad that everything is not like what I have imagined.

There are lots of other men besides Adi and the bookstore clerk who are interested in me. Nevertheless, should they all show such impulsive behavior? I mean, couldn’t they resist the temptation to be overreact like that?

Back to the guy at the bookstore, his action was probably not

excessive, he just wanted to get to know me. Still, couldn't he refrain from bugging people who clearly didn't want to be disturbed?

I really don't want to waste your time by telling you about the strange behavior some guys did when they were trying to attract my attention. I might tell you one or two later though if the incident has something to do with the affair tonight. But, only if I happen to feel like doing it.

I sigh, glancing at my wrist. It's 8 p.m. Already. That means I have been standing here for almost half an hour, staring at the brightly lit street below, watching everything.

Remembering the pictures in the slow diaphragm.

* * *

This bookstore is important. It has always been.

This bookstore becomes a landmark in my colorful life journey this past ten years.

A beautiful landmark I will always remember.

Ten years ago, at this store, I felt the promise of a bright future for the first time. I felt the pleasure of a perfect childhood for the first time. I felt the comfort of having someone who protected me and cared about me for the first time. *Someone*.

You will never guess how Tania looked like ten years ago when the first time she entered this bookstore. She was hesitated and in trembled. Her mouth was open, forming a perfect O. She didn't dare to look around. She was afraid she would break things

on display, despite the fact that there were no glassware or plates around.

Mother has said to me earlier that day, "*Tania, be careful out there, don't touch anything! We have to pay back anything broke because we touched it! Take care of your brother, don't be naughty....*" I swallowed hard with a little doubt and much fear listening to Mother's advice before leaving home. Exactly how would we pay back the broken goods?

At the time, that *someone* took me to this bookstore. I was only eleven years old. My brother was six. It was a very special day. The day I would never forget, including all the details!

That afternoon, Mother scrubbed my filthy little body. She washed my curly hair using a lot of shampoo to get rid of the smell from being in the sun practically all day.

My little brother Dede spent even much longer time at the well. He was a lot dirtier than I was.

Mother gave us our best clothes she has stored in a plastic bundles on top of a pile of cardboard boxes. The best clothes? Those clothes were worn-out and smelly (it was our best clothes because they had not been touched for years). Nevertheless, I was happy wearing them. Dede couldn't even stop smiling.

We didn't eat "dinner" together as usual. Mother was the only one who finished up *nasi bungkus* (Indonesian rice dish wrapped in banana leaf) purchased from the food stall next door. *Nasi bungkus* with three pieces of tempeh plus *sambal terasi* (chili shrimp paste). At exactly seven o'clock, that *someone* came to pick

us up. *He* chuckled when *he* saw me and Dede stood in front of our cardboard shack, neat and tidy, waiting.

My brother Dede blushed when he was praised by *him* (“*Look at you! You look so cool!*”) I myself was embarrassed with my “new look” (“*And you look beautiful, Tania!*”). Oh, My God! That was the first time *he* praised me. And I was really embarrassed. I remembered, the last time I wore clothes as neat as this was three years ago. It was when we returned to our hometown during Eid. When my father was still alive. When we still had a normal life. Three years had passed, we had outgrown those clothes, making me and my brother looked uncomfortable that night. But who cares?

My brother asked a lot of questions along the way. That *someone* just laughed, explaining this and that, answering all Dede’s questions. We took a public transportation. For the first time in three years, I and my brother paid our fare to ride a public transportation, even though it was being paid by someone else. All this time, public transportations were actually the place where my brother and I tried to make a living by busking.

That *someone* took us to a bookstore, the largest bookstore in the city. I was terrified when we walked into a brightly lit large room, stepping on the tile floor that looked slippery. What if I slipped and crashed into one of the shelves and broke everything? I was worried that the sales clerks would stare at me. All this time, didn’t all of them always rush to chase me and my brother away as soon as we approached the entrance to their stores? I was

so embarrassed to walk among many visitors who smell better, dress neater, and have better everything.

That *someone* was clutching my fingers. Steady. *He* put his hand on Dede's shoulder to his left. *He* looked at me with *that* look. A look that somehow made you start to feel confident. *He* smiled a warm comforting smile at me. I could feel it. I smiled back sheepishly.

We browsed up and down the first floor to purchase various school supplies. Dede noisily chosed his school bag. My brother was adamant to buy a pen, even though he was just started first grade tomorrow, where he would only allow to use pencil. I was amazed by the way that *someone* persuaded Dede in terms of the issue concerning the pencil. The way *he* looked at my brother, stroking his hair, smiling, explaining quietly, was really fascinating. Even Mother wasn't that good at persuading my brother Dede when he was already cranky.

Forget about me! Once, Dede, who was very upset, refused to go home when we arrived at the bus terminal at the end of town. It was late at night. Dede insisted to stay. Having no other choice, we stayed overnight in front of a police guard post. Mother was anxiously waiting for us at home. This whole ordeal happened only because Dede wanted to buy a popsicle, and I refused to spend our earnings for the day. Dede sulked all night. I couldn't explain it well to him about the money, except telling him repeatedly that Mother needed the money to buy medicine, so that he shouldn't spend it to buy snacks.

That *someone* stroked my hair gently as we continued walking

around to buy other supplies. “You just washed your hair, didn’t you?” His remarks interrupted my thoughts. I blushed. Dede finally made due with “only” crayons.

I followed that *someone* and my brother ahead of me. I was staring at his sturdy shoulders from behind. I was staring at the figure that was so comforting. The figure that gave me the promise of the future. Since that moment, I made a promise to myself, earnestly and wholeheartedly: *I will follow all his advice. I will listen to whatever he has to say. Whatever it is* We spent more time on the second floor. The floor where they kept all the books! We bought fourth grade textbooks for me and books to learn to read for Dede. We then stopped in front of a large glass window, just like what I’m doing now.

That *someone* lifted Dede high so Dede could see out the window. I stood on the tips of my toes so I too could clearly see out from behind the rack. I was only four feet five inches at the time. We looked at the silhouettes of a busy street below. Photocopy kiosks were not as nice as now back then. Those photo shops didn’t even exist then. The street has not been neatly partitioned. Drivers could still drive their cars at normal speed, no traffic jam. Don’t ask about the town square and other buildings. They didn’t exist.

We huddled together watching the view below for about ten minutes. Everything was so amazing to me. The lights, the people walking around, the busy shops across the street, the food stall tents crowded with customers, everything was amazing.

Ah, there were many things happening in this world. It was

very different from what I had been through. And I suddenly felt *he* had given us the promise of a better life, a picture of a more beautiful future.

Although that *someone* only briefly invited us to look at the bustling life outside the “aquarium”, I could feel the excitement down there. I understood why *he* did what *he* did as we stood there, paused, looking around. Doing so always inspires us!

* * *

How did I meet that *someone*?

Ah yes, this needs to be explained first.

It was a cold night in a city bus where my brother and I tried to make a living by busking. It was two weeks before that *someone* took us to the bookstore. Rain was falling heavily along the way. It blanketed our city. The rain forced me to sing louder. The sound of my little brother’s *kencrengan*, a jerry-built musical instruments he made with his own hands, was getting weaker. Dede was tired. He had not stopped singing since morning. I did persuade him to be more enthusiastic before boarding the bus, but my brother was tired. Look at him! He has been yawning constantly, so I just left him alone.

We were not so lucky that day. Actually, until this afternoon, after moving from bus to bus, from minivan to minivan, Dede and I had managed to collect about nineteen thousand rupiah. A huge amount of money for us. But earlier at the terminal, some drunks forced us to give our money to them. One of them

clutched Dede's neck. I could have screamed I suppose, but the guy gripped Dede's neck very hard, making Dede's face looked pale as he wasn't able to scream anymore. It was terrible. I was forced to give up all the money in my left pocket. That was half of our earning from busking all day, ten thousand rupiah.

It was late, almost eight o'clock. I decided to go home, despite of today's modest earning. Mother never complained whatever money we took home. So we took this route, a city bus full of people coming home from work. This was actually a blessing for every busker, unfortunately though, many of them were exhausted and asleep, so they would not pay too much attention to us.

I sang louder.

Four songs. The bus almost arrived at its final destination. It was enough I thought, so I pulled out a crumpled plastic bag and passed it around from front to back, wishing kindness from the hearts of those exhausted people. My brother followed behind me. The *kencrengan* made from bottle caps has been stored in his dirty pants pocket.

Halfway through, I stopped dead in my tracks when I stepped on a thumbtack lying around on the floor of the bus. I had no idea how that thumbtack got there. The sharp part was facing up, and mercilessly prick the bottom of my barefoot when I stepped on it.

I moaned.

"What's the matter, Sis?" Dede asked, yawning, resisting sleep. My brother was also barefoot.

I held back my tears. I squatted, put down my plastic bag

containing only four or five coins and turned over my right foot. The thumbtack was quite large. It was embedded deep in my foot. My hands were shaking when I pulled it out. It was painful.

Blood flowing out of my foot.

Only a few people around noticed. Some people stared, grinning flat did not care. Others stared for a moment then went back to sleep. Dede immediately cried out in horror. He backed away a few steps. Quite a lot of blood coming out. I was suddenly afraid to see it, and continued to moan in pain. My right foot was sore.

It was then that *someone* greeted me.

Oh, My God! *He spoke* to me.

I remembered very well when looking at his face for the first time. *He* smiled a warm and reassuring smile. His face was very pleasant. I could see kindness in his charming face. *He* wore a long-sleeved blue shirt. *He* looked as neat as the other passengers who just got off work. *He* was probably in his mid twenties.

"Don't press it too hard," *he* reprimanded me. Out of panic, I have been squeezing my foot too hard.

I looked at him, confused. *What do I do then?*

He rose from his seat, approaching me. *He* squatted in front of me, pulled out a handkerchief from his trouser pocket, and grabbed my little dirty foot from walking up and down the street. Carefully, *he* cleaned my foot with the tip of his handkerchief, then slowly wrapped my foot with it. I was amazed, more because I realized how spotless and clean his handkerchief was.

"You should wear sandals," *he* said, tying the makeshift bandage.

I just grinned. *How could we afford to buy sandals?*

He smiled, wiped the corner of my eye.

As we were getting off the bus, he handed me a ten thousand rupiah bill, "For buying iodine."

Dede exclaimed cheerfully and accepted it. I just nodded, looking down, "Thank you!"

* * *

The next morning, Mother replaced the makeshift bandage with a kitchen towel, then washed the handkerchief. "Someone might want to buy it." God knows what Mother was thinking.

I and Dede had to go back to "work", even with me limping. Actually, the injury wasn't that serious. I was just hesitant to set my foot down, worried it would bleed again.

We used the same route as yesterday. We liked that route so we have been using it for the past week. The buses were not crowded (what I meant was that the passengers were not crammed like sardines. It would be hard to sing if the bus was already too crowded). Also, there were not many competitions in that route.

The thugs who robbed our money at the terminal were nowhere to be seen that day. Still, we went home late. We didn't make much money that day.

And you know what, as we boarding the same bus to go home that night, that *someone* was there. He said hi to us, smiling. It was as if he has been waiting for us.

He pulled out two boxes from his bag and waved for us to come closer. I and Dede walked toward him, stood in front of his seat, failed to perform with bottle caps *kencrengan*. Dede instead put his “music instrument” in his pocket, and yawned again.

Evidently, the boxes contained two pairs of new shoes.

“Try it!”

I looked at him with hesitation. By now, my brother Dede had already grabbed the shoes from *his* hand. Other passengers looked at us with curiosity. He just glanced back at them and smiled.

“Come on, try it!”

I complied with his request. I squatted, trying on the shoes. My hand was shaking when I put on the socks, then I failed repeatedly to tie the shoelaces. I didn’t remember how to do it anymore. *He* helped Dede. I glanced at him to imitate what he was doing.

It was funny to see our appearances that night. Our clothes were torn and shabby, our hair was filthy and dirty, and we were smelly, yet we were wearing expensive shoes and clean white socks. But Dede didn’t care. My brother tried out his new shoes proudly, using the isle as a catwalk.

That *someone* smiled.

My brother and I didn’t work that night. We spent most of the evening talking with *him*. Dede laughed a lot at *his* jokes, and I somehow suddenly felt very close to *him*. It was like we finally found that missing part in our lives. Whether it was a father

figure or an older brother figure or what, I wasn't sure. I just prayed that this kind man would always be a part of our lives.

I'm not sure whether it was a good news or bad news for me, but God did answer my prayer.

* * *

Since then, I knew *his* name: Danar Danar. A strange name, Dede commented. "How come you have a double name like that, Uncle?" *He* just chuckled, pretending to punch my brother's shoulder.

People around us were not interested listening to our conversation. A few who were trying to sleep even get a little irritated by Dede's cheerful remarks (my brother never speaks softly; he always giggles no matter where he is, particularly after he got a new pair of shoes, he wasn't sleepy anymore).

Following Dede, I called him Uncle too, although *he* was only twenty five years old at the time. That night, *he* accompanied us back to our cardboard shack near the river on the access road of the city. Mother was both concerned and confused when she saw *him*, but *he* managed to ask more questions to my mother than the other way around.

He was very pleasant.

My mother who was usually always suspicious of strangers, especially in uniform, spent a lot of time talking to him that night. Dede was still busy running around the house, trying out

his new shoes in front of us. Mother reprimanded him repeatedly, reminding my brother that he might caused our home to collapse.

Miraculously, our lives changed the next day.

The next morning right after dawn, Mother told me and Dede the good news. One that I remembered the most and instantly made me jumped up and down with joy was that I would be going back to school. Dede would also be sent to school. Mother choked with emotion when she told us this. I even saw tears in her eyes as she hugged us tightly.

"But who will pay the costs?" I suddenly realized something. For the past three years, we sometimes didn't even have money to eat, let alone paying for schools.

"Uncle Danar...," Mother replied softly, wiping the corner of her eye, smiling.

Mother was looking up to the ceiling of our cardboard shack. I knew why Mother did that. She was holding back her tears so we would not see her crying. Her mouth was whispering something.

He really was an angel for us. Looking at my mother's happy face, I silently made a promise to myself that night that I will always respect *him* after Mother. Always.

A few days later, my brother and I still went to work, busking on buses as usual. *He* came to visit us twice a week after work.

"Where do you work, Uncle?" Dede asked *him* one day, playing with the tie in *his* shirt pocket.

He was wearing the same blue plaid shirt again that day.

"In a veery tall building!" *He* replied with a smile.

"Oh, I thought you're a doctor!"

"A doctor?"

"You treated Sister Tania the other day."

He chuckled, shaking his head.

"Mother said I have to go to school if I want to be successful like you. Is that so?" My brother wanted to confirm Mother's advice for the past two days. Dede was not too enthusiastic about school.

He nodded solemnly, pretending to slap my brother's shoulder again. My mother smiled in the corner. She was setting up the food *he* had brought for us.

"O, I almost forgot, I brought something for you, Dede!"

My brother jumped cheerfully (although it wasn't really clear exactly what the present was). *He* pulled out something from a plastic bag next to him. I finally figured out some time later, the name of the toy *he* gave to my brother is Lego where you arrange blocks of various colors and sizes to form an object.

Those blocks are complicated. Dede couldn't finish completing his Lego that night, but he was excited and curious. My brother forgot to eat while my mother and I busy enjoying the food *he* had brought for us. It had been a long time since the last time we had such a nice meal.

* * *

Two weeks later, we went to this book store, the largest book store in our city, buying school supplies. Minus shoes of course,

since *he* had already bought us shoes. Minus the red-and-white school uniforms, since Mother had already ordered them from a neighboring tailor two days ago.

Tired after nearly two hours walking around, *he* invited us to eat at one of the fried chicken restaurant in the bookstore. I swallowed hard. I usually just walking along the street staring at the children eating in the restaurant with envy (my brother once was sulking for half a day wanted to eat there; and again, I failed to persuade Dede). I never dreamed that one day I would be there too, enjoying everything like a beloved daughter of a rich parents.

Again, *he* held my hand to comfort me.

Dede, who had voracious appetite, ordered two large portions and managed to finish them. I just smiled shyly looking at my brother. I gasped. This was the first time in three years we enjoyed a good food in a nice restaurant. *He* continued to encourage Dede to finish the rest of the food he had ordered for the third time.

Ah! That night, everything changed.

Three years ago my father died of tuberculosis. We had a better life at the time, although my father only worked as a construction laborer. We lived in a small rental house, not in a cardboard shack that always leaked when heavy rain was falling. At least Dede and I didn't have to work then. I was still at school. My brother was three years old.

When my father died, everything turned into a mess. After three months of overdue rent, we were evicted from the rental

house. Mother frantically looking for a place for us to stay. We didn't have any relatives in the city. Even if we had any, they would not be willing to even accommodate us anyway. We had no other choice but to live in a cardboard shack.

I had to quit school. We barely had food to eat, let alone paying for school. Mother worked odd jobs, anything that could earn money. Unfortunately, she was sick more often than not, in fact, her illness was getting worse. People said my mother was ill not solely because of her physic, but more because of the burden in her mind. Who knows whether this was true or not. What was certain and true was that in the end, Dede and I was forced to work: busking. We brought with us *kencrengan* made of bottle caps, singing adult songs on buses or minivans to anyone who would listen. We left home early in the morning, arrived home at night, hammered by the street life.

I didn't mind it at all. I was happy doing everything I could to help Mother. Only once or twice I had to swallow hard in sadness at the sight of a group of school children riding in the same minivan where I was working. That was then, during the first few months when I just started busking. After six months, I managed to take my mind off my dream to go to school. It was time to go to work.

Dede and I lived in that cardboard shack for three years. We knew almost every street corners in the city, memorized by heart rows of buildings along the way, just like we memorized the amount of garbage pile near the cardboard shack. The cardboard shack next to a linden tree.



8.15 p.m.: The First Time I Recognized That Feeling

I wipe a tear in the corner of my eye.

No. I have promised to my mother to never cry, let alone crying for such a ridiculous reason of recalling all those bad memories. Everything has passed anyway.

I do not want to cry, and I am not going to.

I sigh, withdrawing my palm that is touching the glass window on the second floor of the bookstore. It's cold. Fifteen minutes has passed. My hand feels numb. I brush off a strand of hair from the corner of my eye.

The rain is getting heavier outside. People who have been walking on the roadside and ignoring the drizzle, now hastily scurrying for shelter.

Food stall tents and overhang shops along the street are crowded with people taking shelter.

A car is entering the parking lot of the photocopy kiosks across the street. A guy comes out from the driver's side, hastily opens a red umbrella, rushing to the other side. He opens the door for his girlfriend, then guides her out. Using one umbrella, they walk towards one of the photocopy kiosks.

I sigh. Does photocopy kiosk now become a fun and romantic place for going out on Saturday nights? The other couple earlier still sitting comfortably in there, talking to each other more intimately. Does photocopy kiosk now become a favorite spot like the atrium of some shopping mall where we can see lovers spending their weekends together? Whatever! I hurriedly look away from the photocopy kiosk across the street.

On the street, the queue of vehicles is getting longer as the traffic gets worse. Street lights flood the road, collides with the sound of cars honking and snort of disgust from the drivers. Well, at least there's a positive side of this traffic jam. It allows me to enjoy a display of hundreds of lights below.

I notice two bookstore's security guards opening their big black umbrella down there. Despite the heavy rain, they remain diligent in checking every car passing through the gate. They will perform their routines: making a formal salute, greeting every passing car, opening the rear hood, directing a large mirror under the car, and so on. Heavy rain doesn't interfere their concentration in the slightest. They're working hard.

I worked hard too.

The next day after visiting the bookstore with *him*, my schedule changed one hundred eighty degrees. Early in the morning, my brother and I walked to school. At exactly seven o'clock, the school started. Our school was located close to the cardboard shack.

It was so cool when we first joined Monday's flag ceremony at the school courtyard. Especially when I was introduced to the teacher in the classroom. Everything felt so wonderful. I was finally back to school.

At noon, I rushed home to the cardboard shack by the riverbanks. Hurriedly, I tossed my bag and books, eat my lunch as fast as possible, then immediately changed my clothes and picked up the *kencrengan*. We went busking until late afternoon, choosing a shorter route.

We usually be home before sunset, eat dinner with Mother, then, with the help from a kerosene lamp flickering by the wind, I studied. I studied until late into the night.

I had a lot to catch up since I was three years behind. Three years wasted! Since I have promised to myself to always obey *his* words, then when *he* stroked my hair before returning home from the bookstore that night and said, softly: "Study hard, Tania!", I vowed to do so. A pledge that later on would reward me with a glowing record on my education. A perfect one!

Mother often reminded me to go to sleep. I told her I wasn't

sleepy. Every half an hour Mother told me to go to sleep and I always answered her the same. She finally gave up, decided to go back to sleep next to Dede who already been sleeping for hours.

My brother almost completed his Lego tonight. Dede also been able to memorize the entire alphabet. Imagine that, in just one day. His first day at school. I muttered, why wouldn't he if during the time we were busking earlier he was always buzzing like bees to say the letters while beating his *kencrengan*, always bugging me when I was singing. I should just sang children songs for learning to read; it would be better suited with Dede's needs. Such songs were unfortunately rarely attract passengers on city buses to give money.

He didn't force us to stop busking, even though I knew the money he gave to my mother was far more than all our income for a month combined. "It's okay, as long as it doesn't disrupt school!" He smiled at her while saying that. For whatever reason, Mother agreed. Besides, I didn't want to give up busking. I had some spare time left after school anyway.

Lately, my mother's health has improved. Miraculously, she was cured without any treatment. Then maybe what people said was true, Mother was happy now, so her condition had improved by itself.

A week later, my mother started working, doing laundry at one of the laundry services for college students. Her income, coupled with our earning from busking half a day, plus a gift of money from *him* were more than enough to meet our needs. Therefore, a month later my mother decided to rent a small house.

He agreed. In fact, *he* was the one who suggested this to Mother in the first place.

Dede was pleased with the house. At least now my brother could bang on the walls safely, a bad habit of his when he was excited studying. It wouldn't be a good idea to do so at the cardboard shack. It might collapse, you know. And more importantly to me, we no longer had to study under the flickering lights of a kerosene lamp. I was now studying under a 40 watt light bulb.

At this point, our lives had been much improved. Since every morning we had to shower before going to school, my brother and I were not dirty and filthy anymore. Mother bought some new clothes (second hand) for us. She also bought some for herself since during the past year she had been wearing the same clothes over and over.

He visited our rental house twice a week. He brought food, books for me, and toys for my brother. Dede and I always looked forward to these visits. We would sit in front of our rental house, staring at the end of the alleyway, waiting for his arrival which was scheduled for Tuesday and Friday night. We cried happily when we saw his figure at the end of the alley, then ran to greet him.

He just laughed, stroked my hair, pretending to punch my brother's shoulder, then greet my Mother. You know, *he* always kissed my mother's hand. *He* was very respectful to her. Mother used to feel uncomfortable when he did this. How could someone who had helped us kissed her hand. But later on she became accustomed to it. "I've never been fortunate to have a mother!" *He*

said with a big laugh. At the time, I had no idea and could care less at what *he* meant with that statement.

My brother and I were more concerned with the pleasure that came with his visits. Parcels and souvenirs he always brought with him, as well as listening to his stories and seeing his laughter.

"After you finished, you tell me, okay?" That was his answer during his routine visit at the end of the second month when Dede reported that he would soon finish his Lego.

"Then I'll get a present, right, Uncle?" My brother's eyes were sparkling, hopeful. *He* smiled, nodding. Excitement immediately filled our rental house, although it wasn't clear whether or not in fact my brother could finish the most complicated part of his Lego.

I proudly showed *him* my math test papers from earlier that afternoon. *He* smiled. *He* wrapped his arm around my shoulder when sitting next to me, whispering softly

"You're a smart kid, Tania! Very smart!"

Mother just smiled, sitting on a plastic chair in the corner. I felt like my ears was getting bigger. The compliment made me hug *him*.

It seemed that we had never been as happy as that night. *He* brought a box of donuts for us. Dede was more chatty than usual as he toyed with his donut more than eating it.

"Uncle, why donuts have holes in the middle?"

* * *

Oh, I forgot to tell you that though we still busking after school, Dede and I were off busking every Sunday because every Sunday, *he* invited us to come to his house. The house *he* rented. It was much bigger and better than ours. It had a spacious yard, and *he* lived there alone. *He* told us that he lived there with three friends from college in the past, but they got married and moved away (one friend even got married in college).

It wasn't how big or nice his house was that made my brother and I felt at home there, but because every Sunday, *he* opened his house for a storytelling program, in his living room where rows of bookcases lined up neatly. Those cases were filled with books. Every Sunday at 8.00 a.m., the room was always crowded with children from the neighborhood. I recognized half of them as my own school friends.

He would tell us stories. Sometimes *he* would read fairy tales from a book but sometimes *he* would tell us stories *he* created spontaneously. It was really fun gathered with other children listening to him telling stories. *He* was very good at it, far more skillful than my grandparents in the village when they were still alive, and I was happened to be there during the Eid holiday.

The children as usual were always shouting "More! More!" at end of the story. They were also scrambling to sit near him. But since I joined, I was the one who always dominated that position, not my brother. I was very happy to sit near him. I smiled a big smile when *he* stroked my hair.

The storytelling program usually was over right before noon, and the children would headed home. *He* lent us his books

without bothering to record them. Anyone could choose the book themselves from the bookcase, and it was up them when they wanted to return it. In fact, *he* didn't really care whether we return the book or not. The bookcases were always full.

Later on I found out a great secret. Turns out, *he* is good at writing stories, writing books. Some of the stories *he* told to us was derived from books *he* wrote himself. Including adult novels that I like myself, *he* wrote them.

I remember it very well. That Sunday afternoon, as usual my brother and I stayed much longer than the other children. Dede and I were on the computer in the living room. *He* was sitting typing something on his laptop. Staring at his own computer screen, Dede reported that he had just completed the entire Lego. With proud and jovial face, my brother demanded the prize *he* had promised him.

After giving a thought for a moment, *he* casually announced the prize:

"Fantasy World!"

* * *

The following week, after the storytelling program which was finished earlier than usual, Mother, my brother, and I went to Fantasy World. A place I could only dreamed of, even when my father was still alive.

That afternoon *he* asked his friend to join us. Her name is

Ratna. I called her “Sister Ratna”, since she asked me to do so, “*Just call me Sister Ratna, okay, Tania.*”

Sister Ratna shook her head while still smiling when Dede refused to call her “Sister Ratna.” Dede insisted on calling her “Auntie Ratna.”

Sister Ratna objected.

“I call him Uncle Danar, so I have to call you Auntie Ratna!” Dede insisted on defending his logic.

He just laughed looking at Sister Ratna who was overwhelmed arguing with my brother. Mother just smiled. In the case of arguing, my brother is always number one. No one can beat Dede. Only *he* can persuade my brother.

Sister Ratna is very beautiful, her hair is long, and her clothes are fashionable. She looks like one of those celebrities on TV. She smells good and wears light makeup. She’s very pretty. During our time at Fantasy World, Sister Ratna always stood next to *him*. They walked side by side, holding hands. Intimate.

I was upset. After all, didn’t *he* always hold *my* hand? Didn’t *he* always wrap his arm around *my* shoulder? Didn’t he always rub *my* head? It was clearly my position, was it not?

I loathed him.

That day, I was introduced to the word jealousy for the first time!

I wasn’t quite eleven then. My brother was six years old, and *he* was twenty five. I was jealous.

Yet, no one seemed to care about my feelings. Dede was busy

running around joining various rides. Mother couldn't barely control my brother.

"Let him be. Let him grow to be a responsible kid....," *he* calmed Mother down. Dede was completely free to do whatever he wanted all evening. My brother was running around, fully confident. Once or twice Dede informed us that they refused to let him joined certain rides.

"They think I'm not tall enough or what?" My furious brother complained about certain ride that had just rejected him.

He just smiled, didn't mess up Dede's hair or pretend to punch his shoulder as usual. How could *he* do that if "the celebrity girl" was holding his hands so tight like that? I snorted with disgust. *He* wouldn't go anywhere, why would she need to be right next to him all the time. What was she thinking?

Mother chatted with both of them. I decided to hang out, sitting on the tile floor in the garden, staring at the crowd. The lights began to light up. More people were coming. Why I just felt so lonely at the time?

I could hear their conversation from the distant.

"Why don't you get married? Looks like you two are a good match!"

"Well. I've only been working for three years now.... Ratna will be graduated in two years."

"You really make a great couple."

"I'm the one lucky.... Danar is nice."

I sighed. I hated all the talks. I stared at Mother, furious. Why would Mother be so nice to Sister Ratna? I quietly moaned,

pushing a strand of hair blowing by the afternoon wind away from my eye. Getting up, I approached my brother who was now busy hitting a beaver's head.

"Let's ride Bianglala!"

Dede turned around, grinning. He looked disturbed. I pointed my finger to the Ferris wheel illuminated by lights not far from us. My brother wasn't interested. He was still busy beating the beaver in front of him. I pulled out two chocolate bars Sister Ratna had given me from my pocket. My brother thought for a moment, looking at the chocolate bars in my hand. He laughed. Interested.

We both walked to Bianglala. I really wanted to invite *him* to go up there. I wanted to ask *him* to explain to me how the Ferris wheel works to keep on spinning. But I couldn't do it when they were busy talking. Dede and I jogged to join the queue. My hair, which was braided by Mother earlier, was swinging to the left and to the right. Dede sulked because I was running too fast. He threatened to go back to his beaver. I gave him one more chocolate bar.

Ah, all this was supposed to be fun.

* * *

"Why didn't you take me, Mother, and Uncle Danar riding Bianglala?" Sister Ratna asked with a smile while we had dinner together at one of the food outlets widely available at Fantasy World.

"You were busy chatting with Mother.... I didn't want to bother you," I replied quietly, munching on my corn soup. The soup was still hot in my mouth. I kept on munching, didn't care. There was something heating up inside of me.

"Was the view good?"

I nodded.

"We could see Auntie Ratna, Mother, and Uncle Danar from up there!" Dede interrupted, wiping his cheeks which was smeared with soup. My brother still called her "Auntie", and I was happy with Dede's stubbornness.

"Really?"

"Yes, Mother and Uncle looked small.... *Auntie Ratna didn't even visible from up there.*" I laughed (my brother deliberately said that).

I didn't follow the rest of the conversation. I was annoyed to see Sister Ratna eating from *his* bowl. Just look at them. They were sharing a bowl of soup.

She didn't have to do that. Can't she just grab another bowl? Her action would only bother *him*! But *he* didn't look bothered in the slightest. Instead, *he* seemed to enjoy her laughter.

At the time I didn't really think much of it. I just felt annoyed with someone who suddenly appeared and took over my position. There were a few things that annoyed me. First, about walking hand in hand. Second, about whom he talked to. This past six months, didn't he always talk to me when we went out together? Third, about seating arrangement while eating. Sister Ratna's position should be where I was seating now.

Fourth, about sharing a bowl!

That night I went home to our rental house feeling annoyed. A feeling I couldn't understand. I wondered what it all meant. I was too young to understand my own feelings.

* * *

Luckily, the event at Fantasy World was quickly forgotten. I got busier with my daily activities. I was busy studying, trying to catch up at school, as well as teaching Dede to count. My brother had been asking me ridiculous questions lately. "Sis, why zero should look like a donut? I can write it with a different shape, like a triangle, can't I? Who would forbid it?"

I was busy working, we still went busking for half a day.

I was busy helping Mother cleaning at home.

Good news and bad news were coming and going.

During grade promotion, the teachers decided to move me directly to sixth grade from fourth grade, skipping fifth grade. They said I was "too smart". That was the good news. Mother cried when we were picking up the report cards and my name was called as the best student with the highest score. Smiling a bit, I stepped forward toward the front row. Smiling a bit? Yes, it was because *he* didn't come.

At the time, *he* was waiting on Dede at the hospital. That was the bad news. Dede had been hit by dengue fever for the past two weeks.

Mother was forced to accompany me picking up the report

cards at school. I myself was reluctant to go. We could pick it up anytime anyway. I didn't want to leave Dede, although *he* was there waiting on my brother. Besides, it didn't matter anymore anyway if *he* wasn't there to see me being praised for my achievements.

"Dede's critical period has passed. It's important for Mother to accompany Tania picking up her report card.... There are many positives side from this.... Tania can also pick up Dede's report card, right?" *he* persuaded Mother (and me).

So we were forced to leave the hospital.

Dede was ranked fourth in his class, though he didn't participate at general tests because of his illness. And it was enough to make my brother cheerful for the rest of the day lying in bed with infusion on his wrist. Dede opened his report card wide and showed it to us proudly since I had been bad earlier teasing him that he didn't advance to the next grade.

"We're going out to eat, aren't we, Uncle Danar?" Dede demanded what *he* had promised him.

"Are you sure you're allowed to eat delicious meals already?" *he* teased Dede, shrugging his shoulders.

I laughed, joined *him* teasing Dede. Mother just smiled. Dede put out a strange face, disappointed. *He* just laughed.

A year went by so quickly. I didn't seem to notice it.

* * *

A large photo of Sister Ratna and *him* was now displayed in *his* home. I didn't really care anymore. At least if Sister Ratna wasn't with us, she would not interfere our time together. All day Sunday, I didn't see her at all at his rental house. So that day was perfectly mine.

I was twelve. My brother was seven years old. *He* was twenty six. I grew up like other teenagers. Once or twice Mother even complimented me being beautiful. My brother would usually interrupt, "How could she be pretty? She has long hair, long nails. It's a good thing she doesn't have a hole in the back." Dede laughed. I threw a pillow at him.

I had been promoted in Sunday's storytelling program. *He* chose some older children to tell stories to other children. One of them was me. It was really cool "to be" him. I mimicked the way *he* told stories. I imitated everything. It seemed to me the other kids were happy listening to my story.

"You're a good stroryteller, Tania! Very good," *he* praised me that afternoon. I smiled sheepishly.

"No, it'd be more enjoyable if you told the story, Uncle Danar," Dede challenged the compliment. I stuck out my tongue at my brother's direction. What a troublemaker! My brother just grinned.

My brother and I now were no longer busking. Since I was in sixth grade, my mother didn't work at the laundry place anymore. Mother was now making tiny pastries. Homemade pastries. She was so good, those simple pastries looked so tempting. She was

so creative in decorating them too. How did they taste? Gosh, my mother's pastries were always the best.

Although we were not busking anymore, my brother and I remained busy. We helped Mother making pastries, delivering them to neighbors, food stalls, shops, as well as to several co-operatives at college campuses. I even delivered some to one of the food outlets in the bookstore. I was in charge of accepting payments and making notes of how many pastries we had delivered to certain places. At one point, Mother even asked me to record the sales in a book.

Our pastry business was growing rapidly. A few months later Mother had to invite two kids from the neighborhood to help out on certain days. At any rate, I had never seen my mother so busy before.

Of course the fund for the pastry business was entirely from *him*. *He* even gave suggestions to Mother how to decorate the pastries. Not once did *he* ask Mother to return the money. *He* only grinned when she gave him a bag of pastries.

Dede liked the pastries. Hence, he gained a lot of weight over the past year. I never imagined he would be this big. He used to be skinny when we ran around chasing a city bus at a bus stop. I myself was thin then, but Dede was still thinner than me. I didn't think he would be able to hop on and off city buses for busking anymore these days, even for half a day. Too fat.

* * *

Six months later I actually hated the word “busy”!

Because of that reason, *his* visits became less and less frequent. At first, *he* came once a week, then every other week, then only once a month, although my brother and I always looked forward to see him.

We would sit around at night in front of our rental house for nothing. Waiting to see his shadow at the end of the alley was pointless. The schedule of his weekly visits were no longer exist. Everything was a mess.

He came to visit us once in the past month, but only to complain to Mother that he was tired.

“A lot of work.... Overtime.”

Mother just looked at *him* with concern, handing him a cup of warm tea. She had considered him as her own. Oh, I forgot to mention that Mother got married in her thirties which was considered late back then. Mother was in her early forties now, so she considered him as the oldest child in our family.

Dede and I just sat around in the corner. Mother had told us not to bother *him* with questions. “He’s tired!” My mother had said, although I wanted to show *him* my English test result, which was A+. Especially Dede, my brother really wanted to ask *him* about the new Lego *he* had promised him. We just scratched our heads, resisting the urge to approach *him*.

O, by the way, in addition to school, I was taking an English course as well. Mother just followed *his* advice. “Tania’s very good at dividing her time. She’ll grow up to be a reliable child! She can

handle several courses at once." I was happy to hear *him* saying that. Mother just smiled, nodding.

It had been three months since I took an English course.

That evening passed. I was disappointed. Annoyed, I stuffed the test result in my school bag. Maybe Sunday I could show *him* the result, during the storytelling program.

Days went by quickly.

One day my mother told *him* that *he* didn't need to pay for school anymore, because she could handle everything on her own. *He* just smiled, shaking his head. "Just save the money. After all, we don't know what future brings, do we? The money from selling pastries could be used to increase the fund for the business." Again, Mother agreed. I didn't really understand what *he* meant with "we don't know what the future brings."

Although I hated the word "busy," I actually still saw him once a week. During the storytelling program. So every Sunday, Dede and I welcomed the day with joy. It became a substitute for his evening visits. We rode our bikes to his rental house. The bicycle was a prize for a more complicated Lego my brother had completed a month ago. Because of the complexity, it took Dede four months to finish it. Actually, had he asked me for help, it would probably only take a week.

That morning I brought a large bag of pastries with me. As usual, *he* sat in his living room, wearing his favorite blue shirt. Some children were sitting around *him* (no one dared to sit at my usual spot). I unwrapped the bag. Excitedly, we sampled the pastries.

"Sister Tania made them!" my brother exclaimed proudly interrupting the children who were making a lot of noise chatting. In terms of boasting about or and criticizing his sister, Dede could be relied upon.

He looked at me smiling, asking me through his bright eyes. I shyly nodded.

"They're very good, Tania."

That was *his* third compliment in the past three and a half years. And looking at his bright eyes, I immediately made a promise to myself: *I will always bring him pastries I made myself every week; and ... and I will make pastries only for him.*

Although again, Dede interrupted (correcting his earlier compliment), "But Mother makes better pastries, Uncle!"

I threw a piece of pastry at Dede.



8.21 p.m.: Leaves that Have Fallen Never Hated the Wind

The good old days.

One and a half years have passed very quickly. I sigh, tucking my hair in between my ears. I keep staring ahead, standing motionless near the glass partition in the largest bookstore in the city. A bakery van is passing by on the street that becomes increasingly hectic because of the rain. I smile. Mother once dreamed to have a van like that. Our pastry business had been growing rapidly. Six months after we started the business, Mother had to hire a few more employees. We had moved to a larger rental house, though not as big as his, but at least my brother and I had our own bedroom with two separate beds.

The three of us didn't have to sleep together in the same room anymore!

This evening, I have no idea how many times I smiled and grinned to myself behind the glass window on the second level of the bookstore. You know, this is what I have been doing for the past week. Staring at the same scene below. Remembering those same memories. I become like a video player playing all those events in my mind.

Every night, over the past week.

People across the street has not moved from their spots. Heavy rain makes them want to linger. The two couples inside the photocopy kiosk earlier probably are hoping the rain would never stop, so that they would have more time to talk, more time to joke around. They're probably even praying the photocopy machines would break, or there would be an electrical short circuit, or something.

A sales clerk passes by me, greeting me (she wants to pass). I smile a bit and move half a step back, providing her space to pass. She smiles ("Thank you!").

I turn around for a moment, watching the crowd behind me. The rain! Some of them are actually just looking for shelter. While they are taking shelter, they also checking out books.

Some teenagers between the age of twelve and thirteen standing around a shelf with teen books piled on top. Looking at them, I smile.

* * *

Once a month we always took time to go to this bookstore together. *Him*, Dede, and I. And I loved that section with teen books. There were not many authors back then. The type of books were limited too. We didn't have much choices, but it was adequate for reading in between studying and delivering Mother's homemade pastries.

Dede liked comic books the best.

He didn't mind one bit how many books we were buying. Once, I saw Dede carrying a plastic bag full of comic books. "As long as your grades remain good!" And Dede nodded firmly. Dede, just like me, was very good at keeping promises. The challenge was to make him agree to make a promise in the first place. Though still young, Dede was very capable at bargaining when it comes to making promises.

I remember I used to hate reading sad stories. I used to think the stories were too far-fetched. How could anyone be constantly afflicted with sorrow? Besides, what story could outdo the sorrow our family had endured before we met *him*?

We had suffered enough during those three years. Living in a cardboard shack, going barefoot everywhere, working from morning to night on the streets. All those could even make a perfect sad novel. I thought that there would not be other situation worse than what has happened to us in the past. That was bad enough.

But, I was wrong.

Turns out, the pleasant situation we were having changed very quickly. Those bad situation that we experienced five years ago

could still deteriorate! Three months before I graduated from elementary school, my mother fell ill, seriously ill.

He was very busy taking Mother to the hospital and back. She had to be moved twice. It didn't take long for the doctor to reach a verdict: Mother was suffering from a stage IV lung cancer. It had not been detected because she had been happy. Happiness was covering up her real condition. Her cough had never come back for the past two years. The problem, despite feeling happy which made you feel like you could overcome your illness, your body has its limits.

And that night, Mother suddenly fell ill.

I immediately panicked. I had never seen such a drastic physical changes in her. Two weeks in the hospital, Mother's condition was already serious. One month later her face quickly became pale and her lips turned blue. Two weeks later her body had withered, scrawny. She suddenly looked so pathetic, as if all her energy had been sucked out of her body.

The pastry business stopped. No one could replace Mother. Everyday after school, Dede and I

went to the hospital, waiting on Mother. In fact, we often skipped school because we didn't want to leave her alone in the hospital.

He always came to the hospital after work, accompanied us waiting on Mother. He was back with us again. Two or three time Sister Ratna came to visit with a bag of oranges. I didn't say anything, but I was really annoyed, *"Who the hell would eat*

oranges if they were as sick as Mother!" I murmured to myself. But my brother still wanted the oranges.

Many bad thoughts rushed through my mind. One of them was enough to spoil all the happiness we were all having all this time.

God, I couldn't imagine what would happen if Mother never recovered from her illness. I always asked God for her recovery in my prayers. I didn't want to lose her. I had no idea what would happen if she was gone. I often cried when I hugged her shrinking body. I sometimes fell asleep while hugging her.

Dede just complained a lot, "When are you coming home? I want pastries." Mother just stared at him helplessly with her sunken eyes deep in its sockets.

* * *

That morning, Mother suddenly lost her consciousness.

It was Sunday. We were all gathering at Mother's bedside, including Sister Ratna. Nurses and doctors ran around taking Mother to the emergency room. Dede and I followed closely behind Mother's bed which two nurses were pushing in a hurry.

I had no idea what the problem was, but I held back my tears along the hallway. They took Mother into a room with a glass divider. A nurse smiled, firmly forbidden me from entering the room.

"I want to be with her!" I yelled at the nurse.

Dede stood behind me, glaring at her, as usual, ready to punch anyone who intervene his sister.

I didn't hear what that nurse was saying. She held my shoulder, told me to wait outside. I refused to listen, once again screamed at her trying to push my way in. Dede raised his hand, ready to hit her.

"I want to go inside!" I screamed frantically.

Luckily, *he* grabbed our shoulders before the "brawl" really happened, pulling us away.

"We can see her from here, you know..." *He* looked me in the eye, wiping my eyes with the tip of his handkerchief.

"But... but I want to be inside with Mother!"

"We're just going to disrupt the doctor."

I remembered the nurse had mentioned about "disrupting" earlier, and I was immediately angry with *him*. How could I be a disruption, I would just stand there, watching Mother from nearby! The word was the one actually bothered me the most. I wanted to yell at him, but then I remembered my promise to never argue with him, so after sobbing for a few second, I sat down on the floor, leaning against the wall. Dede sat down next to me, although I knew he couldn't really comprehend the situation.

I wondered what those people in white uniforms were doing in there, they didn't come out late afternoon. They were still there when dusk was falling. I saw more doctors were coming to Mother's room.

I immediately rejected Sister Ratna's suggestion to drive us

home. I yelled loudly at her. She wasn't angry. I even saw her tearing up. And *he* left us alone this time. Around nine o'clock, as my brother and I were falling asleep in the hallway, covered with a blanket that Sister Ratna had brought with her, I heard a commotion around us.

I slowly woke up.

"How could that be? You have to do everything you can to help her recover!" He lowered his voice in such a way so *he* couldn't be heard, but his intonation still sounded very serious.

"We have, Mr. Danar. It's too late."

"What do you mean it's too late!" He screamed louder. The doctor shook his head. I heard a thud. I wasn't sure what *he* was doing; probably hitting the wall.

"You see..." He grabbed the doctor's arm hard, forcing him out of the room. *He* pointed at us who were asleep under the covers.

"You see who will lose if she died. Those children don't have anyone else except her. For God's sake, please do everything you can. Please..." His voice was hoarse.

The doctor just sighed.

"Even if you brought her to Singapore won't help much, Mr. Danar.... It's too late. She would probably survive until tomorrow at the most."

He held his breath, trying to control his emotions. His hands was pressing against the glass wall. The glass was shaking from the pressure. I sobbed, although didn't really understand what was going on exactly.

The news was heartbreaking.

Dede, who was now awake, touched my hand, inquiring innocently with sleepy face and some smudges on his cheeks from drooling.

“What’s wrong, Sis?”

* * *

The next morning, we skipped school. He didn’t go to work either. Sister Ratna came early to deliver clothes and told us to shower in the hospital bathroom. She was even busy helping Dede changed clothes, while *he* was busy talking on the phone, perhaps calling his office, or maybe calling our school.

At exactly eight o’clock, the doctor finally let me and Dede entered the room. My brother looked at the grumpy nurse who prohibit us from entering the room last night with a victorious stare.

Mother had regained her consciousness, and she wanted to see me.

It was sad to see various tubes and lines from hospital equipments wrapped around Mother’s head and body. Dede just lowered his head in silent, sense of victory earlier was soon disappeared from his round eyes. I walked closer to Mother and touched her bony fingers.

Mother gave me a weak smile, mustering the remaining strength she still had.

“How are you, Mother?” I asked softly.

Ah, I was following his example. *He* always asked that question

every time he met someone. *How are you?* Personally, I thought it was a very pleasant question to ask. That was the most important question, you didn't need to ask anything else except how one was doing when you met someone.

Mother just shook her head. *Very bad.*

"Come closer, Tania...," Mother whispered softly. I moved closer to her face. The bed was tall. Dede was holding the tip of my clothes behind me, standing on his tiptoes.

"Do you want to hear a story?" Mother said, gasping, then coughed.

I nodded.

Mother paused, took a deep breath.

"Listen to me, my love... Once upon a time... there were two children.... one was a girl.... the younger one was a boy... They were good kids, smart, obedient and dutiful... Unfortunately, sometimes life is not always good to good people...." Mother paused. Her eyes began to wet.

I looked down, wondering what she meant with all this.

"Their father died when they were eight and three years old, respectively.... And their mother didn't have anything other than her weak hands.... They were forced to live a hard life.... But the two children remained strong.... They were grown to become children who can be relied upon, to become independent children with all their innocence...

"They lived a miserable life for three years.... And when life seemed to be a little more kind to them... everything changed again! Life is can be cruel sometimes...."

Mother tried to catch her breath. She coughed. There were red mucus in her mouth. I grabbed a tissue and wiped her mouth. Mother looked at me, said thank you in a weak voice. She sighed.... (I took a deep breath too).

“Five years after the death of their father, their mother died.... Just when the promise of a better future had arrived.... She left them completely all alone now.... She left the children who should have spent more time playing.... Not working and bearing the burden of adult life.... Not burdened by things beyond their years....

“But these children were not ordinary children, Tania.... They continued their lives with courage... strong... and proud. They grew up to become successful individuals.... Proud....”

By now, Mother started to cry. She choked up. Dede still fiddled my shirt with his fingertips, didn't understand what was going on. I began to grasp what Mother was saying.

“The little girl grew up to become a beautiful woman, my daughter... Very smart.... Capable of doing a lot of things like kids from other normal families.... The boy also became a handsome and succesful man... Just as smart.... Thanks to the guidance of his sister....”

My eyes started to fill with tears.

“You know, Tania.... *That beautiful girl is you....* I had a dream last night to see you really grow up.... You looked so beautiful with long black hair... You looked at me smiling, looking at life with confident... I'm so proud of you....”

Mother was really crying now. Long. Gasping. I was holding her fingers, trembling. I looked down, crying.

“Promise me, my daughter....” She tried hard to finish the sentence. “Promise me that you will always take care of your brother....”

Trembling, I nodded.

“Promise me, my daughter.... you will never cry no matter how hard the circumstances you have to face in your life...”

I wiped my tears and nodded again.

“You know, this will be the last time I cry... Last night I dreamt of your father came to fetch me... I will be gone soon.... Forever! My God, Your way is always the best way.... And I place the fate of my children in Your hand.... You’re so kind to allow us to meet someone before I die.... You showed us the way to meet Your *angel!*”

I sobbed louder and louder.

“Promise me, my daughter.... This will be the last time you cry too...” Trembling, Mother stroked my fingers with her hand.

“From now on, you won’t cry for anyone....not even for your brother.”

I nodded.

“Except, except for *him*.... Except for *him*....” Mother looked at me helplessly with a strange smile for the last time.

I had no idea what she meant, because seconds later Mother *fell asleep*. I screamed in panic. *He* and Sister Ratna hastily ran into the room.

Mother *fainted* again.

It was Monday. A week before my thirteen birthday. My brother was eight years old, and *he* was twenty seven. I didn't believe that number thirteen will bring bad luck or misfortune, but that afternoon my mother died. She was gone forever.

Mother never regained her consciousness.

I sat helplessly on the tiled floor, biting my lips as hard as I could so I wouldn't cry. I was clutching Mother's bed sheets. Dede was just staring in bewilderment at Mother's body which was covered in white cloth.

That afternoon, Mother was brought back to the rental house. Living a normal life for the past two years in a new rental house, neighbors came to show their sympathy, especially because Mother had been so kind sending them pastries every day.

I just sat in the corner of the rental house, speechless, wearing a black veil Sister Ratna had given me. My brother sat staring at Mother's body which was wrapped in a shroud tightly, confused. Everyone was looking at me and Dede with sad look in their eyes.

Sister Ratna sat next to me, her eyes were swollen from holding back her tears. For the first time, I was at peace with her. I let her put her arms around my shoulders. Dede repeatedly pulled my hand, asking me things I couldn't explain.

"Sis..., why is Mother wrapped in cloth?"

I just shook my head weakly. Dede was eight years old, and he could not comprehend the word "death" very well.

In the evening after sunset, Mother was immediately buried.

He decided to bury her as quickly as possible, "It's not good to let Mother waiting too long. Besides, we don't have to wait for any close relatives anyway."

The sky was clear that night. It had been raining for a month, but now a perfect full moon was sitting up there, accompanied by millions of stars. It was an odd night.

My little fingers were trembling as I sprinkled jasmine flowers on Mother's grave.

"Sis, why is Mother covered with dirt?"

So far I managed to hold back my tears, but my brother's questions really started to make me hard to breath.

"Sis, why is Mother buried?" Dede asked, getting more frantic.

One by one, people left the cemetery. Dede, whose questions had not been answered, sulked, refused to leave.

"I want to go home with Mother!" My stubborn brother screamed. His voice immediately broke the silence.

Four of us stayed. I myself didn't want to go home. I wanted to *sleep* in there with Mother. It was getting late in the evening. Pungent smell from the tuberose flowers filled the air.

"We have to go home," *he* persuaded me and my brother. Dede shook his head, refused. He was gripping the red soil of Mother's grave in front of him. His pants was dirty.

Tears started to fill my eyes. The promise for not to cry was particularly hard. I couldn't take it anymore. I wanted to cry out loud. Why did Mother have to go? Why did she leave me and my brother alone?

He and Sister Ratna were silent a moment later. They let us

remained squatting beside Mother's grave deep in our thoughts. Mosquitoes began buzzing noisily over our heads.

Fifteen minutes later, his hands gently touched my shoulder and my brother's. *He* sighed.

"Listen to me....," his voice was soft, persuasive.

We still refused to turn around.

"To me, you're not at all too young to understand what I'm about to say." *He* paused. I blew my nose.

"Please know, Tania and Dede... *Leaves that have fallen never hated the wind....* They let themselves to fall. They didn't resist. They willingly accepted their fate. Tania, you're more than mature to understand this.... Not now, but soon you'll know what this all means.... And when you do, all this will look different. We have to go home, Tania."

I swallowed hard, looking down.

"And, Dede, didn't you remember when I was with you burying that betta fish? Mother will never return forever, like the betta fish. She has gone to the most beautiful place.... Heaven, like the one I often told you in the stories every Sunday.... She will be very happy there...."

"But why didn't she ask me to come along?" My brother interrupted, sobbing, trying to push away *his* hand. Dede's feet plunged deeper into the ground.

"Because she's preparing everything there.... Just like when early in the morning she prepared breakfast for you and Tania... When everything is ready, we'll go there someday.... If we go now, we're just going to interfere.

“She would come just like when she wake you up to get ready for school.... But before that time comes, we have to go home tonight.... have a good sleep, wake up in the morning to continue our lives.... One day, we’ll meet Mother again.... She will definitely come and fetch you.”

It was silent in the cemetery.

“Come on....”

With a little force *he* pulled my arm. *I must not fight him, I have already promised to myself*, I thought to myself. But Dede resisted.

Moments later *he* was forced to grab dan carry Dede who was trying to break loose with all his might. Slowly and with great difficulty, we hobbled to Sister Ratna’s car which was parked at the edge of the graveyard.

Sister Ratna slowly led me by the hand. Home.



8.26 p.m.: After Mother was Gone!

I sigh. For five minutes I was just standing here in silent, on the second floor of our city's largest bookstore.

Outside, the rain never subsides but it never got heavy either. Nothing has changed. The two couples inside the photocopy kiosk are still there. The photo shops and the food stall tents are still busy. The only thing changed is the traffic. It keeps changing its pattern. Cars are creeping along with the wipers keep on creaking, from left to right, from right to left, pushing away rain water that never stop falling on the windshields.

Cars are inching along in traffic like a snail.

A Toyota Kijang with an airline logo on its door passes by. It's probably a shuttle van for their pilots and flight attendants. I immediately remember the next series of events.

Some events that I could be proud of, some events that were sad, after Mother was gone.

* * *

Actually, two months before Mother died, I had been preparing some documents to apply for a scholarship from ASEAN. This scholarship would provide me with an opportunity to continue my study at a junior high school in Singapore.

That was all *his* idea. I obeyed. Mother, who was still healthy at the time, just nodded, although said quietly, smiling, “Son Danar, it seems hard for me to imagine Tania attending school there. Abroad. We’re grateful just for her to go back to school here.”

He just chuckled.

I liked to see that expression on *his* face the most. A very constructive expression. Convincing. Soothing. A sincere expression, not fake. And it had been motivated me a lot.

I had participated in various tests for the scholarship, up to the final assessment, and *he* always accompanied me every step of the way. *He* helped me go through various exhausting tests, from written test (which was the easiest), drawing, answering questions about my interests, up to the interview (which was the most difficult).

But since Mother was hospitalized and later died, all was forgotten. I didn’t think about the results at all—it wasn’t important anymore, was it?

We got busy planning what to do next.

The day after my mother died, my brother and I moved to *his* rental house. We vacated our rental house (“*So they could soon forget all this painful event,*” was *his* explanation to Sister Ratna as we were cleaning up, getting ready to move). Sister Ratna helped us a lot during our move.

My brother and I still couldn’t come to terms with the new arrangement a week later, although I was really happy to live with *him*. However, I still wasn’t able to forget my mother’s face the last time I saw her and my brother was asking many questions about Mother, which once again I couldn’t explain.

He now went to work later than usual and returned home earlier so *he* could spend more time with us. We eat out every night this past two weeks, from one food stall tent to another. Over time, some of the buskers working the street in the area even recognized us.

And why not? Our presence was in sharp contrast. My brother and I just sat quietly, smiled reluctantly at *his* jokes. We both were not eager to eat and spending a lot of time staring at empty spaces. On the contrary, *he* jokingly commented about a lot of things, trying hard to cheer us up.

Sister Ratna joined us once or twice. This time she eat from her own plate. They let me sit next to *him*, but at the time I didn’t really care much about the sitting arrangement (which was my rights anyway).

I missed Mother.

"Which junior high did you enroll, Tania?" Sister Ratna asked me one evening.

He and I looked at each other. The issue was never mentioned in the past two weeks. We were too busy thinking about other things.

"Uh, I haven't had time to enroll her." *He* rubbed his face, a bit regretful.

"Well, then, let me take her tomorrow. Just enroll her in junior high near Dede's grade school, right?" Sister Ratna volunteered.

I didn't say anything. I had no interest to comment. Dede was busy stirring his lemonade, which had not been touched at all.

"Sure. Just pick them up tomorrow. Tania, you'll go with Sister Ratna tomorrow, okay? And Dede, you too will go with Sister Ratna."

I didn't say anything. Dede snorted silently in his glass (*Auntie Ratna!*).

* * *

Luckily, Sister Ratna didn't need to enroll me in junior high the next morning and I didn't need to bother persuading Dede to come along (he had flatly refused to come since last night). Early in the morning, that phone call came. From the scholarship secretariat.

My application was granted!

I wasn't sure whether I supposed to be happy or sad. The news didn't change my mood at all. In fact, it only made me more sad

when I realized that I had to go alone. Leaving Dede, leaving Mother's grave, leaving *him*, leaving everything.

That night we celebrated my achievement with going to this bookstore. It had been almost three months since the last time we were here. It was before Mother fell sick. My brother and I found that the crowded atmosphere in the store always gave us some comfort. Looking at the view from the second floor gave me (and Dede) pleasures. For some reason, it gave us inspirations.

And there, *he* revealed to us that "little secret."

"You read this book, didn't you?" *He* pointed his finger at a story book. I nodded. It was a good book, even my favorite. I kept a copy by my bed. I had been reading it over and over.

"I wrote it." *He* smiled.

I was utterly confused about what I just heard. Not that I didn't believe him, but, was it really?

"But.... The name of the author is different, isn't it?"

He grinned as *he* stroked my long jet black hair which I let loose that night.

"Well, Tania, that's my other name. A pseudonym. An alias."

"It sounds like a girl's name!" Dede interrupted. That was his first remarks since the death of our Mother (the atmosphere in the bookstore had helped lift up Dede's mood).

I laughed. *He* laughed.

"So that means you wrote this too!" Dede handed him a thick novel from the same author. An adult novel. *He* nodded slowly.

"But don't tell anyone, okay? Only three of us knew. It'll be our secret."

I was so fascinated that I forgot to nod. That meant my three best collections were written by someone who really meant a lot to me. What a real surprise. And that night I made a promise to myself quietly: *I will read every book he wrote and every book to be written by him.*

That same evening, my brother and I made peace with many things. We got home really late that night. Just for fun, *he* invited me and Dede to sneak up to the top of the bookstore. We managed to avoid the attendant. Then we sat on the rooftop, watching the entire city lit up.

“Tania, life must go on. When you lose the spirit, remember what I told you the other day. Life is like a leaf that has fallen... Let the wind blow it away.... *You must go to Singapore!*”

* * *

And when the time to depart to Singapore arrived, I finally followed *his* advice. *He* was right. Besides, I had made a promise to myself to always follow *his* words, right?

Dede would remain to live with *him*. *He* was going to ask some neighbor to watch my brother while *he* was working. The neighbor would also take care other household matters. Sister Ratna would also help oversee Dede. The idea that immediately was rejected by my brother, “I don’t want Auntie Ratna taking care of me! I don’t like it!” *He* laughed.

I never imagined I had to go to school that far. Singapore! Five years ago I didn’t even attend any school. Look at me now, as

small as I was, I would be alone in a foreign land. But *he* always assured me. *"I know I can rely on you, Tania. Always. You're going to grow up to become a smart and beautiful girl there.... I'll be so proud of you!"*

Hearing the word "grow up beautiful," I thought about many things. A lot of things.

Mustering up my courage, along with four other children from Indonesia, I boarded the plane that morning. My first flight. I was thirteen years old at the time. My brother was eight. *He* was twenty seven.

I hugged my brother tightly.

Dede didn't question anything since *he* had explained everything to him for the past three days. About why I had to go. About responsibility. About maturity. And you know what, you'll never guess that even a baby will understand an explanation, let alone explanations from *him*.

I didn't cry. First, I had promised Mother that I will never cry. Secondly, the trip wasn't something I supposed to be sad about at all. *"I'm so proud of you, Tania. I'll tell everyone I know that I'm so proud of you...."* *He* hugged me tightly. And for that reason alone, if I could, I didn't want to let go of him.

Sister Ratna praised me too. For the first time, as I was looking at *him* and Sister Ratna, I suddenly felt one level above that "celebrity girl." I was smarter, as *he* had said.

* * *

Time passed by very fast.

My days were filled with new things in Singapore. I was underage when I arrived so the Indonesian Embassy in Singapore provided me with a mentor. A fat lady. She wasn't fun at all. She was very strict and discipline, and loves regulations. But I was okay with that.

I learned there were many ways to get in touch with *him*. The distance didn't interfere in the slightest. And of course my favorite was: online chatting. I quickly learned how to use the internet. And why not if our entire class was packed with computers. There was even a computer with flat screen monitor in my bedroom at the dorm.

I was the smallest kid in my class. There were twenty students in my class, most of them were Chinese-looking, some were Malay-looking, one or two looked Caucasians, but I looked very different than them. Four of my friends from Indonesia attended different classes. I had difficulty communicating the first few months I was there. Most of the time, I used gestures and facial expressions to communicate. Turns out, the English course I took in Indonesia wasn't much help at all, though I always got A's.

I reported everything to *him* via chatting. I was online almost every day, waiting for *him* to arrive at work and be ready on his desk. I was too busy reporting many things about myself that I rarely asked about Dede, let alone inquiring how Sister Ratna was doing.

Tania: I received the result for my math exam yesterday. I got 95. Five kids got 100. I'm very dissappointed, you know.

Maibelopah: Don't worry. You're still the smartest kid. Someday you'll get 120. :-)

Tania: Not possible. The maximum score is 100.

Maibelopah: Well then, hopefully those five kids will only get 80. You get 100. :-)

Tania: Evil! But amen to that. :p

Maibelopah: :-)

Tania: Last night Miss Butterball was in rage again at the dorm.

Maibelopah: What happened?

Tania: Adi didn't go to sleep until late, inviting us to play PlayStation.

Maibelopah: That stubborn boy? The one who often bothering you?

Tania: Yes, that mischievous one. Miss Butterball went ballistic.

Maibelopah: Well, when it comes to sleeping late, your mother was always angry too, wasn't she?

My cursor was blinking for a long time. Mother? I was suddenly reminded of my mother.

Tania: I miss Mother....

He didn't answer for a long time. I didn't know *he* was thinking about Mother too that *he* had unintentionally typed the word Mother.

Maibelopah: I miss her too. Last night I dreamed of meeting with her. She sent her regards to you. She looked very happy. She said she was proud of you. Very proud.

I knew he was lying, but it was still delightful reading “the sentence” he wrote.

Tania: I would love to dream meeting with Mother.

My cursor was blinking for a long time. For a moment, *he* didn't type anything.

Maibelopah: How's your dorm? Nice, isn't it?

Tania: Great. I like it :-), except for Miss B.

Maibelopah: Don't forget to eat! And get enough sleep!

Tania: Yes, boss! Will do. :-) The dorm provides us dinner. Breakfast and lunch at school. All set. Miss B takes care of everything.

Maibelopah: See, Miss B is actually useful for something, isn't she? :-)

Tania: That's true. :-) Hm.

Maibelopah: I transferred money earlier today. You can withdraw it from a bank there. If you don't know how to do it, ask Miss B. I'm sure she'll help you.

Tania: My allowance is enough. You don't need to transfer more money.

Maibelopah: That's OK, you can use it for other purposes. Or if not, you can save it. We never know what the future will bring. :-)

That sentence again. I sighed, smiled, following *his* advice.

Two weeks later, when *he* and I chatted again, Dede was there too. I “talked” quite a bit with my brother, although I spent a lot of time waiting for his response. Dede was still not accustomed to using the keyboard. He was good at using his mouse or his stick game, beating the monsters, but not good with the keyboard.

Sister Ratna joined the fun too. I didn’t mind talking to her, making small talks asking how she was doing. She asked me a lot of questions.

And time passed by like a flying bullet. The days turned into months, months turned into years. The chatting routine was still take place, only the time had changed. We chatted at night now. *He* was online from home. I talked to my brother more often too. He said they have installed an internet connection at home.

Time passed in the blink of an eye! Three years later, I was sixteen years old. My brother was eleven. *He* was thirty years old. Satellite communications helped me through my busy days. I asked *him* about many things. And *he* became like a mother, a friend, a brother, and a father to me. *He* advised me considerably (*he* never told me directly what to do; *he* always advised me through a story). *He* motivated me to continue to learn. *He* reminded me to take care of my health, “*Don’t forget to eat on time, Tania!*” *He* even helped me picking out clothes for formal events (I had to attend many formal events throughout the year).

During the first year, I haven’t been able to completely forget

many sad memories of my mother's death. We still talked about old memories here and there (and *he* was good at changing the subject). Entering the second year, time really became the perfect remedy. You could say that everything was back to normal as before (I spent more time concentrating on my study to catch up with smarter kids who had better scores than me).

I grew taller. Back then when I first started junior high school I was the smallest, now I grew to be taller than them. According to the book I read, girls do grow faster than boys. I was 5 foot and 1 inch tall, and I looked more like a high school kid. I had long hair that I let it hang loose.

I asked *him* about "physical" stuff too via chatting. I had read many books on puberty, but I still needed someone I could talk to about it. And *he* became a substitute for Mother and a good friend. The second year was preoccupied mostly discussing about the issue surrounding puberty. *He* patiently explained a lot of things to me. Once in a while I talked to Sister Ratna online. And again, I didn't particularly mind to ask her questions, especially ones related to more personal matter. She responded with delight.

My brother Dede told me about his school activities. He was much better with computer now. Sometimes we played games online. You can be sure that I sent him Lego from Singapore every month.

And three years passed in the blink of an eye.

I graduated on second place for the entire school. I was number one out of twenty two ASEAN scholarship recipients

throughout the entire ASEAN countries. The result was almost perfect. I had kept my promise that I would learn as best I could. *He* actually had promised me *he* would attend my graduation ceremony. Unfortunately, *he* had to be in Tokyo that day.

Oh, I forgot to mention to you that *his* career was progressing rapidly. *He* had been promoted to be a marketing manager in the past two years. Having a parent company located in Japan, *he* had to travel there frequently. I always asked *him* whether *he* would transit in Singapore, and whether there was any chance for *him* to be assigned to Singapore. To be honest, I missed *him*.

I wasn't sure how to explain that feeling.

I never discussed about my feelings on the internet. So for the past three years, I kept everything to myself. I wasn't sure with whom I should share my feelings and I didn't know to whom I should tell them. I missed my mother, I missed my brother, but I wasn't sure why I missed *him* the most. I longed to meet him! Staring at his charming face smiling at me. Seeing the expression on *his* face when he was smiling from ear to ear.

I really missed him. So imagine how impatient I was waiting to see him a week later. One week after my graduation. When I was on school holiday, when I was finally able to return to Depok, three years later.

* * *

When I arrived at the airport, *he* and Dede had been there, waiting for me in the lobby (Sister Ratna wasn't there, and that

was good news for me). I ran to him cheerfully, abandoning my suitcase. I screamed as I was sprinting to hug *him*.

People glanced at us. I didn't care.

I was overjoyed! I had no words to explain what I was feeling at that moment.

"You really changed, Tania!" *he* said, smiling. I didn't let go of his arms. Yes, I'm a grown up now, not a little girl anymore, I thought to myself.

I was busy watching *his* face intently.

He had not changed one bit, only that *his* facial lines looked more pronounced and more impressive. My brother was the one who had changed a lot. Dede was growing very fast. Three years ago, he was only up to my chest, but now he was up to my chin in height. That meant he was growing much faster than me.

"Sis Tania, you remembered to bring the Lego, didn't you?" Dede pulled my shirt. My brother was now in sixth grade. Just like me, his teachers decided to have him advanced directly to sixth grade, skipping the fourth and fifth grade.

I released my hand off *his* shoulder in a hurry as I was reminded of Dede's gifts. I jogged to pick up my suitcase I had left behind. *He* laughed. My hair was not braided anymore since it was cut short to my shoulder before returning home. The style was popular these days in Singapore. But I didn't color my hair like many Singaporean teens. It was still as black as before. It looked more healthy that way anyway in my opinion. I hated to see people who color their hair. "Only people with bad hair would

color their hair.” I once said that to Anne, a friend from third year of junior high I shared a desk with.

I handed Dede five boxes of Lego. *He* chuckled watching our behavior.

“But... I’ve done this one,” my brother protested.

“You never mentioned which one you want in your e-mail.” I insisted, still clutching *his* arm (to be honest, I didn’t have time to pick the Lego carefully, I left in a hurry this morning). *He* helped wheeling my suitcase out of the airport. Sister Ratna wasn’t there, was she? So she wouldn’t interfere. I’m taking over her position, I thought.

Dede was grumbling behind us (scolding his Lego).

We climbed into *his* new cool car.

“This isn’t the brand that manufactured by your company, is it? Are you allowed to drive different brand?” I asked *him* as I was opening the front door. *He* just laughed and shrugged his shoulders.

At that moment, though didn’t realize it, I really wasn’t a teenager anymore. I was only sixteen,

but my way of thinking, my intelligence, my perception, and how I construct sentences was equal to someone three years ahead of me. And above all, I had grown up to be a “beautiful and mature” girl, like *he* had said.

* * *

Turns out, *he* and Dede had moved out from the old rental house. He had bought a piece of land about six hundred feet from the main street, not far from the old rental house. It was a pretty big piece of land. The house was only seventy five percent finished, but you could already see the design. It was round like a tall jar. It was really cool I thought.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I protested.

“We purposely didn’t. Uncle Danar said that it’ll be a surprise for you!” my brother answered, relaxing in his chair, still busy playing one of the Lego I bought. The car was entering the front yard.

That night, to welcome me, *he* had prepared a small gathering on the spacious yard. Neighbors from our old neighborhood, new neighbors from around the new house, as well as children from the storytelling program were invited. But, I didn’t recognize many kids, there were so many of them now.

It was so obvious that *he* was so proud of me and kept boasting about me in front of the neighbors. And I often blushed. I didn’t have much to say, though indeed I was happy to be praised by *him*. I looked at the silhouette of that charming face under the light of a bonfire that Dede had lighted earlier. From that moment on, I reform many things in my heart, including that feelings.

* * *

“Why didn’t Sister Ratna come to the celebration last night?” I quietly asked during breakfast the next morning. I was curious. I had the right to ask, didn’t I?

He just shook his head slowly, grinning.

“Uncle Danar broke up with Auntie Ratna,” Dede casually replied from next to me, scooping chicken porridge from his bowl. He laughed.

He chuckled too, although it wasn’t a pleasant laughter I used to hear.

I wasn’t sure whether I supposed to laugh too or be sad. I should have asked my brother first. Dede certainly knew about it. A direct question like that might bothered *him*. But in any case, I’ve already asked, so....

That afternoon we visited Mother’s grave. Her grave looked beautiful. The remark *he* had made to us when he was persuading us to come home from the cemetery that night was carved along the edge of the tombstone.

“I did the writing, though I don’t really understand what that means,” my brother explained casually.

The three of us laughed.

“Liar! Do you know that he has a diary full of poetry now?” *He* punched my brother’s shoulder gently.

“Hey, please don’t spill the beans! It’s unfair. I want to be like you, you know, using alias,” Dede protested, pulling *his* shirt. *He* was wearing a short sleeves blue shirt that day.

I knew that was *his* favorite color (also my favorite now).

And we spent a lot of time in front Mother’s grave talking

about many things. We laughed a lot (we actually spent most of the time laughing at Dede). I hoped Mother was also laughing with us from heaven up there.

I ran my fingers touching the writing on Mother's tombstone, smiling. *He was absolutely correct at the time!*

* * *

Later that night we went to this bookstore.

Since so far Sister Ratna seemed to have walked away from his life, I had complete control. I walked beside him "showing off my affection" as we walked around on the second floor of the bookstore. Dede trailed behind. I even wish my brother had gone far away from us.

One of the senior sales clerk who had been working there for a long time recognized us. And of course he also recognized *him* and Dede, "Is this Tania who used to come here frequently? The one with braided hair?"

I nodded.

"Wow, you're all grown up now... very pretty!"

I grinned a happy grin, smiling. Pretty, right?, I said to *him* in my mind.

Again *he* proudly told the sales clerk about Singapore. I was very pleased, holding *his* arm tightly.

For a long time we stood there watching the view across the street from the glass window on the second floor. Had people saw

us from outside, they must have thought I was well-suited to be his “*someone special*.” I smiled to myself.

Photocopy kiosks across the street were being renovated. The photo shops were started to be built on the new foundations. Street median was being worked on. Building materials were piling up here and there. Street lights lit up, beautiful and bright.

Oh, I forgot to mention something. *He* now had a new habit. *He* always took his digital camera with him everywhere. I wasn't sure since when *he* was obsessed with cameras. Anyway, that night after visiting the bookstore, we took pictures along the way. For fun, Dede even invited us to pose right in the middle of the street median where coral stones and barrier marker were stacked.

The pictures came out very nice. Particularly, I liked the picture of me and Danar together. I was standing next to *him*, holding *his* arm. The focus was great. In the picture, all around us seemed froze by the dancing car lights passing by while he and me were smiling happily.

We left the area as the evening wore on.

“Mother always considered you as her own child, didn't she?” I said quietly in the car when returning home from the bookstore and the photo session on the street earlier.

“Yes?” He was still looking ahead.

“So, I could actually call you Brother Danar, couldn't I?”

He turned to me, probing. I made a funny face like a comic character (so *he* wouldn't be suspicious). *He* laughed, grimaced a little bit, observing my face, then nodded.

“Why bother to change it? It's better to call him uncle than

brother anyway. More fun,” my brother protested from the back seat. I turned around, throwing a box of tissue at Dede.

What a spoilsport!



8.32 p.m.: A Beautiful Sweet-seventeen

That was a new chapter of my relationship with *him*, at least according to my own version. Isn't it clear that calling him "brother" mean much more than calling him "uncle"?

Unfortunately for me, the term was not as beautiful as I have imagined.

I sigh.

The rain is still heavy outside. My hand is cold when I touch the glass which is wet on the outside, exposed to the rain hitting the window when the wind is blowing. The second floor of the city's largest bookstore is getting crowded with people who are stuck inside, not able to go anywhere.

The lights from the future shopping mall are flickering a steady rhythm. Food stall owners are busy cooking for their customers. The steam coming from the food are so inviting that the stall

tents attracted even more visitors. People who are hungry are getting hungrier. People who are not hungry suddenly feel hungry.

I myself is not hungry at all.

A blue urban transportation stops across the street. Two people jump out from the front door in a hurry. They run, shielding their heads with their hands. Although the distance they travel was only about 30 feet, heavy rain is enough to drench the upper part of their clothes.

They just laugh. The fact that they are wet doesn't matter. Again, another couple. Brushing the rainwater of their arms and clothes, they're headed to the photocopy kiosk. Now there are three pairs of "bride and groom" in there, just waiting for an officiant to perform a wedding ceremony. I mutter to myself.

Turning around again, I observe the room. There, near another pile of books, a bunch of teenagers still busy chattering. Ah, teenage years. A time filled with stories. They're always fussing about everything. Worshiping foreign movie stars, gossiping someone, displaying pictures of their idols, discussing how to dress, fashion, and other teen issues.

Me? I wasn't at all like them when I was a teenager.

* * *

I was about their age when returning back to Singapore. I was only a month in Depok since the school holiday only lasted a month. And at the end of the month, I had to rush back to Singapore. ASEAN had decided to continue their support by

providing another scholarship for me to continue my study to the best high school in Singapore.

I could have insisted to continue my education in Jakarta, but *he* would have flat out rejected the idea. And because I had made a promise to always obey *his* words, so rather than argued, I voluntarily went back to Singapore. Although that meant I wouldn't be able to see *him* again for another three years.

Imagine that! Three long years.

He and my brother drove me to the airport.

I hugged *him* for a long time. Really long. And *he* let me. No. For whatever reason, *he* had not stroked my hair for quite a while. *He* just smiled, whispering about how proud Mother was in heaven.

Listlessly, I started to walk away, pushing my luggage trolley toward the departure gate. I was only two steps away when *he* suddenly called me.

"Tania, wait a minute."

I turned around.

He patted my brother's shoulder. Dede hastily pulled something out of a plastic bag he had been holding all this time (I did ask Dede about that plastic bag earlier on the way to the airport, but he just grinned. "It's a surprise!" he answered).

Inside the plastic bag was a box.

He opened the box. A pair of shoes. Snickers. My God, I was deeply moved. They were just like the ones *he* had given to us on the city bus back then, but these shoes were in larger size of course.

My hands were shaking when I accepted the shoes. I tried as best I could to not cry, nevertheless, my eyes filled with tears. I hugged *him* again.

“Hey, why are you crying? He just gave you shoes,” my brother as always interrupted from beside me, laughing. This time I was not glared at my brother. I was too choked up.

* * *

He and I were connected again through online chatting. I shared more problems with *him*. And although I was much more mature in my way of thinking, these problems were not far from usual issues facing by teenagers.

I complained about one particular Singaporean boy, a Chinese-Malay looking boy, who always bothered me. His name was Jhony Chan. He looked like the famous Hong Kong movie star (whose name is also similar), but his behavior was far worse than any season criminals.

Maibelopah: That means he likes you.

Tania: But I don't like him, you know.

Maibelopah: Didn't you say that he's pretty cute? :-)

Tania: Why are you defending him?

Maibelopah: I'm not defending anyone. Are you at war or something so you need to be defended?

Tania: You should defend me, you know.

Maibelopah: I'm not defending anyone. :-)

Tania: Never mind. How's Dede?

His response was always the same everytime I complained about the same issue. I often got cranky. Nevertheless, such conversation actually helped me "exposing" my own feelings to him a lot more. "But you're better looking." Or "The boys are childish, not like you." Or "They aren't serious. They just want to have fun. The feeling should be mutual and should happen through a long process."

Unfortunately, *he* usually didn't comment further. Most of the time, he would comment lightly, or *he* would joke around. Hence the fight (because at that point I was already upset). Though honestly, I was only looking for an excuse to tell *him* about the issue with Jhony Chan. An excuse to express my own feelings to *him*.

At any rate, our relationship had somewhat evolved. Our conversations were no longer between a small child and her uncle. It was now more like between "brother" and "sister". The subject of our chats had changed a lot. Although I wasn't sure whether that meant anything to *him*. At least for me, that was an important progress.

So far Sister Ratna's name was never mentioned. And I was reluctant to ask. What for? Our chats were focused only on the three of us. Me, *him*, and Dede. I told *him* many things about my high school years in Singapore.

- Tania:** We were moved from the dorm yesterday. Here you have to do everything yourself.
- Maibelopah:** Was Miss B also moved?
- Tania:** No. I have to take care of everything myself now. Food. School expenses. So many things you have to do, you know.
- Maibelopah:** But you still eat at the dorm and school, don't you?
- Tania:** Still. But we can also eat outside. I sometimes get bored with the food at the dorm. Maybe I should eat out more, huh?
- Maibelopah:** As long as you eat on time.
- Tania:** Don't worry. I've installed an alarm in my stomach. :-)
- Maibelopah:** :-)

Time seemed to pass by faster than I imagined. It went by unnoticed because of my busy schedules at school. I now had become accustomed with the school system in Singapore where they taught their students to be self-sufficient. My life at the dorm ran smoothly. *He* was still diligently sending me money every month. Since the money from the scholarship was more than enough, I never touched the money *he* transferred. I saved them.

Chatting with *him* and Dede was a good way to spend my spare time. Dede always sent me the latest copy of *his* book. In return, I had to send him bags of Lego. My brother told me about his school. He would attend junior high school next year. I suggested to him to apply for a scholarship from ASEAN. Dede laughed and answered, "Gee! You yourself didn't really want to

attend a high school in Singapore, did you? Why do you tell me to go now?"

At the time I didn't really pay attention at what my brother was saying.

Dede knew what I was feeling.

Dede could sense a lot of things, and he was not mistaken.

* * *

A year later, I was seventeen years old. My brother was twelve. *He* was thirty one. Oh, I forgot to mention that *he* and I were born on the same month. *He* was born on the first, I was on the 31st.

My brother commented once with a laugh, "Uncle Danar and Sister Tania are like an opening song and a closing song." To my surprise, they both decided to come to Singapore to celebrate my birthday!

"Uncle Danar said that we'll celebrate your seventeenth birthday in Singapore. We're leaving next week. Eh, but we'll celebrate it at your dorm. Uncle Danar doesn't want a big party." That was what Dede had told me last week in when we were chatting online.

I didn't really believe the news.

"Hey, why would I lie? How could you accuse me of lying? I never lied! I always keep my promise! Uncle Danar told me last night..." my brother protested at length when I reminded him not to play silly trick on me.

“Why didn’t he tell me directly?”

“Haha, he deliberately did that! He even told me not to tell you last night. I just can’t stand it. I can’t wait to go to Singapore. Going on vacation....” My brother and I laughed happily. All of this was really a surprise.

My heart was overflowing with happiness when I welcomed them at Changi Airport. I was wrong. I didn’t have to wait for three years to see him again; my longing ended in only one year and two months. I only had to wait for that long to see *his* face again.

By this time I was 5 feet 3 inches. According to the book I read, I will only grow another one or two inches at the most the next few years. But that was ideal. I was up to *his* chin now (much taller than Sister Ratna. Ah, I wonder where she was now. It wasn’t even important to think about her).

My brother was chattering non stop as usual, asking a lot of questions along the way from Changi Airport to the hotel. He was “disturbing” our conversation. Really annoying.

Dede went to school close to home.

“So now you’re alone at home then, Brother Danar?”

He nodded, smiled widely, shrugged his shoulders. No big deal, they could still stay in touch.

“But the house is always crowded every Sunday, you know. About fifty children are now attending the storytelling program. Uncle even invited two of his students to help,” Dede explained casually from the front seat of the cab (my brother had insisted

to sit in the front; and *he* let him; I myself was happy with the arrangement because then *he* and I could sit together in the back).

I swallowed hard. Student? Since when?

“So you decided to teach again now?”

“Yes, but only part time. Twice a month. Not too busy,” *he* answered flatly, explaining, still watching the road.

“His students are pretty, you know, Sis.” Dede grinned (I just realized that my brother was a teenager now, just listened to his comment).

But, I was paying more attention to other things in his comment. Students? Pretty? I swallowed hard, glancing at *him* who was still amazed watching clean and well-maintained streets.

* * *

We arrived at the hotel. Dede went berserk earlier because *he* and I just got off the taxi and walked away without paying. “You sit in the front, so you have to pay,” *he* said to Dede lightly (mimicking the way Dede talked).

I just laughed. Gotcha. I was content to see my brother panicked and irritated. It was then I suddenly realized that for whatever reason, *he* never teased me the way *he* teased Dede.

Dede sulked for the rest of the afternoon, “Then there’s no point of me getting allowance.” But it didn’t last long, *he* was just teasing Dede. The money to pay for the taxi ride was entirely reimbursed in the hotel room.

Later that night we went straight to the dorm.

Anne, my friend from junior high who was now also in the same class again with me in senior high (I was in my second year), had prepared a simple party in the dorm living room. Some of my friends also came, including the infamous Jhony Chan.

They blew the trumpets loudly when we were entering the room. Luckily we already got permission for partying from the ill-tempered dorm manager. Believe it or not, he was more fierce than Miss B. The rules were not so strict on Saturday night anyway.

We sang *Happy Birthday*.

I blew the candles.

Then came the time I had to cut my small birthday cake. Anne knew that I was going to give the first slice to *him*. She knew the whole story since I already told her everything. I was close to her. She was the only friend I had in Singapore. A very good friend.

But my other dorky friends shouted, "Jhony, Jhony!" *He* just smiled, joining my dorm friends shouting Jhony's name.

Dede just stared at the strange crowd with amazement (with a look that said: why do you have to shout like that? She's just handing over a slice of cake, right, why the fuss?). The problem was, my brother did look the smallest among the other kids.

Of course I still handed the cake to *him*. *He* accepted it with a smile, wrapped *his* arm around my shoulders, kissed my hair. Anne nudged my arm, giving me a meaningful glance. Jhony Chan stared at us from across the table, annoyed. All my friends clapped their hands, making fun of Jhony Chan and his wryly face. Dede, without much comments, casually helped himself with

a big piece of cake. He almost took half the cake for himself, ignoring the stare from the other kids.

My sweet-seventeen birthday party was modest, although for me that was the best party ever in my life. *He* mingled with my friends. Maggie, whose parents lived in Selangor, murmured, "Wow, cute," as she was shaking hands with *him*. Some of Maggie's friends came up to them, giggling, flirting with him. But *he* was more than capable of handling teenagers' behavior.

He was, as usual, very pleasant to everyone who just got to know him. *He* joked around, talked a lot, participated in other people's conversation. Every now and then the living room was silent when everyone was listening to *him* talking. Dede was comfortable interacting with a group of kids who were five years older than him. He brought a set of the most complicated Lego I had given him. And my brother mockingly laughed at Jhony Chan who couldn't finish it.

Dede said proudly that he could finish it in a matter of seconds (that was a lie by the way!).

Unfortunately, such a pleasant time had to end. At 10 p.m. *he* and my brother had to go back to their hotel. Anne and I cleaned up the tables and chairs before going back to our dorm room.

"I think he won't be interested in girls our age, Tania," Anne whispered softly (in English with a thick Singaporean accent).

I swallowed hard. Anne was probably right judging from the way *he* handled Maggie and her gang of girlfriends.

Ah, but it would be different two or three years from now I

thought. When I became a college student (a beautiful and smart one).

* * *

We went out the next day, walking around from one shopping center to another shopping center. Dede had spent his allowance even before we walked out of the first store. *He* flat out rejected “emergency assistance” for extra money Dede was pleading all the way to the next shopping center.

“You don’t need to give me allowance next month. Please, Uncle. You could impose a moratorium if you want,” Dede pleaded, mentioning an economic term that he probably learned from *him*. Dede was now sitting in the back seat with me. He had learned the lesson from the taxi incident the other day.

I knew *he* once again was just teasing Dede. In fact, when Dede wanted to buy books in one of Singapore’s largest bookstore, *he* just nodded. Agreed.

“Turns out we could actually see the entire city from here, huh?” *he* said quietly to me. The bookstore was located on the tenth floor. It was indeed a great view. The sea looked beautiful from up there.

Standing next to *him*, I nodded in agreement.

“But I think it’s much more fun to see the view from the second floor of the bookstore in our city,” I said quietly.

“Why?” *He* asked, smiling.

I wasn’t sure how to answer.

Of course it was because that bookstore was a special place for me. It was there where I got the promise of a better life from *him*. It was there where I looked forward to a wonderful future with *him*. And, it was there where my hopes and dreams emerged, though I wasn't able to understand what I was feeling at the time.

"It's just more fun, that's all," I tried to answer as casual as possible, making an expression like a Japanese comic character. *He* just smiled flat, wrapping his arm around my shoulder.

"This is your book, isn't it, Uncle?" Dede walked towards where *he* and I were standing near the glass window. *He* and I turned around at the same time. Dede was holding a thick book in English. I saw *his* nickname "Maibelopah" on the cover.

I recognized the book. It had been translated six months ago by a publisher in Singapore. The translation was bad. I even found many errors in the translation. The work was done carelessly. *He* nodded.

"May I buy it?" My brother was flipping through the book.

"Are you fluent in English?" I teased Dede.

My brother made an "offended" face. I laughed.

* * *

We had dinner at China Town.

Duck was offered in every dish on the menu. Dede talked non stop the whole time we were waiting for our food. ("I lost my appetite just looking at duck tails. Why do we have to eat here? Let's move to another restaurant, Uncle. I don't get why Sister

Tania chose this place.”) But my brother quickly forgot his ravings as soon as the waitress deliver his large order. He immediately gobbled his food and went silent.

The dinner was very nice. I sat next to *him*, staring at the crowded street, at the hanging lanterns, at Barongsai (lion dance) costumes dangling from curved roofs, at people with traditional Chinese clothing walking on the streets, at street vendors busy shouting their wares. I could see red everywhere.

As red as my heart.

We talked about *his* work. *He* had been promoted again to be the General Manager of the Marketing Department. *This young, this cool?*, I thought to myself. Dede was not interested in talking about office stuff. My brother abruptly changed the subject, talking about the house that was almost finished.

“Your room... has been... finished!” Dede informed me with his mouth full. He never mentioned about this before in his e-mail or chatting. “But... it hasn’t been... painted yet... waiting for you... What color... do you want?” Before I had a chance to answer, my brother already answered his own question, “Blue!”

When talking about school (actually, I had told *him* about school via e-mail and chatting), for the most part, I only repeated what I had already told *him*.

“O, by the way, Mother’s pastry business has been reopened. What’s her name, Uncle? I forgot....” Dede changed the subject again at will. His words were much clearer now. Only the tail of his Peking duck was left on his plate (and he felt much too disgusted to finish it).

Danar mentioned the name Miranti, a woman who had helped Mother expanding Mother's pastry business in the past. I smiled happily. Mother must also be pleased to hear this news in heaven.

"Do you still make pastries?" *he* asked me.

Again, I had trouble to find answer for such a sudden question (it was not sudden at all actually, it was just that I felt all his questions seemed to come suddenly).

I shook my head.

"Why?"

"Nothing!" Again, that standard answer. When in fact, didn't I once promise to myself that I would only make pastries for him? That was the reason.

"Hey, are you dating that Chinese guy from the other night?" My brother asked me casually.

That was an unexpected question from Dede.

I glared at him, almost choked. I threw a chopstick at him. Dede laughed, catching the chopstick.

"Whoa.... why are you angry? I'm just asking!"

"No. I'm not dating anyone."

Dede grinned. "Well, you're weird anyway."

He just laughed at our behavior.

Then for the next fifteen minutes, we were discussing about that silly issue.

"It shouldn't be that impulsive, right? I mean, you can't immediately fall in love at first sight, don't you think? You should try to get to know the person first.... I don't think anyone would believe these kind of stuff anymore these days."

I swear to God, my brother was silent much of the time at that point. Suck it up, Dede! Despite his big ass demeanor, he was still a twelve years old teenager.

“You really have grown up, Tania, as Mother had expected!” *he* simply ended the conversation with that “annoying” phrase. *He* was reluctant to discuss it further.

I sighed silently. I just wanted to hear *his* opinion about this matter. I was dying to understand *his* way of thinking. I would never know what was on *his* mind if I didn’t know *his* understanding about this. *He* wasn’t consistent in discussing it in his books either. Sometimes *he* was too serious, but other times *he* was overly casual about it. What I knew was that in every book *he* wrote, *he* always made a remark that he didn’t believe in love at first sight (that was exactly the reason why I said what I said earlier).

However, *he* was not interested in talking about it further.

* * *

My brother and *him* were flying back to Jakarta the following afternoon at 4 p.m., so we still had some time to spend together. I took them for a walk around the campus of National University of Singapore (N.U.S).

“Why don’t we go somewhere else? What’s the fun of walking around a campus? It’s not like we’ve never done it before. Sister Tania’s ideas of having fun is always weird,” Dede protested along the way.

I ignored Dede, didn't care what he was saying.

We spent some time walking around the park, then sat, watching a group of Chinese-Malay looking students playing American football on the field. They didn't have the strength to collide with each other.

When passing a basketball court, *he* spent some time to join the students playing basketball. I had no idea that *he* was good at playing basketball. *He* spent about fifteen minutes on the court. Rolling up *his* long sleeves shirt to *his* elbows, he dribble the ball, deftly and swiftly, and shoot the ball perfectly three times. I shouted to encourage *him*.

Some of the female students wearing cheerleader uniforms who were also watching shouted too. And suddenly I lost my interest to clap anymore.

He left the court all sweaty. I handed *him* my handkerchief (a habit that I got from him, always carrying a handkerchief; a white one, no less). *He* looked at me gently and thanked me. "I think we could build a basketball court in the yard beside the house, don't you think so, Uncle?" Dede chimed in, expressing his idea. *He* nodded. It was rare for my brother to have a good idea.

We had lunch at the student cafeteria. And as we were busy eating and chatting, *his* cell phone rang. *He* grabbed it out of his pocket, glanced at the name on the screen, then stood excusing himself to step away.

"Since when did he step away from us when answering his phone call?" I asked my brother, staring at him intently.

Dede just shook his head nonchalantly.

“From whom?” curiously I asked Dede, probing. My brother certainly would know everything, I thought.

“It’s probably his new girlfriend,” Dede casually replied, munching on his beef.

Suddenly, I lost my appetite.

* * *

At 3 p.m. I accompanied them to Changi Airport. The phone incident at lunch was still bothering me. I wasn’t as upbeat as before. Luckily, my brother took over much of the conversation (in fact, he usually did dominate the conversation; his mouth was just like a submachine gun, you know).

Leaving N.U.S, we returned to the hotel to check out, then rushed to the airport. Not long, we walked straight to the departure lobby.

I was still feeling uneasy when I hugged *him*. My brother had long refused to be hugged (“I just feel uncomfortable being hugged. What’s the point anyway?”)

Before leaving, *he* pulled out something from his pocket. A small red box, made of velvet (certainly it would not be a pair of snickers; though it could be if they were miniature ones).

The box contained a pendant. A pendant!

My initial was on it: T. I was blown away. The feeling of uneasiness I had felt earlier was instantly gone.

I didn’t really care whether *he* gave me as a birthday present (he had not given me any presents during the party at the dorm

the other night), or solely because *he* considered me as his “little sister”, or whatever the reason was. What was important to me was that it was a heartwarming present. A pendant.

I held back my tears as best I could.

“Now, for such presents, you might as well cry, Sister Tania.” My brother grinned. I just smiled.

“Thank you.” And my brother and *him* headed toward their departure gate.

I was very happy that day. The pendant was definitely something special, I thought to myself.



8.37 p.m.: The Pendant with a Thousand Questions

It has been more than half an hour I stand in silence here, on the second floor of the city's largest bookstore, remembering all the events, remembering *him*.

I smile. I touch my neck with my left hand. I have been wearing the pendant since the day he gave it to me. My fingers touch the initial: T. It could be *Tersayang* (dearest), *Tercinta* (beloved), or *Ter-whatever*!

Anne repeatedly cut me off when I was trying to "interpret" the presents. "T could be an abbreviation of anything, right, not just Tania? But if you simply use Indonesian language, it might just be *Teman* (friend), right?" Anne grinned. She had difficulty pronouncing the word "*teman*."

I remember throwing a pillow at her.

Ah, maybe Anne was right. Maybe I was just overreacting in interpreting *his* gift.

It looks like the documents has been finished to be copied. The student sitting on a high swivel chair across the street stands up, reaches into his pocket, pays the fees, and receives a large plastic bag. He's headed to the door. Arriving in front of the photocopy kiosk, he just stands there, hesitated. The rain is heavy.

Being resourceful, the student shouts to call out people wandering around offering to loan their umbrella for a fee. With a big umbrella, he then hurriedly walks away through the pouring rain. I sigh. The three very affectionate couples and employees busy chatting are the only people left inside the photocopy kiosk across the street.

"Er, excuse me, I want to search for a book using a computer. Do you know where the computer is?" a middle-aged woman asks me. She smiles awkwardly, very confused.

I turn around reluctantly, observing her face. I slowly raise my hand, pointing towards where the computer is located. I barely smile back. She could have asked one of the employees, right? Why me? I sigh silently, annoyed. The woman was interrupting my thoughts.

* * *

"You look friendly, Tania. And that makes many people feel comfortable asking you questions or being with you...." That was *his* explanation during our brief chatting when we were discussing

about why many of my classmates chose to talk to me than to other kids.

I only came in second place at school. The Singaporean student who came in first in junior high school was now again ahead of me. At first, the explanation made me proud because that meant I “inherited” his “friendly face.” I noticed that people around *him* chose to talk to him too. Once, while eating at one of the food stall tents which were plenty along the streets in our city, the stall owner refused to get paid. She smiled and said, “I’m grateful that you’re willing to eat at my stall, Mr. Danar.”

However, the incident is not the one I’m thinking about right now. The woman who spoke to me earlier remind me more about how curious I was about *his* “new girlfriend.” At the time, I had been thinking hard and long about Dede’s comment at N.U.S cafeteria the other day. I said to myself that I need to find out more about it, one way or the other.

The following day, I immediately contacted Dede.

Tania: You should tell me before you change your profile. It confuses me X-(

BebekPeking: I just changed it this morning. I’m still in your list of friends, right? I just changed my username. That’s all.

Tania: Why did you change it to BebekPeking?

BebekPeking: No particular reason, why? It’s better than changing it to *buntut bebek* (duck tail) :-)

I laughed. Thinking for a moment, I pondered different format of questions that would not arouse Dede's suspicion. Questions about *his* new girlfriend were certainly a quite sensitive subject.

Tania: By the way, do you know who Brother Danar's new girlfriend is?

As it turned out, the only thing I could convey was nothing more than a standard question.

BebekPeking: What's your business asking about Uncle Danar's girlfriend anyway?

See, Dede was immediately defensive.

Tania: No particular reason. I'm just curious.

I cursed my brother from across the sea. Damn it, just answer it!

BebekPeking: I don't know her name, but she's definitely more beautiful than Auntie Ratna.

Tania: Did she come to the house often?

I swallowed hard. I was shaking as I was typing the question; anxiously waiting for the answer.

BebekPeking: Very. Every day. Every second. It gets annoying after awhile.

Tania: Every day ???

BebekPeking: What I meant was, my curious sister, that girl is chasing Uncle Danar. I get annoyed sometimes because she always asked me a lot of questions, just like you now. Why do you ask anyway? Are you also chasing him like that girl?

Tania: I'm just asking! For no particular reason, just like you changing your profile name. Am I not allowed to ask? :-(

I swallowed hard, hurriedly took control of the conversation. I should have been much more clever fishing for explanations, not this obvious. I was lucky Dede didn't ridicule me further. Our conversation rambled around as they usually do. And I lost my interest to go back to the previous topic.

* * *

I thought my problem with the guys at my dorm and school (especially with Jhony Chan) would end at my seventeen birthday, particularly with Anne helping me to spread gossips about him. But the kids didn't believe her, especially Maggie and her gang. They even asked him for his e-mail, reasoning that they would ask him about school stuff. What a bunch of coquette.

Jhony Chan started to get on my nerves too. He had openly asked me for a date several time. And then there were those other

Malay-looking boys who were acting as if they were adult, including Adi, my friend from Jakarta (an ASEAN Scholarship recipient himself) who started to launch his own “attacks.”

I rarely reported such situation to *him* anymore. *He* would only responded with the same comment anyway. Mostly just joking. Not serious. So rather than getting annoyed, I chose not to share the information with *him*. I thought that he should have known where this conversation was going, right? Not the other way around. *He* probably thought such events were perfectly normal for a young girl like me.

I was eighteen years old. I would graduate from senior high school in six months. My brother was thirteen years old. *He* was thirty two. Time really passed by so fast like a flying bullet.

I found it more difficult to manage my feelings toward *him*. Slowly but surely, those feelings flourished. I didn't think much about “his new girlfriend” anymore. Besides, Dede told me recently via chatting, *he* didn't seem to be interested to that girl anyway (whatever her name was or wherever she came from).

However, it didn't stop the many questions passing through my mind. I felt increasingly uncomfortable with my feelings. And who else would listen to my humbug except Anne.

Listening to dozens of questions and complaints from me at the dorm, Anne told me that I might have started to obsess with *him*, “You can't possibly expect from someone who is far older than us, don't you think? Drop it, Tania! He won't be interested to a girl our age.”

I just looked at Anne, my roommate, with annoyance. So what?

"I mean, you seem weird compare to other kids. You never go out with any guys. You're cold and inhumane to the boys at the dorm and at school. You wish to be with someone much older. See, you only display a picture of the two of you on the table! What's with that picture anyway." Anne laughed, brushing my ear.

I glared at her. Anne didn't realize that she was actually twice as cold compared to me in the case of boys. And the pictures she was displaying on her wall were more tacky than anyone's in the dorm (pictures of football players). My picture was still nicer.

The picture in a slow diaphragm. The picture with lights frozen around it. The picture of me and *him* smiling.

* * *

A month passed.

As usual, I spent 10 to 15 minutes chatting online with Dede every night (in between my busy schedule studying, doing endless assignments and school papers).

I asked Dede a lot of questions. *He* was very busy. *He* had to travel to Tokyo every week. Dede said that *his* company was preparing to launch a new model SUV, so *he* didn't have time to be online with me. I had not seen *him* online at all this month (I only heard from *him* via email every Thursday).

Tania: How's Uncle Danar's doing?
d3d3: Busy. Coming home late, then immediately go to sleep.
He works overtime on Sunday now. By the way, I'm now
the manager of the storytelling program. :-)

I grinned. First, for Dede's new profile. Second, for the news about being a manager. What was he taking about? My brother was now in charge of telling the stories? I didn't think the children would understand what he was telling them. Dede often wasn't focus when talking. He constantly changed his topics.

Tania: But he's in good health, right?
d3d3: Have you ever seen him sick?

I nodded in agreement. Yes, *he* did never look sick, let alone complaining.

Tania: You remind him to take a break, eat on time, get enough sleep, okay?
d3d3: He's the one who always remind me to get some rest and eat.

I grinned. A few minutes later, I changed the topic to discuss Dede's school.

d3d3: Oh, I want to tell you something before I forget.
Tania: What?

- d3d3:** Two weeks ago Uncle Danar scolded me. He just nagged and nagged nonstop.
- Tania:** He often did that to you anyway, didn't he? :-)
- d3d3:** But this time he was really mad.
- Tania:** Mad?? Why?
- d3d3:** No big deal really. I was curious and opened his laptop.

I swallowed hard; that would really be a big deal.

- Tania:** Well, if that's the case, anyone would be angry too. What were you doing opening his laptop anyway?
- d3d3:** Just wanted to copy the software driver. Besides, his laptop was already open. I didn't open any file anyway.
- Tania:** It makes no difference. If I were him, I would have strangled you, you know! :-p

My brother didn't type anything. He lost his interest. He probably thought I would defense him, but I blamed him instead. He was probably annoyed so he turned the conversation to different subject. He talked about his extracurricular activities at school ("I now join the backup basketball team at school." I grinned, what good did joining a backup team do him?).

- d3d3:** Being in a backup team is not bad, you know! What's wrong with you? Why are you so mean?
- Tania:** :-p Who says I'm mean?
- d3d3:** I was about to tell you about Uncle Danar.

Tania: What? What?

d3d3: Haha! See, when it comes to Uncle Danar, you're always interested.

I grinned, annoyed, but my brother told me about it anyway.

d3d3: Do you know that he was nervous before we were leaving for Singapore?

Tania: Nervous? Why? (I couldn't wait for the answer so I cut him off.)

d3d3: Nervous about his appearance, haha. He was really weird. He asked me twice about his hair style.

My heart beat faster. Since when did *he* care about his appearance?

d3d3: Not to mention when we were about to depart, he was very tense. Then when we arrived and were about to meet you at the arrival lobby, believe it or not, he just stood there in the middle of the hallway for a while. I didn't understand why he was so nervous. We were only going to meet you, what was the big deal?

O God, my heart burst with joy.

Tania: Did he say anything?

d3d3: No. I didn't pay attention. Why?

I wanted to curse my brother. Why didn't he ask? He would ask a lot of questions when it was something not important. But he didn't pay much attention for something that was actually important.

d3d3: Well, he did say something.

Tania: What? What did he say?

I was anxious to hear the answer. My fingers were trembling as I pressed the keys on my laptop.

d3d3: During our flight home, he said that you changed a lot. Said you're beautiful and mature. I cut him off, told him that you're weird, acting like an adult, haha.

At that point, I really cursed my brother.

d3d3: Uncle Danar said, Mother would be very proud in heaven....

And unfortunately, Dede suddenly changed the subject again, asking about Lego that he had not received, talking about his school homework, about his birthday (my brother celebrated his birthday the week before).

d3d3: Speaking about birthday, I forgot to mention something. Do you still remember the pendant he gave you at Changi Airport?

Dede wrote the following message before I had the time to ask. Reading the sentence, I immediately stopped typing. Waiting.

d3d3: Turns out, Uncle Danar also has a very similar pendant like the one you have. I saw the initial DD on it.

O God, I gasped. What did all of this mean, *he's got the same pendant?* It was true then, the pendant was indeed a pair (just like what I had told Anne)! My hands were shaking. I wanted to type something ("*Are you sure?*"), but my fingers were not able. My heart was pounding. It felt like it was expanding like a balloon.

d3d3: I just found out about it last week, on my birthday. Oh, thanks for the birthday package. I got it the other day, but why not Lego? I don't feel like reading a book.

Geez, why did he talk about his birthday again? The pendant, that was more important.

d3d3: Uncle Danar showed me the pendant when we were having dinner at a food stall tent the other night. Don't laugh! Though it was a stall, it was an elite one!

To me, that was a promising sign, and I didn't have time to tease my brother. My God, the pendant was and would always be special.

d3d3: He showed it to me for a long time while smiling from ear to ear.

I gasped, waiting for the continuation of Dede's sentence on my laptop screen.

d3d3: And he gave one pendant to me. The one with the initial D. The other pendant was for Mother, with the initial WH. I buried it in Mother's grave yesterday afternoon.

Reading Dede's last sentence, I suddenly felt like my heart had exploded.

It turned out, the pendant was nothing special at all. Anne was right. I was gasping for air, trying hard to type something.

* * *

A week later, the news about the pendant which turned out to be nothing special at all came to light. Though with great difficulty, I persuaded myself to make peace with hope. Anne had told me. T = teman (friend). T = Tidak lebih tidak kurang (no more, no less).

At least it was still impressive, wasn't it? He only bought the pendants for four people. For *him*, Mother, me, and Dede. I was one of the owners of the pendant. Did *he* give one to Sister Ratna too? I suddenly was reminded of the "celebrity girl."

Hey, why should I thought of Sister Ratna?

Little did I know that two weeks later I met again with the

owner of the name in the wrong place at the wrong time. Sister Ratna was back. She completely took over my position.

A few months before graduation, we had to prepare a final report on social issue. Being a scholarship recipient, we were required to write a report about problems in our own country. I was given a round-trip ticket to Jakarta, and off school for two weeks to explore my research in the field.

I purposely didn't tell *him* or Dede so it would be a surprise. Like a dog with two tails, I jogged past the airport arrival lobby, looking for a taxi that would immediately took me to our city.

It was Sunday afternoon. They would certainly be relaxing at home. That was their only agenda after the storytelling program. I smiled to myself in the cab. When the cab was speeding up crossing the tollway, I felt as if it was moving like a snail. When we started to enter a crowded street, I felt as if the cab was like a snail whose four feet had been cut off (how would I know that snails don't have feet?).

"The Dutch is still far away, Miss," the taxi driver who seemed to sense my impatience teased me. Ignoring him, I continued tapping the seat in front of me impatiently as the cab was moving down the small road toward the house.

Hurry up, I sighed silently.

Impatiently, I unloaded the suitcase myself. The front yard was deserted. The kids from the storytelling program must had gone home earlier. I heard thumping noises from the side of the yard. I peeked there. Dede was practicing to shoot the ball into the basketball hoop. Three attempts, three failures. I grinned. He had

absolutely no talent whatsoever. *He* was not there, so I decided to greet my brother later and left him alone.

He must have been reading in the backyard, looking at *his* favorite bougainvillea (I planted it when I was home during my junior high school holiday; which according to *his* last email, was now blooming).

It would be a very exciting meeting, was it not, set against a backdrop of red flowers? I breathed a sigh of pleasure.

However, when I arrived in the backyard, preparing to surprise *him*, I was the one who got the shock of my life. *He* was indeed there, but *he* was chatting sitting side by side with Sister Ratna, the person who didn't exist in the list of creatures on earth I wanted to see right now.

The little suitcase I was accidentally carrying around to the backyard slipped off my hand, creating a loud thump as it hit the floor. Or more precisely, as it hit the tip of my toes (I didn't feel any pain at all; my heart was more numb right now). Both of them turned to me.

"Tania...", was the only word that came out of *his* mouth. *He* looked surprised. *He* smiled cheerfully. *He* stood up, took a few steps closer toward me, hugged me.

And I suddenly hated *his* hug.

"Wow. What a surprise!" Sister Ratna stood and gave me a hug too. I hated her even more.

All the longing and plans had vanished instantly like a burning candle doused with a large bucket of water. I put up a stiff face

pretending to be delighted for their welcome. My heart failed to instruct my lips to smile. I held back my tears as best I could.

He was otherwise acting like *he* would normally do. *He* was really happy and surprised with my sudden return. *He* asked me a lot of things, and I just answer *him* with a weak voice. *He* wrapped his arm around my shoulders (*his* hand accidentally touched the pendant). And I suddenly felt like grabbing it off my neck and throwing it away.

“Er, there’s a taxi in front of the house waiting to be paid, Uncle. Just who was coming here not paying his taxi?” Dede suddenly appeared carrying a basketball. He had not seen me standing stiffly inside the house.

I just remembered that I had not paid the taxi and hurriedly walked to the front. And that saved me from being seen with tears in my eyes.

* * *

Those two weeks was really hell for me. The research was actually just an excuse for me to go home. My papers had long been completed and was more than perfect. I only needed to interview my sources. But even then, I actually had done it via email.

I took the chance to get a two-week holiday solely because I wanted to go home, to meet *him*, to spend time with *him* like when I was in junior high or when I had my seventeen birthday. But look what happened now. What did I get?

Sister Ratna completely took over my position. And it was

much more painful than when we were at Fantasy World (I didn't really know what I was feeling at the time, remember?).

"You're so beautiful," Sister Ratna praised me.

I just nodded (for the sake of good manners).

"Look. She's taller than me now." Sister Ratna turned to *him*.
He smiled agreeably.

"She used to be just this tall." Trying to be friendly, Sister Ratna pointed at her stomach (I really hated her, I was certainly higher than that).

"We haven't seen each other for a long time. Almost six years, isn't it, Tania?" Actually, if I wanted to be subjective, she was sincere and friendly in engaging in dialogue with me. But, with my wicked heart and evil mind, everything looked bad, even her face looked like a monster.

"Yes. It's been six years." I mutter silently: *and I really hope I will never see you again forever.*

But Dede didn't pay much attention to what was going on and continued throwing his basketball to the hoop. He was always reluctant to talk with *Auntie* Ratna anyway.

* * *

Later that night I chatted online with Anne in the room with blue walls. Unfortunately for me, Anne analyzed the incident with a very strange way of thinking.

"I told you so. He's only interested at girls his age, Tania.

You're no more than a sister to him. A jealous and demanding one."

"But why does he have to come back to her life?"

"Well! What's wrong with that? My God, Tania, why are you so irrational? What happened to that smart brain that always gets 100?"

I quickly closed the laptop and walked to the living room. I saw Dede unpacking the Lego I brought this afternoon. He was seriously investigating the boxes. And that night (for whatever reason) I challenged my brother to compete. Five sets of Lego, and I was defeated in all of them. Dede laughed with satisfaction.

It wasn't a surprise that I lost. Firstly, my brother was much better trained than me in playing Lego (his brain was like a computer filled with thousands of solutions to solve Lego problems; his hands were nimble like a proboscis robot). Secondly, obviously I was upset at the time, how could I think?

I couldn't think straight at all. And now I was getting annoyed looking at Dede's triumphant face. He was laughing (laughing at me, "You look just like that Chinese guy at your dorm, haha. You can't think fast. You're slow!")

"Where's Brother Danar?" I asked Dede, interrupting his increasingly disrespectful laughter.

"Dunno. Maybe driving Auntie Ratna home." Dede shrugged, didn't care.

I muttered silently hearing that answer.

We were silent again, for a long time. I didn't feel like turning on the TV. Dede was busy straightening up his Lego. A moment

later my brother approached me, with an odd expression on his face.

“Can I ask you something?” His eyes looked funny. I new he was hiding something.

I glared at him, probing.

“What?”

“But don’t laugh, okay?”

I just had to laugh looking at his face.

Dede immediately backed away.

“No, no. I promise I won’t laugh.” I tried not to laugh. Dede swallowed hard, stepped closer, stood next to me. He pondered for a long time, thinking. I was getting annoyed.

“What is it?”

My brother was silent again.

“What do you think girls would like for a present?”

Turns out, Dede was asking me about his classmate. I laughed out loud, holding my stomach. Dede was annoyed (“See, you said you wouldn’t laugh.”). But he wasn’t upset for long. For the next hour we discussed about his issue. My brother was thirteen years of age. I was eighteen.

You see, he was two years older than me when I had that feeling for the first time.

The conversation turned out to be important for me. Since Dede had already started it: sharing his feelings, then later on, in the following months, I was much more comfortable to tell my feelings to him. It was important because Dede didn’t make fun of me anymore like he used to during our chatting online (“Or

maybe you're falling for him too, huh?"). Since I had teased him all-out, my brother now understood very well how uncomfortable it was being ridiculed about issues like this.

Dede would help me a lot in this matter later. Although it was only in a form of being a good listener, at least I had a friend to share my feelings with beside Anne. I had a good spy at home.

He came home very late that night.

* * *

That two weeks went by very slowly. Slow? Because everywhere we went, Sister Ratna always came along. I grumbled silently when I found out that she would join us to go to Mother's grave. She had absolutely no business going to Mother's grave, didn't she? Mother didn't even know her. Why should she come along?

I forgot that Sister Ratna had been there accompanied me and my brother at home after Mother died. She had brought us a blanket and clothes when we were at the hospital. She had guided me home after Mother's funeral. She had stayed with me at the rental house, and so forth. My brain was full of hatred, so my thoughts were always negative all day.

Sister Ratna came with us to the biggest bookstore in town.

The thing was, I was glad that Sister Ratna didn't know about the books written by *him* (and would never know), only me and my brother knew about that great secret. Secondly, the sales clerk greeted me, not Sister Ratna. "Wow, Tania grew up to be

beautiful, Mr. Danar.” See, I was much prettier than Sister Ratna (although the sales clerk didn’t exactly compare me with anyone).

“For a man his age, physical appearance isn’t that important, Tania.” Anne sent me a message the next night before I went to sleep. And I grinned reading her message. Anne always thought she knew everything.

“You maybe more beautiful and more intelligent than the “celebrity girl,” Tania. But prettier and smarter isn’t enough to attract the attention of a guy as mature as him. In his mind, you’re still a teenager. An annoying one.”

I cursed Anne three times.

That night we watched the view below from the second floor of the bookstore. He wrapped his arm around my shoulder, not Sister Ratna’s, because she was walking around, didn’t want to stay there.

“You’re right, Tania. The view here is much more beautiful than in Singapore,” he whispered.

And I grinned happily. At least this glass window was still ours. No one could take it away from us. This view was special for me and for *him*.



8.45 p.m.: Let Me Cry for Him, Mother!

I wipe my eyes that starts to fill up with tears.

No. I will never cry, Mother. Although before you were gone you allowed me to cry for *him*.

Mother indeed knew everything. Even before the angel of death came for her, Mother had told me and said it with that odd smile. I didn't really understand what she meant at the time, but now I do.

Little did I know, successive painful events were getting ready to come after me over the coming months. Events associated with the return of Sister Ratna in *his* life. I now understand why Mother let me cry only for *him*, not for anyone else.

Ah, Mother knew it from the beginning. She knew that I liked *him*. She knew that I fell in love with our angel ever since my brother and I sat in front of our cardboard shack waiting for *him*,

looking at the beautiful moon above through the branches of the linden tree.

I sigh. I found myself standing here in silence, on the second floor of the city's largest bookstore, for a long time, remembering everything.

I notice that the rain is getting heavy outside. It was here where the three of us looked out the window before I returned to Singapore the very next day. It was here where I felt that at least I still owned a precious spot, scraps from Sister Ratna. And it was enough to help me through my final months in senior high school.

Those months were difficult for me. It was difficult because every moment, whether it was in the classroom, or at the dorm, or while bathing, or before going to sleep, or while eating, or while doing anything, I was always thinking about *him*.

Him, with Sister Ratna standing behind *him*.

* * *

Have you ever watched a movie where the hero appeared only at the last seconds? As one of them was about to move forward doing something or accepting something, the other, who she had been waiting for, finally emerged during that crucial moment (in a spectacular fashion of course). Through a mesmerizing slow-motion scene, the audience was amazed. They would cheer to welcome the hero! And her partner, with tears in her eyes, would move forward to the battlefield continued doing what she was doing.

That was what happened to me at graduation day.

After battling it out in the final test, I finally managed to surpass the number one by a margin of only 0.1 digit. The difference was very thin. I became the best student. The principal handed me the award in a form of a lime tree made of crystal. And when I was about to accept it, *he* hurriedly entered the auditorium. *He* called out, waving. Impressive.

My heart was beating fast. I was happy.

What a surprise! A real surprise. *He* came to my graduation day. Why didn't *he* tell me? Didn't Dede tell me in his last email that Uncle Danar was busy in Japan? Yet here *he* was. *Did he come alone? Is he coming especially for me?*

O, my God! No, look, Sister Ratna was right there behind *him*, clapping along with other graduates and guests. All the great scenes in the movie I had been imagining before vanished without a trace.

He did later explain to me that *he* had made a promise to himself long time ago *he* would come to my graduation, no matter how busy his schedule. But why did *he* have to come with Sister Ratna? Why? It screwed up the speech I have prepared beforehand. Having stood stunned for a moment on the podium, I was only able to say a few words (I let my heart took over).

"Last night, I have prepared a long and beautiful speech. But now everything is lost..." I choked up. I turned toward *him*. *He* smiled broadly. Sister Ratna... Sister Ratna was wrapping her arm around his shoulders tenderly.

"Thank you, God...." I bit my lips.

"Thank you Mother... I hope my mother can see this from heaven.... I hope she is smiling in heaven right now...."

I choked. How different it felt mentioning Mother now.

My throat was dry. I felt a streak of light came out of my heart and immediately shot upward. It made me feel like crying. Yes, look at me now, Mother.... Look at your daughter! She has completely changed. The dirty girl from the slum has changed. The filthy girl from car exhaust and road dust has grown into a jet-black haired girl who confidently look to the future.

Just like what Mother had dreamed of..... My eyes filled with tears.

No. I had made a promise to my mother not to cry no matter how difficult life I had to face. Especially now, I should be happy. I graduated from high school, and left my miserable life behind.

"I thank my father.... my brother.... And... and...."

Oh my God, it was so hard to say it.

"And someone...."

Mother, I would never be able to say his name (and that was the reason why I used the word *he* or *someone* while recalling the whole story).

"Someone, who like an angel, has came into our lives.... Someone, who makes me willing to trade everything I have in this world for him. Someone...."

I was shaking, hurriedly got off the podium, before my sentence became even more muddled. I didn't care that my words were just hanging in the air. Fortunately, the guests didn't seem to care, they were all clapping.

The principal, a woman with a very pleasant face, hugged me. "Nice speech, Tania, although we still don't have the slightest idea who that person might be. Who is it?" Her English was flawless, teasing me.

* * *

When I came out of the auditorium, *he* hugged me tightly. Sister Ratna did too. *He* shook his head happily, smiling very proudly.

"Look at her, the little busker who stepped on a thumbtracks. The girl who cried because her foot was bleeding! Look at her! The world should learn a lot from her." Chuckling, *he* pretend to punch my shoulder.

I just looked down. I couldn't explain what I was feeling at that point. No word could describe it. All of this was really encouraging. I was so happy that I wanted to hug him. But Sister Ratna was there, spoiling the fun.

"You're amazing, my dear!" Sister Ratna helped me carrying the trophy. "You know, I saw tears in Danar's eyes listening to your speech."

At that time I didn't pay much attention to what she was saying. Only a few days later that I realized, the sentence raised a lot of questions. I thought to myself, I can't remember seeing him crying for anyone before in my life.

The three of us walked together toward the reception room where lunch was served. There were many good news that I received during lunchtime. One of them was: N.U.S was

guaranteeing me a seat at one of their best class for the upcoming semester. Proudly, my high school principal handed me the invitation letter. Whatever major I decided to choose, they would provide a full scholarship until I graduated.

Unfortunately, all the happy news were forgotten a few moments later when I heard the news which came unexpectedly like a lightning in the middle of the day. It destroyed all hope. Accepting the news, I was speechless, thinking about my future without any chance to be with *him* at all. All the chance to rebuild the connection we had was completely gone.

At this point, it was all over.

* * *

At dinner in China Town (*"I want to prove what Dede said because he has lied to me so many times before"* was the reason Sister Ratna told us as to why she picked the place), *he* delivered the "big plan" as I mused myself staring at the tail of *barongsai* (a lion dance costume).

"We're getting married, Tania!" *He* smiled.

Sister Tania was gently touching *his* hands. She smiled too, looking at *him*, happy.

I choked, hurriedly grabbed a glass of water in front of me.

"Are you surprised, Tania?" Sister Ratna handed me a box of kleenex. I could see sincerity and friendship on her face, but somehow I just didn't like her.

I hastily changed my demeanor (it would be a messy affairs if

I acted like a child, I thought). I was blushing. All of this was surprising.

"Yes, I *am* surprised," I put on a look of surprise.

"It came as a surprise for us too, Tania." *He* laughed softly. Sister Ratna was blushing next to him.

"When?" My voice sounded faint.

"Danar just decided about it last week, at home." Sister Ratna explained.

That's not what I asked, I muttered silently. Not that one (See, Sister Ratna didn't get it. In terms of understanding what other people said, I was five times faster than her. How could *he* chose her?

I grumbled to myself, didn't remember what Anne had told me).

"I mean, when is the wedding?" I made a supreme effort to put a face of a curious "sister" who was naturally delighted to hear the news.

"In three months." Sister Ratna mentioned the date. And I immediately felt like the bright streets in Chinatown suddenly went dark. I felt as if the barongsai tail was strangling my neck, making me difficult to breath.

That meant they will get married soon.

* * *

I decided not to go home during the holidays before the new semester began at N.U.S. I reasoned that I just went home a

month before. Besides, I would be home in three months to attend their wedding anyway, there was no point to waste money.

So I spent a month and a half in Singapore just hanging out. It was much better than if I went home, don't you think? I would just going to be sitting around, not doing anything in that house. Watching everything. Witnessing their wedding preparations. *In three months?*

Those one and a half months really became the most difficult time in my life (with different problems compared to the problems I had faced being a street kid for three years).

"You have no right to object, honey," Anne looked at me with concern. I decided to visit her at her house in Kuala Lumpur.

"He isn't related to you in any way. How is it possible for an angel to obey the will of ordinary people?" Anne grinned when she said this. She deliberately used the same term I used in my speech. Someone, our angel.

"I've told you many times before, you're expecting too much. You're nothing more than a stubborn little girl to him. Or a jealous little girl. Or something like that."

I still looked down.

"Tania?" Anne grabbed my arm.

"But I want to know his feelings. Am I not allowed to do that?" I replied weakly, hopeless.

"What for? Isn't it clear that he's going to marry that "celebrity girl"? What else are you going to ask him? His feelings are as clear as the stars in the sky, Tania. Gees, why are you so childish like this?"

I moaned.

"At least he needs to know what I feel, right?"

"Oh my goodness. What for, Tania? You're just going to ruin a lot of things. It'll ruin your relationship as brother and sister, or whatever your relationship is with him all this time. Can you imagine what would happen if he knows what you feel? One, he might ignore you, he doesn't care. Two, he might be able to handle the situation properly and with maturity, which I am sure this is what he would do considering how cool he was handling Maggie and her gang.

"Three, he might just distance himself from you. You're scaring him. His own sister made him feel uncomfortable. Four, he might even hate you. Your presence could interfere his relationship with that celebrity girl. Please be rational, my friend! They're getting married! Not just dating, not just declared that they love each other. They're getting married. In three months."

I moaned again. Anne didn't help me anything. There was no point for me to come all the way to Kuala Lumpur asking for her opinion.

"What about a fifth possibility?" I asked weakly, staring blankly at Anne.

Anne laughed.

"You mean that he suddenly changes his mind one hundred eighty degrees? That he would cancel the wedding, then come running to you and say, '*Oh, Tania. I love you too.*' C'mon! The chance is only one in a million for it to happen. And un-

fortunately, that doesn't exist in his dictionary of life. A grown-up as mature and as cool as him." Anne looked at me hopelessly.

"But, I want him to know what I'm feeling. I do have the right to express all these feelings to him, don't I?"

"You do, Tania. But you forget that he also has the right not to hear what you're about to say. And speaking about rights, you also have the obligation to make the wedding plans run smoothly as it should, and not in turmoil because of those silly admiration of yours. It's such a childish obsession, you know. Drop it, Tania. Forget about everything."

Anne concluded her speech. I didn't say a word.

* * *

It was three weeks before the wedding date. I finally decided to discuss the issue with Dede. My brother was only fourteen at the time. He was only in ninth grade, but, like me, he was much more mature than kids his age (although he often acted at his own discretion). But at least my brother needed to know what was happening to his sister. To decrease the tension of our conversation, I used English when I was chatting online with him.

Tania: Dede, I have something to confess.

Miamiheat: Hmm, what is it? Is it a great sin?

Tania: But you have to promise me that you won't laugh, won't mention it to anyone anywhere, including at Mother's grave when you're talking to yourself.

I knew that habit, and opened the conversation by mentioning Mother's grave would make my brother listened to me more seriously.

Miamiheat: Oke. Promise. What is it?

Three minutes had passed. My hands were too shaky to type the "confession."

Miamiheat: What is it? Just tell me!

My brother was getting annoyed waiting; I sighed.

Tania: Do you remember when I asked you about him, and you responded by laughing, teasing me?

Miamiheat: Who are you talking about?

Tania: Brother Danar. Remember when I asked you about his new girlfriend?

Miamiheat: No.

I squeezed my fingers, cursing my brother. How could he forget? Didn't he has photographic memory? Even only the slightest detail, my brother would instantly remember, especially something that made him laugh like that time, it was impossible for him to forget. That was the result of playing Lego for many years.

Miamiheat: Wait. That one? When you were acting very weird? Why do you ask again now? Are you....hahaha.

Tania: YOU PROMISED!

Miamiheat: I'm sorry. I apologize. Yes, I remember! What's the matter?

Tania: I....

I sighed, if it was this difficult to tell my brother about this, how would I tell *him*? My cursor was blinking slowly for a long time. It was as slow as my brain processing all of this.

Miamiheat: If you meant to say that you like Uncle Danar, I knew it already for a long time.

Dede was taking over the conversation.

Tania: How do you know?

I typed nervously.

Miamiheat: You should remember what Don Carleone said, "Don't underestimate my intellectuality." Sorry, just kidding! :-)
Isn't it obvious? Everything is so clear, isn't it?

Tania: What was?

Miamiheat: It's so obvious, my dear sister, that you always in bad mood when Auntie Ratna was around. That you always looked annoyed whenever she was around. That you

always looked at Uncle Danar with a certain look. That you always cried every time he gave you something. Like when we were at Changi Airport, remember? Or when we had dinner in Chinatown, remember? Gee, even an amateur like me could see it.

I swallowed hard. Was it that obvious? Good Lord, if my brother knew everything, that meant *he* did too? A series of scenarios and various concerns immediately crossed my mind. And one concern in particular suddenly felt like a knife stabbing my heart. It meant that *he* knew exactly what I feel for *him* all along!

Miamiheat: So, what do you want to ask me?

My cursor was blinking for a long time. Oh, Mother, now what would I ask my brother? I was going to confess, but then Dede already knew everything! *He* might already knew everything too.

Tania: I don't know what to ask you anymore now.

That was all I typed. We both didn't write anything for almost five minutes. The cursor was just blinking.

Miamiheat: I don't like Auntie Ratna either. In my opinion, she's not suitable for Uncle Danar. She never like kids. Have you ever seen her at the storytelling program? No. She

doesn't like standing by the window on the second floor of that bookstore either. That's a mandatory ritual for Uncle Danar.

The chatting ended abruptly when my brother suddenly signed out. Apparently, he was entering my brother's bedroom at the time (Dede told me the following morning).

Besides, I really didn't want to gossip. My brother started to lead the conversation in that direction. "Auntie Ratna never came to the storytelling program." Part of me was cheering. "She only like him physically, but doesn't really want to be part of his life! If she really likes him, she should be at the storytelling program for him." That part of me was encouraging my brother to speak ill of Sister Ratna.

I grabbed a pillow, covering my head. I tried to push away the thoughts and go to sleep (I was renting a flat close to N.U.S now, next to Anne's flat).

* * *

From that day on, my brother kindly took the initiative to do something about that sensitive issue. No, not by talking trash about Sister Ratna. I tried to avoid talking about her actually. Dede just promised me that he would report to me what was happening at home. Unfortunately, the report was getting more and more painful for me to hear.

"Sister Tania, yesterday Uncle Danar and Auntie Ratna went to the bridal shop to measure her dress." I thought to myself, *I was instantly measuring the pain in my heart.*

"They already decided where they're going to held the wedding, Sister Tania!" I moaned silently, *I have no place at all in my heart where I could feel happy again.*

"Yesterday Auntie Ratna said that they plan to go on a honeymoon for two weeks!" Yes, *and I was going to suffer for months because of this bitter reality.*

"Auntie Ratna decided to move to Uncle Danar's house after they got married." O God, *how could I stay in that house even only for one day when returning home later on and see them making out?*

"Kids from the storytelling program will accompany Auntie Ratna when she walks down the aisle. Thus, the reception hall will be filled with children wearing a white dress with wings holding a stick." My God, *that was the very idea for a wedding celebration I often discussed with Anne.*

"Catering was already booked. Peking duck is on the menu. Auntie Ratna said it's special for me. Don't be mad at me, okay, I really didn't say anything when they were discussing the menu." I looked down staring at the laptop screen, bemoaning the special menu.

"Invitation has been made. They took pre-wedding pictures at home. Uncle Danar shot the pictures himself. I pretended to be busy in my room when they were taking pictures. I didn't want to be ordered around." Taking pictures using a self-timer camera? We did that too when we took pictures together in front of the bookstore.

"Sister Tania, Auntie Ratna asked when are you going to be home? She said you could go home a week before the wedding so you could help out. She said she wants you to be her bridesmaid."

I bit my lip, vaguely staring out the glass window of my flat. It was raining outside. The rainy season was just started in Singapore.

A bridesmaid? That would be like stabbing a knife into my heart in front of many people.

* * *

Evidently, issue concerning whether I would go home or not became a big problem. Two weeks before the wedding, I was beating the drum war: *I would not return home*. He and Sister Ratna asked me about it repeatedly via email and chat. I just gave them a short answer: *I'm busy. Sorry won't be able to go home*.

They asked me repeatedly and I repeatedly gave them the same answer.

A week before the wedding, *he* decided to call directly to Singapore. Not via email. Not via online chatting. *He* called me at my rental flat.

"You really can't go home?"

I was silent. I felt so depressed I lost for words just listening to his voice when I picked up the phone. Even more so now when I heard that question.

"I... I have a matriculation exam."

He chuckled.

"Come on, don't lie to me. Since when Tania the smart needs a matriculation exam before college? Unless of course if you're actually going to teach in that matriculation class."

"I... I really can't go home. Sorry!"

A pause.

"Can you at least go home for one day? I'll pay for the ticket. You could set off with an early morning flight, and if you really in a hurry, you could return in the afternoon. You can do that, can't you?"

Squeezing the tip of a handkerchief, I bit my lip.

"Hello, Tania. Are you listening?"

"Yes. But I really can't go home." My words hung in air.

Anne, who had returned to Singapore and happened to be visiting my flat, also fell silent in a chair in the corner. She didn't speak Malay very well, but she understood the conversation I was having. And she knew exactly who I was talking to, and about what.

On the other end of the phone, I heard *him* took a deep breath. A very long one. I groaned. *Of course I have made him disappointed.* Oh my God, didn't I promise to myself to always follow *his* words?

"Tania, whether or not you come to the event next week will surely make a big difference."

I was speechless, looking down.

"A very big difference. You can't even imagine what could happen if you don't come, Tania." *His* voice was hoarse.

Unfortunately, I didn't hear that sentence. I was so upset and felt defeated that my ears were numbed. Oh, Mother, please let me cry. *I want to cry for him.... Please let me cry.*

"But if you really can't come..."

Silent. *He* sighed.

"Anyway, we're still have another week. You still have time to change your mind."

He gently changed the subject. Asking how I was doing (I replied hoarsely, *fine*). Asking about my flat (I answered with a more hoarse voice, *fine*). Passing on regards from my brother and Sister Ratna (I wasn't able to answer anymore; not that I hated to hear Sister Ratna's name, but my voice was shaking so bad that *he* would know that I was fighting back my tears).

When the phone call ended, I immediately ran to my bed, burying my head in the pillow, crying profusely, really crying.

I was nineteen years old. My brother was fourteen. And *he* was thirty three. I cried for the first time in six years. Since Mother died. Since the most difficult three years of my life. Since a thumbtacks pricked my foot and *he* wrapped my foot with a white handkerchief which I was holding now. Since Mother made me promise not to cry whatever I had to face in life, no matter how hard or difficult it might be.

I cried for *him*. I felt defeated.

* * *

"Do you know that I always envy you, Tania? Everytime they see your happy face, our classmates will be happy too. I never imagined to have a friend with ability to influence people like you, Tania. And you know, when I see you crying, I can feel the pain in my heart too." Anne hugged me. Her voice was weak. She lifted my head from the pillow and pulled me up to a sitting position.

We hugged each other in silence.

"Your decision not to go home, is it final?" Anne asked when I stopped sobbing.

I didn't shake my head, but I didn't nod either.

"Do you still want to tell him your feelings, Tania?" Anne asked again.

I turned to look at her. *What for?* If even my brother understood all of these, and *he* was much more mature and knowledgeable, *he* would certainly understand everything very well. And what was the answer to that understanding? *He* decided to marry Sister Ratna. His feelings was obvious, was it not?

However, Anne expressed a different opinion that night.

"I was probably wrong. Yes, I was wrong. You're right, Tania. You have the right to tell him. Whether he already know or not, whether he'll accept it or not, whether he'll be angry or not, whether he'll hate you or not, you have the right to tell him, honey. Your rights is much bigger than his, even compared with your obligation to make sure the wedding goes smoothly." Anne wrapped her arm around my shoulders, whispering weakly.

I turned to Anne, completely baffled by her statement.

"You have the right to tell him, Tania."

It's true what people say, principles of life are extremely flexible. Whether we realize it or not, those principles will always change based on the situation we're facing in front of us. And Anne instantly changed her mind at the sight of her best friend who was dying because of her feelings.



8.50 p.m.: The Painful Days!

ANNOUNCEMENT.

I hear a female employee announcing something from the information desk. The largest bookstore in the city is closing in ten minutes. She thanks the customers for their visit, and hopes they will come back again tomorrow.

I sigh, this is the last night before this evening affair has to end. That means I will not be back tomorrow. I will not be able to meet the announcer's demand.

Whatever happens tonight, I have to continue my life. And perhaps I will never come back to this city again.

Outside, the rain finally subsides. Leaving only droplets of water dripping from the trees along the street. Leaving drops of water on the tip of umbrellas that are still open but refusing to trickle down. A tear is forming in my eye. In spite of myself, my

eyes are wet. Ah, remembering all of this really tears my whole being apart.

A guy (with his girlfriend) comes out from the photo shop across the street carrying a large brown envelope. It must be A0 size photos, perhaps they will be displayed along the red carpet.

The guy with the girlfriend in hijab walk out of the photocopy kiosk, arm in arm. They put on their helmets (at one point he helped his girlfriend fastening the chin strap), fold their raincoats neatly, store them in the trunk, then the motorcycle is roaring leaving the photocopy kiosks behind.

The couple who just got off of the red public transportation and the other couple who drove a car which was parked across the street have left a few minutes ago. The only people left are just a few employees who are now busy straightening up the place. They're getting ready to go home! Just like the employees in the bookstore where I'm standing.

Going home.

* * *

The word "going home" really became important the last week before the wedding. At the time, I didn't even realize that for *him*, the word "going home" meant so much more than the word "marriage" itself. Unfortunately, I just found out about it in the past two weeks, which resulting in me standing in silence on the second floor of this city's largest bookstore, remembering everything.

You know, three days before the wedding day, or four days after *he* called me, someone came to my rental flat. Anne was happened to be there (she was always with me during those painful days; she is indeed a friend who I can always count on).

That someone was Sister Ratna.

I was surprised when I opened the door. Sister Ratna was standing there, smiling from ear to ear. I stammered a bit as I invited her to come in. She gave me a warm and friendly hug like a good friend. Ah, she had indeed considered me as a friend, not a little girl anymore.

"Wow, your room is very cozy, Tania." She looked around, fascinated. I grinned a bit.

I introduced her to Anne. Anne smiled and hugged her. Anne looked at me. That was to ask whether she still needed there. Of course, Anne had to remain there (I had no idea at all what Sister Ratna was going to discuss with me).

We exchanged pleasantries briefly about Sister Ratna's journey. What a surprise, I commented about her arrival, while trying to sound and look as if I was really excited to see her.

"But you surprised us too when you came home unannounced." Sister Ratna smiled cheerfully.

We talked about my brother, about *him*, then we finally reached the all-important issue in our conversation.

"Can you come home? Please?" Sister Ratna touched my hand, smiling.

I didn't know what to say. I really was not able to look at those hopeful eyes. I shook my head.

Sister Ratna sighed, smiling. (Anne remained silent in a chair in the corner of the room).

“You know, Tania. You guys are the only family Danar has. The most important part of his life over the past six years. You know, I even have to fight hard to compete with you guys to get his attention. Really.” Sister Ratna smiled.

I grinned, smiled a bit.

Dede and I knew that we are the only family *he* has. *He* has no one since he was a child. That explains why *he* is always nice to children. That explains *his* friendly appearance and *his* cheerful laughter when *he* is around children.

He was orphaned as a baby (no one knew who his parents was). He struggled to survive on the streets, just like we did; his experience was perhaps more painful because no one offered to help him. Little by little, he made better of himself, and finally managed to reach the path of success. Alone. I knew how hard it must have been for him had to go to school while working. Later, when I'm in good mood, I might tell you more about this part. Unquestionably, my bad memories being a street kid for three years was actually part of his life too.

Amazingly, *he* manages to make all those bad experience reflected in his friendly face. *His* sincere laughter, *his* kindness to children, *his* love to share. None of those bad experience left any sorrow in him. Yes, I'm really just following the footprints *he* has left behind. I only imitate *him*.

“You know, Tania,” Sister Ratna sighed restlessly. “These last three days Danar has changed a lot. I don't know why. I have no

idea at all. But I think it might be something to do with your decision not to go home, Tania. I fear that he suddenly decided to do something bizarre or something. For example like, ah, I don't know! I'm scared."

I hurriedly shook my head hard. No, it was not because I decided not to go home. How could it be?

"Can you go home for a little while?" Sister Ratna asked again more gently. I was still shaking my head.

"I really can't, Sister Ratna. I'm sorry," I replied quietly.

Sister Ratna paused, smiling. She looked disappointed.

"If you can't go home, will you persuade him to at least be excited about all this? Please help your sister, Tania. Help me to reassure him that our decision to get married is good. I don't want him to regret many things later on. You know, men always have a commitment problem in the final days before the wedding takes place. I'm afraid...." Sister Ratna smiled nervously.

I smiled back. I felt miserable. I didn't expect to hear that sentence: *help Sister Ratna?*

"The only person who could persuade him of course is only you, Tania. We won't hand over such important matter to Dede, right?" Sister Ratna chuckled, clutching my arm.

There was not the slightest hostility in her eyes. Sister Ratna hugged me again. I didn't see any hatred in her face. She was sincere. O God, I bit my lip. We then talked about something else. I spent more time listening to her as she talked about her wedding dress, the Peking duck menu, their pre-wedding pictures, and so forth.

Sister Ratna joined us for lunch at the flat cafeteria and returned to Changi Airport in the afternoon. She smiled gently, resisting my offer to take her to the airport.

“No need, my dear, I’ve disrupted your day already. Let me go home alone.” She smiled and hugged me.

“Oo....your pendant is very beautiful.” Sister Ratna touched my pendant (for some reason the necklace just slipped out from underneath my white t-shirt).

“*T. T for Tania, isn’t it? This, this is exactly the same... like the one Danar has.... D!*” That was all she said before climbing into her taxi. But the remark sounded odd compared to her friendly remarks earlier.

I just waved weakly, hastily inserting back the pendant underneath my t-shirt.

* * *

“I don’t think that celebrity girl consider you as her enemy, Tania. In fact, she asked for your help,” Anne said flatly in the flat, a few minutes after Sister Ratna left.

I didn’t say anything. Sister Ratna did never consider me as a thorn in their relationship. Perhaps because she didn’t know. Or rather (which I didn’t want to admit) maybe because she was much more mature than I was in this matter.

“What should I do?” I looked at Anne.

Anne grinned a little, shrugged, shook her head. The affair

turned into a more complicated matter now. Help *him* to be excited about the wedding? How?

"I can't just call *him* and ask why *he* suddenly changed. *He* would ask 'how do you know', and I can't possibly tell him that I heard it from Sister Ratna. Clearly, she came here without telling *him*."

Anne was still deep in her thoughts. Without saying a word, I stared at her.

"What about this, Tania? Maybe you could just tell them that you finally decided to go home. Despite the fact that you're not going, that you're lying, but I think it might make a huge difference in this regard. Although in the end, they of course will be disappointed when the wedding is over and you never came. A little lie isn't a big deal, is it?" Anne grinned when she said this.

I swallowed hard. That wasn't the problem. It wasn't about whether I lied or not. The problem was very clear, I wanted them to know that I didn't want them to get married. Saying that I would return home was like saying everything was okay.

But what about Sister Ratna's request earlier? Have my heart turned so evil that I intend to make their marriage fail? Didn't I remember that I was a nobody to *him*? I was just a little girl *he* picked up from the street, given a wonderful life, promised a good future. And now, what did I do to return the favor? Sulking, refusing to go home for no apparent reason!

They would think that something was wrong.

They would be worried.

But, I do have the right to tell him, don't I? Part of me was strongly defending myself. I did have the right to do it.

You forget what Anne has said. The other part of me strongly denied it. Anne did tell me that I have the right to tell him! No, you're only going to hurt yourself. Look, the marriage won't be canceled because of your childish behavior. You're just going to make yourself entangled in a more difficult situation because of your own assumptions, feelings, desires, dreams, and eventually you don't know which ones are real and which ones are not anymore.

If you really feel that you have the right to tell him, why don't you do it now? Send him an email, or send him a message via online chatting, or call him, or whatever! Ha ha, you're just afraid to face the reality, aren't you, Tania? Afraid of the answer? Afraid. That's what you really feel, Tania.

Coward! You just hope there will be a miracle falling from heaven. While waiting for the miracle, you're screwing up everything with your arrogant and childish behavior. You never deserve him. Not even close! You're still a little child who often sulk, jealous, and demanding!

Nothing more and nothing less.

I covered my face with both hands, fighting back tears listening to "accusations" in my head.

* * *

Two days passed and I managed to maintain the status quo.

There was no significant change in my heart. Since I didn't

have all the paradox behavior I have now at the time, there were no changes in my attitude or decision.

Everything seemed so slow. It was frightening. I was afraid to look at the calendar. I was afraid to look at the clock. However, slowly but surely, the clock was still ticking. No hand could stop it.

Oh, my God. Before I knew it, the time was almost here. Tomorrow morning at 09.00 o'clock, they were going to exchange their marriage vows. Tomorrow morning.

I was counting down the minutes as I felt the wound in my heart was widening. It was a really painful and sad countdown.

Anne didn't show up at all the next day. Her mother was sick in Kuala Lumpur, so she had to return home immediately. It reminded me of the time when my mother got sick. But all the worries, all these feelings I was experiencing was more painful than that time. The feeling was similar with the one I felt when Mother died. And now I felt like I was getting ready for another loss.

I couldn't sleep that night, just been sitting on the roof of my flat. It was a clear sky in Singapore. The lights on top of the buildings on Raffles Avenue lit up. The moon seems bigger from up there. It was a full moon. The stars filled the sky, just like the night of Mother's funeral. All this grief.

Leaves that have fallen never hated the wind.

Suddenly, I found myself sobbing. Crying.

Forgive me, Mother. This was the second time I cried. I was nineteen years old. I supposed to grow up carefree like other girls.

Instead, I was crying for feelings that I never asked for. I wasn't supposed to get caught up in all these feelings that holding me up.

I was not a *leaf*! And I never wanted to be a *leaf*! I never wanted this feeling, okay? It just appeared out of nowhere. It pierced my heart, then slowly growing like a sprout watered by rain. I really never wanted these feelings.

I love *him*. That was the only thing I feel.

Was it a sin that I love our angel? Was it wrong if in between *his* attention and *his* love for Mother, my brother, and myself, those feelings blossomed? I was not impulsive. The feeling emerged with good reason. From a child whose hair was braided in two. From a girl who had not quite grown up to someone who was so perfect. From a little girl who longed for a grown man to replace her father. From an innocent little girl to someone who was so charming.

And clearly, *he* was not the wind.

Mother, I love him. I love him so much....

* * *

The following morning at five o'clock my laptop was blinking. Five hours before the wedding took place.

dedetakmengerti: Are you okay?

I swallowed hard. Slowly, I approached the table and touched the laptop keys with a weak hand.

Tania: Fine.

dedetakmengerti: It's very crowded at home right now. The kids from the storytelling program are changing their clothes to fairy dresses. They're running around. Very noisy.

Tania:

(I didn't type anything, just hit 'enter'!)

dedetakmengerti: Are you okay?

Tania: I'm fine.

dedetakmengerti: It's not fun around here.

Tania:

(I didn't type anything)

dedetakmengerti: I don't feel like getting dressed. Everything is sucks, you know.

Tania:

(I didn't type a word, just hit 'enter'!)

dedetakmengerti: Are you okay?

Tania: I'm fine.

dedetakmengerti: Uncle Danar came out of his room with an odd expression on his face. I don't know. It was just really weird.

Tania:

(I didn't type anything.)

dedetakmengerti: Are you okay?

Tania: I'M FINE, DEDE!

dedetakmengerti:

(My brother signed out)

* * *

At 09.00 a.m., I lay on my bed, moaning and groaning, mourning my loss.

I refused to let the morning sunlight entering my room. I just let my room dark. I made a promise to myself not to cry again. I chose to continue living. They were exchanging their vows at this time. *He* was putting the diamond ring on Sister Ratna's finger.

There was nothing more I could do. I whispered Mother's name with every breath I took. I made a promise to her that I will fly like a leaf. Although the wound in my heart was still very tender.



9.00 p.m.: Life Must Go On, No Matter What

It's time for me to go home, or I'll be thrown out by the bookstore security guard. Employees have been busy cleaning up the place. One or two of them walk pass beside me.

Lazily, I pick up a random book: *8 God's Most Magnificent Creations!* I don't know the author.

I don't even know when I will have the chance to read it, if ever.

The book is my entrance fee for tonight. They have provided me a place to remember these painful memories from the past, so it's only appropriate for me to repay them by buying one or two books.

I walk towards the cashier near the escalator.

Some of the photocopy kiosks across the street have turned off their lights earlier, five minutes before nine o'clock. A small light

is still on inside the photo shop. Perhaps someone is working overtime, who knows doing what. The brightly lit food stalls are still crowded with customers. They will be open until late at night. One or two even open until early in the morning. The street is still brightly lit, though there's not much traffic anymore.

The cashier smiles, greeting me (she's the daughter of an employee who retired three years ago; she knows a lot about me from her father).

"It's a really good book, Sister Tania." The cashier gives me a friendly smile.

I nod (who cares, I will probably never read it anyway!). I take a deep breath. Tonight, everything has to end. Trying to move as steady as possible, I walk down the escalator. I keep walking to the parking lot in the basement toward my car. Dede's giant scale Lego he has brought with him earlier are still scattered on the back seat. I throw the book on top of his Lego.

At the time, I was twenty three years old. My brother was eighteen, and *he* was thirty seven. I only needed two and a half years to complete my bachelor degree with major in Commerce at N.U.S. My GPA was not one decimal less from the maximum grade point. It was perfect. The best in the history of the college. My name was carved on a plaque in the campus front yard. The dirty, smelly, dark-skinned little busker with matted curly hair from being in the sun all day had claimed her name there.

Too bad that *he* didn't come to my graduation. Why would *he* if he never contacted me again since the wedding.

Never!

I turn on the car (it's the same maker with the one he was driving when he picked me up at the airport during my school holiday in junior high). Ah, I always imitate everything *he* did.

I now work full-time at one of the brokerage firms in Singapore. It's the largest of its kind in Asia Pacific. We trade money in the amount that could cause a fever in regional economy of any country in Asia.

Despite the success, I have been going through life with a broken heart.

I've learned a lot from him. I managed to turn sadness into something useful. It didn't matter whether it's good or bad. It didn't matter anymore. Good or bad is relative, isn't it? Good for Sister Ratna, bad for me, right? It didn't matter that happiness has faded from my face this past four years. It didn't matter that my outlook in life has changed dramatically from Tania who always made Mother very proud. Tania who always made *him* proud.

Ah, it's all just nonsense.

Life must go on, no matter what.

* * *

What happened that morning you asked?

Well, the wedding took place as expected.

Nonsense!

There was no miracle like in those ancient fairy tales. And I just lay there on my bed, helpless.



9.02 p.m.: Time for Reconciliation!

My car is slowly entering the crowded street. The security guard in front of the bookstore raises his hand, saluting me. I smile a bit, waving back reluctantly.

I notice the male employee who greeted me on the second floor earlier waiting for a public transportation at the bus stop. He's a little embarrassed when he sees me passing by in front of him (the window of my car happened to be open).

No. I have absolutely no shame having feelings for someone who was way out of my reach. A little girl who didn't have anything falling in love with an *angel*. Ah, I don't care.

I accelerate and turn at a roundabout a few feet away.

* * *

As planned, *he* and Sister Ratna went on a honeymoon.

For months, I tried to transform myself.

Anne helped a lot to care for my wound. Dede did too. My brother was much more mature in this matter by now; do you still remember the poetry book *he* mentioned at Mother's grave? Well, my brother published his collection of poems about love a month after the wedding: "*Tell Mother I Miss Her!*"; and I cursed my brother, because the poems were not at all about his longing for Mother. It was more about me.

What I didn't know, an important incident occurred on the night before the wedding. An incident that made Dede send me a message via that annoying chatting early in the morning. Unfortunately, I just found out about it a month ago, or almost three years after the wedding. I just realized it when all the pieces of the puzzle came together. That was when I decided to resolve all matters tonight.

The day after the wedding, when they were departing for their honeymoon, I decided to occupy myself for the rest of the year. I had to keep myself busy. I thought that at least it would make me tired of thinking about all of this. And if I was tired of thinking, it would slowly go away. If I was a bit lucky, I might be able to forget it.

This matter was different than the one concerning Mother's death. How so? Well, since there were no traces of Mother in life when she was gone, I could move on relatively quickly. But on the other hand, *he* is still everywhere. In my chatting list (I can't possibly delete it, it'll just raise too many questions); in my email

address, in my phonebook (to be honest, I could delete this one if I wanted to, but I didn't.).

And more importantly, *he* is still here, in our city. Consequently, I decided not to go home. At least for the next one or two years. I didn't need to see anyone. My brother was the only one there, and Dede always gave me updates every day via the Internet (which in a sense was the same with meeting in person). Every night, Dede and I chatted online. We recalled fun moments we had together in the past. When I still had a good relationship with *him*. When everything was still wonderful.

I never tried to contact *him* again. Actually, that was only partly true, I was just reluctant to contact *him*. And for some reason, *he* never contacted me directly either. *He* always asked Dede to ask me how I was doing. *He* delivered his messages through my brother.

The way we communicate over the next two years was really strange. Something was not right.

Of four scenarios Anne had told me, I really had no idea which scenario would represent my relationship with *him* at the time. *He* was avoiding me, but *he* still routinely asked about me (not less frequent during the last days before the wedding).

The only thing was, everything was done through my brother.

Did *he* hate me? Who knows. It was impossible to hate someone but still diligently asked about her welfare, was it not? Or was there a new variant of hate in life? Was there a metamorphosed hate? A hypocritical hate?

I never did send the email acknowledging my feelings to *him*.

What for? Everything was clear. I was tired of thinking nonsense. I was tired of making assumptions. *He* certainly knew what I felt. *He* even probably knew every detail of it. The acknowledgment would just ruin everything. I didn't want to be a troublemaker sister who wanted to mess up her "brother's" marriage (Anne was again right about this; following her advice, I deleted the ten-paragraphs email).

Later on, I started to create better scenarios explaining the new pattern of our relationship. Scenarios that were free from prejudice, free from my humongous ego.

One: *he* knows I love him, but *he* was never really loved me. *He* has always loved me, but it's just love from a brother to his sister. Or, it's simply love from an angel to a child he had rescued from the street. *He* will always be proud of Tania who manages to make her own success.

When I refused to go home to attend their wedding, *he* felt that he has offended me somehow. *He* was unable to explain to me how I should change that feeling of love I have for him. *He* might also felt guilty about letting those feelings blossoming in my heart. Refusing to make the problem became more complicated, he's avoiding me.

Two: *he* knows I love him, but *he* was never really loved me. *He* understands very well that no one in this world could erase that feeling.

Having contact with me directly as *he* always did would create an opportunity to disrupt his happy marriage with Sister Ratna. There should be a clear distance between us. Having contact with

me directly would give me the opportunity to continue to cultivate that feeling. Feelings of guilt! Clearly, it's better to build a barrier and let everything resolves on its own.

Three: *he* knows I love him, but *he* was never really loved me. *He* thought that I needed a lot of time to understand the situation. Or, *he* thought that I was childish, jealous, and demanding. Having a contact with me would only create uncomfortable situations, and it would worsen our “brother-sister” relationship.

Isn't our relationship—because I had boycotted the wedding—already bad enough? There's no reason at all to add other nuisances to our circumstances.

Four: *he* knows I love him, but *he* was never really loved me.

And *he* hates me! Someone who was ungrateful! Someone who returned his kindness by refusing to return home on the most important day in his life. *He* did still ask about me through my brother, but it was more because *he* always felt responsible for my well-being. And obviously, I am his responsibility.

* * *

Indeed, there was no other scenarios that point to this: *he knows I loved him, and he loves me*. Anne was right. *His* feelings was as clear as stars in the sky. What other assumption did I have to support that hope? People who are in love indeed tend to link one thing with other things, looking for explanations to make

themselves happy. But I've made a decision to sort out which ones are real and which ones are only existed in my own ego dreams.

And it is really not that difficult, as long as I think rationally.
He never loved me. Never.

* * *

My life was running normal (at least I thought so). I decided to teach at matriculation class so I enroll myself in a program to become an assistant teacher. I opened a storytelling program at my flat. I started writing. I participated in various extracurricular programs. I joined various organizations. I even joined a capoeira class and participated in violin recitals. I was imitating most of those activities from him, but obviously, *he* wasn't the first to discover them, was he? Let's just say that I was imitating others before him.

I also started making pastries in my flat. I was gifted in this regard. My mother had taught me many things. Delicious traditional pastries with a variety of shapes. Dede had just kidding when he said Mother made more delicious pastries than me, obviously my pastries were just as good as Mother's.

I turned the flat pantry that had been untouched by other occupants, since all were female students and all were too lazy to cook, into a kitchen for my bakery. Anne exclaimed happily when I taught her how to make traditional pastries. Entering the second month, I made the bakery into a serious business. The savings from six years of scholarship plus the money *he* had sent

me was enough to rent a small shop in one corner of the street near the flat. I named the bakery “Mother”.

It was a stupid promise that I would only make pastries for *him*. Did he ever promise that he would only eat my pastries? No, right? I grinned a bit. Even your true love wouldn't make a promise like that.

My study ran smoothly. I enjoyed spending a lot of time on campus, besides taking care of my bakery business. There were many things I could do on campus. I met with many people. I met with many *problems*.

My appearance was also different. I cut my hair, very short. I color five strands of my hair in blue, forming an impressive silhouette. I changed, including my opinion about girls who color their hair. Who cares?

However, without realizing it, I slowly created many paradoxes in my life. Not in a serious terminology, but I often felt like standing on two opposite sides of the spectrum at the same time.

I opened a storytelling program, but my intention wasn't sincere and I had no desire for sharing.

I just wanted to start the program. Sometimes I even hated myself as to why I had to be there among those Chinese-looking children. I sincerely didn't like them. I really didn't understand why those two very different feelings suddenly emerged in my heart simultaneously.

I wanted to forget *him*, but I still always wore the pendant. I wanted to push away his images from my mind, yet I still keep his handkerchief and the picture of us together.

In my daily life, the paradoxes started to turn into something serious. I started turning to be a sly. I became slick like an eel. My mouth and my heart were not consistent anymore. I began to enjoy using my ability to influence others (ability that once praised by Anne), and I smiled with satisfaction seeing the results. I used methods that I would once consider inappropriate.

“You’re mean, Tania.” That was what Anne said when I was boycotting papers assigned by one of the smart ass professors in class. And the whole class follow my decision. Where would you find students refusing to do assignment from their professor?

“That annoying professor really deserved it.” I just smiled happily at Anne’s direction.

The professor gave in when arguing with me earlier that day. Papers were useless. She was supposed to improve her teaching. And the forty-something bossy woman walked out of the room with a crumpled face. For the umpteenth time, I argued with a professor. I wasn’t concerned at all that they might gave me poor grades in the final. My written exams had always been perfect. To my knowledge, it’s not a common practice in Singapore to fabricate grades. Grades are always evaluated in a transparent and objective way.

Many changes happened in that first year. I wasn’t sure whether it was good or bad. Only when talking to my brother I felt that everything seems to be back to normal again. Chatting online with him at night greatly eased the level of stress I had been having all day, or at the very least, it helped me make peace with the past. I felt that I still have a place to return to.

By this time, I was twenty years old. My brother was fifteen, just starting high school. *His age?* I didn't care. *I have forgotten him.*

Today was my birthday. There was no celebration. What for? I was tired of such cheap romance. Useless. Nonsense.

jallaludinrumi: Happy birthday, dear sister. :-)

Tania: Thanks.

jallaludinrumi: Sorry can't send you presents. Broke! :-p

Tania: No problem.

jallaludinrumi: Did you celebrate your birthday?

Tania: No.

jallaludinrumi: But, don't you have a bakery? Why didn't you celebrate it there?

Tania: :-)

(A pause, the cursor was blinking.)

jallaludinrumi: I miss you. Really miss you! >: D <

Tania: Me too.

jallaludinrumi: I went to Mother's grave today.

Tania:

(I didn't type anything, just hit 'enter'.)

jallaludinrumi: I told Mother you have a birthday today. I prayed there.

Wish Mother be happy in heaven.

Tania:

(I didn't type anything; I was very moved)

jallaludinrumi: Mother sent her regards: *Wish you a long life. Wish you always be happy. Wish you be healthy.*

My eyes filled with tears. This was that pleasant moment I always longed for. Remembering happy moments in the past when our life was still free of suspicion. I hated all the paradoxes in my life now. At my age, I supposed to still be carefree.

Tania:

(I didn't type anything.)

jallaludinrumi: Are you in good health?

Tania: Yes.

jallaludinrumi: Can't you go home?

Tania: I can't.

jallaludinrumi: Can't you set aside one or two days for a vacation?

Tania: I can't.

jallaludinrumi: It's been so quiet here.

Tania: Quiet?

jallaludinrumi: Uncle Danar and Auntie Ratna have moved away.

I swallowed hard. I was shocked. Why? Why didn't anyone tell me this before?

Tania: Since when?

jallaludinrumi: Two weeks ago. They took everything with them. The house is empty now. Quiet. Can't you go home?

I gave it a thought for a moment. Going home? I didn't think so. I would not be able to return, even though they were not there anymore. Too many wounds had to be opened with my return.

Tania: What about you coming to Singapore? I'll buy you the ticket. It's going to be a long holiday next week.

jallaludinrumi: That'll be great! Are you serious?

My brother quickly replied.

Tania: Yes.

jallaludinrumi: But I need to tell Uncle Danar first, don't I?

I was stunned. Why?

Tania: No. You don't need to tell him. Just leave.

I didn't have any intention behind the "you don't need to tell him" statement. I just thought that my brother was a grown-up now and leaving the house without telling him would not be a big deal. I had my own money. Anyway, by moving away, it certainly looks like he really wanted to make the distance between us clearer.

Therefore, it might be better if *he* didn't know about Dede going to Singapore. That was my only reason.

My brother signed out after sending a hugging emoticon ten times.

* * *

A week later, Dede came to Singapore.

I picked him up at the airport. He was now about the same height with me. Diligently playing basketball, he was robust. Although never won in any competitions, the basketball drills helped neutralizing his diet (being a human garbage disposal who eat everything).

"Wow, you have a colorful hair now," my brother commented casually. He was carrying a full backpack, although he would only be away for two days.

"Does it look bad?" I glared at him.

"No. It's cool!" Liar. I knew when my brother was lying; his eyes would blink three times.

"I mean, is it appropriate for you to look like my friends at school? I always wanted to throw up everytime I saw them. Teenage girls, you know." His voice began to falter. My brother was grinning and my eyes got bigger, glaring at him.

"Oh, Sister Miranti asked me to bring some pastries for you. And she wants you to send her pastries from your store here. She said it's for a comparative study between countries." My brother chuckled.

I decided not to hit his head. Apparently, his backpack was packed with pastries. Miranti was the person who took over Mother's pastry business. A comparative study? I grinned, Miranti was clever finding the term. We continued walking out of the arrival terminal.

Topic about girls at Dede's school became the major topic of our conversation all the way to my flat. I often made fun of him (momentarily it helped me forget about many things, especially the painful feelings in my heart). My brother glared at me many times while commenting "mean". I just couldn't help it, you know. Who told Dede to tell me about it anyway. It had been too long I had not teased my little brother. The taxi driver, who was 100% Indian, pouting. He didn't understand a word we were saying.

As we were talking, it got me thinking about many things. One, my brother was right, I almost graduated from college, I shouldn't style my hair this tacky. Two, my brother's life turned out to be "normal". Meaning, his days at high school didn't full of cheesy puppy love romance like what I had experienced in high school.

I didn't think that my brother should be embarrassed by it all, don't you think? For an amateur poet like Dede, being involved in a cheesy love like that could be a great inspiration. But, in a way, that was the problem. In terms of feelings, often times people are much better in "writing" and "telling other people" about it than when "practicing" it themselves in the field.

My brother was grinning angrily when he found out that the occupants in my flat were all girls. My unit actually had a living room (my brother could sleep there), a bedroom, a small kitchen,

and a reading room. But my brother glared at me when he said, "How am I supposed to get in and out of the building if all the occupants are girls?" And Anne who came to my flat to greet him just laughed.

"You're really handsome, honey. I don't think the girls would mind seeing you around." Anne was like getting a new sandsack, teasing my brother.

Grumbling, Dede distanced himself from her like people who were afraid of contracting bird flu. Anne was just joking of course. Although physically he looked more mature, Dede was clearly still a teenager.

The problem was, what my brother said was true. Dede was the only male there so he would attract the attention of girls when walking through the hallway or when he was in the elevator. I just grinned watching the way my fellow inhabitants looking at my brother, and with a thin smile I mumbled to them, "Let me introduce you to my brother."

Dede cursed softly, "Why do I need to be introduced to them anyway?"

* * *

We spent the first day at the bakery. Dede could not believe that I drew up the menu and the recipe myself (with the help of five employees in the kitchen). The recipe was similar to the ones Mother had, only the form has been tailored to people's needs in Singapore.

"Delicious, isn't it?" I grinned, staring at Dede.

"Not bad. But the pastries Mother made were still better."

I really flicked my brother's head. The last time we ate Mother's pastries was at least seven years ago. How could Dede still be able to compare the taste? My brother just glared at me, his mouth was full with sticky rice.

The comparative study was quite useful. I stored the samples Miranti had sent me in the kitchen. Later on I might be able to try one or two (the ones suited with the taste of the people here, but it seems that Miranti had already picked out suitable pastries for me).

We spent the night hunting for Lego in one of the shopping centers on Orchard Road. I had to repeatedly remind Dede that my money was limited (it wasn't like *him* who could buy us anything; I was still a student). Dede just replied, "Relax, relax, I know better." And he came home with two large plastic bags of Lego an hour and a half later. My beloved brother really *knew better*.

We didn't talk about anything serious all day. Topic about *him* and Sister Ratna was not mentioned at all. I was still fighting the urge to ask about *him* (though many times the question was already at the tip of my tongue). And my brother knew better not to start. Why should he spoil a pleasant holiday by mentioning about the sensitive issue.

* * *

The next morning on Sunday, Anne and I spent half the day at the storytelling program. We used one of the storage rooms in our flat building. A few months ago, we moved all the stuffs that we didn't need from there and turned it into a comfortable room for a storytelling program.

We started with about thirty books, but then fellow residents who heard about our storytelling program started to donate books, though still reluctant to participate in the program itself. Now the storage room looked more comfortable than any good elementary school library. Plus, we had better selection of books too.

Anne has been the only one telling the story for the past three months. I was not too excited anymore with the program, even though there were many more kids came to join. We had about thirty children that day. All of them appeared to be Indo-Malay and they were all well-dressed. I just sat in a an octopus-shaped chair in a corner of the room, watching.

There was no telling what my brother was thinking when he suddenly decided to volunteer telling a story. Anne smiled, happily invited him, "Now, guys, our handsome brother from Indonesia here will tell you a story. He's really good at telling stories. You're going to like it." Ignoring Anne's comment, my brother immediately took over her position. The kids shouted cheerfully to greet my brother, expecting him to be a really good storyteller.

I just grinned, I was sure they would be disappointed. Dede was not good at telling stories at all. He often spoke in an

incomprehensible way. He frequently talked to himself and rarely involving his listeners while he was busy talking.

However, a moment later I was completely amazed. My God, I felt like seeing *him* telling a story. The kids who were rowdy earlier suddenly felt silent, mesmerized. Anne, who couldn't help herself to stop smiling, now took notice and listened to my brother. I could tell that by now, she appreciated my brother more.

The program was completed at exactly twelve noon, just like the storytelling program *he* had in our city back in Indonesia. We had lunch in a restaurant near our flat.

Now Anne talked to Dede in a much more respectful way, dropping comments about teenage behavior and such. I grinned.

"You're good at telling stories. Much better than Tania."

I tossed a bundle of kleenex at Anne.

Dede grinned, looking at me (his look said: *that's why you shouldn't underestimate others*), and looking at Anne (*that's why you shouldn't make fun of others*).

"Where did you learn it?" Anne asked, trying to be friendly.

"Uncle Danar."

My brother unconsciously mentioned *his* name.

I swallowed hard. Dede glanced at me, fell silent. I could tell that he felt guilty. Anne understood the situation. The three of us didn't say anything for a while, then we talked about something else. As usual, my brother was great at changing the course of our conversation, forgetting the name he had just mentioned.

We headed to Chinatown in the evening. The place has become my favorite place to eat with the other fellow residents of the flat. Besides, the distance is not too far from our flat.

Dede ordered the largest duck ("Without the tail please."). I grinned at him, trying not to laugh.

"They say that's the most delicious part!" I said.

My brother laughed.

We laughed a lot that night. Although not intended, we ended up talking about the past. We recalled the time when Dede and I working the streets being a busker ten years ago, when Dede sulked at the bus terminal, when he was strangled by a drunken thug.

"I wonder where he is now." My brother said, pretending to care. "He must have become a chairman by now. The chairman of thugs," my brother said like a smart ass, before I could answer.

We laughed again.

We talked about Mother who often sick. I talked about Father (Dede was only three years old when Father died, so he didn't remember much), about the cardboard shack, and of course it was only a matter of time before the session of recalling the past reached the part about *him*.

The thumbtack.

We were both silent. My brother pretended to be busy cleaning the duck bones in front of him. "Do you want to order

more?" I tried to change the subject. My brother slightly shook his head. Silent. Quiet.

I looked at the tail of *barongsai* at one of the temples. Bright red. *All was just memories of the past.*

"How's Uncle Danar?" Sooner or later I would certainly ask about him, might as well get it over with as soon as possible.

To be honest, I had been more relax with my feelings. I had been much calmer. It was still troublesome recalling and talking about it, but it didn't mean anything anymore to me. In other words, I truly understand by now that there was nothing more I could do, right? Rather than hurting myself, I better of turning the spirit of the past into something positive, regardless of whether it was good or bad.

My brother raised his head, nodded.

"He's fine."

"When did the last time you see him?"

"Two weeks ago. At home. He had a chance to take a look at the storytelling program."

"Ah yes, is it just you who always tells the stories now?"

Dede nodded. He paused for a moment.

"How's Sister Ratna?"

That was really a pleasantries question. In contrast to *him* who was reluctant to ask questions directly to me via email or chatting, Sister Ratna didn't change one bit. She acted the same as before they were married. She remained diligent in sending email once a month. She told me about many things, except about their decision to move out and about *him*. From the

beginning, Sister Ratna never mentioned anything about *him* on her emails. Her emails were always like an email between friends. For the most part we were just discussing about girls' stuff.

In the first months I was just answering those emails with short responses. Now that they were married, it didn't feel right if I just asked about *him* but didn't ask about his wife. Hence, although I knew how Sister Ratna was doing, I still asked about her to my brother.

"She's fine." Unfortunately, Dede's expression was not that as people would usually show when they said someone was "fine".

I cast a glance in my brother's direction sharply, demanding an explanation. Dede shrugged (*what?*). I sighed. Whatever. Even if Sister Ratna was not fine, it wasn't really my problem.

We were quiet again for a while.

"You know, Anne, here, in this restaurant Brother Danar and Sister Ratna told us they were going to get married." I grinned as I said this. Anyway, it was time to appreciate this place as a place of good memories and not the other way around. The good part of me smiled in relief at my casual statement.

Dede looked up, surprised. He didn't expect I would say that. I just smiled at my brother. *Your sister has changed.*

"Yes, on the day of my high school graduation. After the ceremony in the auditorium that afternoon, we had dinner here in the evening.... Sister Ratna said she wanted to prove what Dede has said. What did you say anyway?" I looked at my brother, grinning.

Dede grinned as he finished eating the last piece of duck meat in front of him.

“I didn’t say anything.”

“Liar. Did you pull a trick on her?”

Dede laughed.

“Not really. I just told her exactly what you said earlier, the tail is the most delicious part of Peking duck dishes in Chinatown, and apparently, she was curious.”

I laughed.

See, recalling all those feelings were not as hard as you had imagined. Again, I smiled to myself in relief.

* * *

The following day, my brother flew home to Jakarta with an early morning flight.

We drove him to the airport. Anne came along still with the intention to make up for her mockery and insults this past couple days.

Not only did I send a small box of pastries for a ‘comparative study’ for Miranti, I also gave Dede a large box of my best pastries to be given to *him* and Sister Ratna. Anne was excited with what I was doing (“You’re doing the right thing, Tania.”).

My brother just looked at me flatly when I said, “Send my regards to Uncle Danar and Sister Ratna.”

That was a new phase in the development of my feelings to *him*. A beautiful phase of acceptance. However, my temperament

immediately changed the next day, both on campus and in my everyday life. There were various paradoxes in my behavior. Getting more sadistic, I added more victims to the list of people whom I managed to insult, including those flirtatious Indo-Malay-looking Singaporean boys who tried to woo me.

Racist? Who cares.



9.06 p.m.: Going Home!

My car slowly passes Miranti's pastry shop. The store—like other shops along Margonda Street—is closed. The light on her business sign is still on. It looks cool among the other stores.

Miranti is very nice. She decided to keep Mother's name for her bakery "WH Bakery", even though 100% ownership of the shop is hers. She even puts aside a big chunk of the income from the bakery every month for Dede. "To pay for the royalty and everything else. Please, you have to agree!" She persuaded me furiously in her email to allow Dede to receive the transfer money.

Miranti is really a nice girl. She's one of kids from *his* storytelling program who inherits *his* quality and character, including *his* talent in business.

I sigh. Kindness doesn't always have to be in the form of something that can be seen or in the form of money and material stuff.

He shared many things with the kids by giving good examples. Children in his storytelling program could witness *his* kindness. And that, sometimes is far more valuable than money or material stuff.

I sigh, recalling his words, "*Kindness is like an airplane, Tania. When a plane was passing, windows would shake, TV screens would be affected, cell phones would be induced. Kindness spreads really fast, like resonance on a tuning fork.*"

The evening weather outside very quickly changes.

In just five minutes, the thick black cloud that has been hovering over the town of Depok since the afternoon has disappeared who knows where. One by one, stars begin to appear timidly. They are overshadowed by the presence of a beautiful full moon.

I smile.

In case our conversation ends badly later on tonight, at least the sky looks very beautiful tonight. I hope it would at least ease up my pain.

* * *

In the second year as a student at N.U.S, I decided to begin to open up and make friends with the guys on campus. And that was good news for those impulsive guys, except for Jhony Chan, whose name was already in my blacklist forever. There was no telling what would happen if he happened to be the only male left on the planet.

Anne was once again pleased with the change in my behavior, although she still often complained, claiming that she didn't understand my actions.

"Tania, you decided to open your heart, but then you repeatedly refused their invitations for dinner. And when you agreed to join them for dinner, you didn't show up. I don't get it. What the hell do you want?"

"Everything is a process, isn't it? And none of them are willing to be patient with the process. It's up to me whether I will come or not. Am I not allowed to cancel a date?"

Actually, a better explanation would be, I changed my mind so many times. Everything became absurd. It wasn't that I was doubtful or was not able to make up my mind, but because that was the nature of my bad behavior at the time, those various paradoxes I told you earlier. I would say "yes" but I mean "no". I would say "no" but I mean "yes". Sometimes the difference between the two was not clear anymore.

Anne often looked at me with a worried look in her eyes.

So far the only close male friend I had was Adi, a friend since we both received our scholarship from ASEAN back in Indonesia. He was somewhat different from the other guys who approached me. Adi understood my contradictory behavior much better than others. Or, it could be just that he would accept whatever I did.

Adi was also very patient with all the process. He knew better not to go too far. We were just close friends really, and it had been quite fun for me. Adi could be a good driver, a delivery man

for my pastry business, a gofer to make copies of my lecture materials, and various other functions.

“You’re cruel, Tania.” Anne used to complain to me.

But, Adi seemed fine with all of these. He even looked happy. I didn’t see anything wrong with the arrangement since he always volunteered himself to do all these outrageous tasks.

* * *

Six months later, I was twenty one years old. My brother was sixteen. *He* was thirty five (Ah, now I could remember his age with ease).

When I managed to make myself more calm, I decided to return to our city. I missed my mother. Besides, it was the eighth anniversary of her death so I wanted to visit Mother’s grave. My brother and I had agreed to make the day special to commemorate Mother. Dede was very happy to hear the news. He excitedly answered my emails and messages about my homecoming.

I had not yet told *him* or Sister Ratna. I was reluctant to do that. They would know about it sooner or later anyway.

When he found about my return to Jakarta, Adi decided to come along. I didn’t mind it at all. I would at least have someone to help me carry my luggage. I even decided to bring home more luggage when I found out that Adi decided to go home with me.

I didn’t have to bother to look for a taxi upon arrival at Jakarta airport. Adi’s wealthy family always came to pick him up at the airport. That morning, upon arriving at the airport, Adi insisted

to take me home first. I grinned happily at the entourage of Adi's family members who huddled together inside their luxury car. "Suck it up, people!" I thought to myself. Their house was located at the opposite direction than mine. One was going to Mars while the other going to Jupiter. Adi's family, especially his mother, swallowed hard. Her face said: *"Who does this this bossy young woman think she is intervening our dear son's life."*

I ignored them, decided to sleep the whole way to my house.

"Who is he?" That was the only question Dede asked me when he met with Adi at home.

I just replied shortly, "A friend." I then reminded Dede that he had certainly met Adi before at my seventeen birthday while Adi had hurriedly excused himself to go home. His family refused to get off of the car. They looked very annoyed waiting in the car.

"I do remember him. But what I want to know is, what's your relationship to him now?" My brother clarified his question.

I just said flatly once again, "A friend. He just helped me to take me home from the airport. You could say he's some sort of a porter. Nothing more, nothing less. He won't be coming here again!"

I was dead wrong. As it turned out, Adi came to my house many times the following days. Honestly, I didn't really like talking to Adi, but because he and my brother were both like to play Lego and basketball, plus they were equally bad at playing basketball, I let Adi roaming around freely at my house. He might be good for something.

Indeed, that was a good decision in my part.

For whatever reason, *he* came to the house that afternoon.

I was relaxing, reading a book on the back porch. I sat in a rattan chair with big pillows as a cushion, staring at bougainvillea trees that were in full bloom.

Dede and Adi were playing basketball. Adi had been staying at the house since yesterday, sleeping in Dede's bedroom. It was a quiet morning. We wasn't aware at all when *he* came. *His* car slowly entered the front yard.

He was wearing a blue long sleeve shirt. *He* walked toward the thumping sound on the yard beside the house, said hello to my little brother, and gazed at Adi with surprised.

"Oh, this is Brother Adi, Sister Tania's friend."

He was stunned at this.

"Tania?"

Dede swallowed hard, pondering; then Sister Tania didn't tell Uncle Danar that she was home now.

"Yes, Sister Tania. She's over there, on the back porch." Dede pointed stiffly.

Adi moved closer to shake *his* hand, but *he* didn't pay attention to Adi, hurriedly walked toward the backyard. The fact was, *he* didn't see Adi reached out to shake *his* hand. Adi just looked at *him* awkwardly; luckily, Adi had accustomed to get treated like that by me.

I was reading the sentence: "*Hello, hello, it's me, Picasso, I sent you a beep, and I'm brave. But you should know that I'm not asking*

for anything from you,” when the voice that I recognized very well greeted me awkwardly.

“Tania?”

I had not seen *him* in two years.

Two very long years.

Let alone seeing *him* in person, we didn’t even communicate to each other through a computer screen. Two years I avoided *him*, even though I still miss *him*. Two years I didn’t know what *his* opinion on my bad behavior when *he* got married. Two years.

The book I was reading slipped off my hands. Oh, my God! In the back of my mind, I knew that sooner or later we will definitely meet, but I didn’t expect it was going to be this soon; I had expected to see *him* during the eighth anniversary of my mother’s death at her grave; when I had prepared myself with enough courage to see *him* again.

My body stiffened. Very slowly, I turned around. My neck felt very heavy as if there was several pounds of load hung around it. My feet could barely move as though a million ropes was tied around my ankle.

He looked at me, smiling. The smile was awkward. Very awkward. I had never seen him smile that way.

I bit my lip. The face in front of me had not changed one bit. The lines in *his* face was thickened that made him look even more mature. The sparkle in *his* eyes seemed slightly faded. Fading? Ah, it might just because they were overshadowed by the surprise.

He stepped closer. I immediately thought to step back. Luckily at the last second, I managed to force my feet to stay.

He hugged me. It was an awkward hug.

I half-heartedly hugged him back, forcing a smile on my lips.

"When did you arrive?" *he* asked. The question was forced.

I swallowed hard.

My God, how quickly a distance was forming between us. It was as if the earth had opened up, making us stood ten steps away from each other with a gaping hole in the middle. I really wanted to greet *him* with a hug like what I did at Changi Airport a while back, or during my seventeenth birthday celebration.

I thought to myself, am I not still his "sister" and he is still "my brother"? I figured I could arrange a conversation like a good sister to her awesome brother.

A brother and a sister who had not seen each other for two years.

There was no telling what was on *his* mind or what *he* was feeling at that point. Judging from how uncomfortable *he* was meeting me, *he* might still not able to accept my absence at *his* wedding two years ago. I had to try to make this meeting a lot more pleasant.

"Sorry, what was your question again?" I swallowed hard, trying to remember the question.

He laughed a bit (that laughter!), "When did you arrive?"

"Two days ago.... another semester breaks, eighth anniversary of Mother's death. Homesick...." I tried to answer as casual as possible. My sentence was not in a logical order at all, let alone neat. But it helped a lot to break the ice.

He nodded.

"You should've told me. At least Ratna and I could prepare something."

"I was in a hurry.... Sorry."

He shook his head. *No worries.*

"We haven't seen each other for a long time, have we? Two years."

He took a deep breath. His facial expression changed. And suddenly I was touched! That was the expression when *he* came to pick me up at the airport during my school holiday in junior high. The expression at my seventeenth birthday, the expression when he was complimenting me. The expression when he greeted me on the bus, when he was cleaning the wound on my foot and wrapped my foot! That look on his face.

And all the boundaries that existed in my heart collapsed instantly. Whoever *he* is now. Whoever *he* is with now. Oh, my God, *he* is still my brother. *He* is still our angel.

A tear formed in my eye and began to trickle down. I should not be creating this distance. It was inappropriate for me to create such an uncomfortable situation between us. Anne was right, I was the one who should have sent him email or inviting him for a chat first. I should have started it because I was the one who had created all these problems.

Trembling, I stepped forward, then hugged *him* once again. This time, I did it wholeheartedly.

A hug from a sister who longed to see her brother. And the look in his face said very clearly what he was feeling: longing to

see his jealous and demanding little sister that he still loves very much.

"You really changed," *he* whispered.

I cried, apologizing for everything through my tears.

"Just look at you.... You're so mature and beautiful. Your mother would always be proud of you. I will always be proud of you." *He* let go of *his* arms, looking at me proudly, tearing up.

I whispered my gratitude. This meeting turned out to be easy.

* * *

We had lunch at home. Adi helped preparing the food. He was a great cook, and that was the point. Actually, that was not the only benefit of having Adi around. More importantly, his presence there made me feel like I could protect my fear and memories somehow.

I introduced Adi as a "close friend". Adi and Dede grinned for different reasons. Adi grinned happily, probably thinking that all his sacrifices had finally paid off; he finally moved up from a "friend" or a "gofer" to a "close friend"; while Dede looked puzzled when he was looking at me, (You're lying, Sister Tania). But the lie helped the conversation going at the dinner table.

I was able to ask about Sister Ratna more casually. *He* asked me about the two years we had no contact with each other. Our conversation was not as intimate as when we had dinner at China Town, but it was quite pleasant nevertheless.

At least I had a good laugh two or three times.

The following day, at exactly eight years after my mother's death, I, my brother, and Adi (who already came to the house early in the morning) went to Mother's grave. Dede brought four red roses with him. That has become his habit. Every week for the past eight years my brother has always come to Mother's grave. He always brought red roses. He would talk to Mother, sharing his experiences for the past week.

When he was just eight years old, my brother used to insist that he could talk to Mother. Now I really enjoy listening to my brother telling me about the results of their "conversation". Of course it didn't really happen. It didn't matter. My brother always has a talent to be a great "dreamer," meaning a poet. My brother knows it's all just his own imagination. But it's still fun, isn't it? It keeps us close to someone who is very precious, who we really love, Mother, who is far away. Such pretense is always delightful.

One rose for each person. One for me, one for *him*, one for Sister Ratna, and one for my brother. Adi? Clearly he was not a member of the family was Dede's explanation. Adi accepted Dede's rejection comfortably. Perhaps now there was a growing expectation in Adi's most irrational brain: "One day, sooner or later I'll be a member of the family anyway, and I could bring my own rose another day." I myself didn't care much about it.

He and Sister Ratna came one minute after we arrived. Mother's grave was really close to our house, only about sixteen hundred feet following the main road to the north.

If you continued heading north a few hundred feet more, you would reach the access road, arriving at the riverbank where the cardboard shack where we used to live was located. Someone had purchased the land, I had no idea who, and part of it had been transformed into a park.

But the linden tree was still standing there.

He was wearing a white shirt and a pair of faded jeans. Sister Ratna was also wearing a similar outfits. She smiled at me. I smiled at them, thinking to myself: what a great couple.

“Tania” Sister Ratna stepped closer to hug me. She was tearing up, deeply moved by the meeting. I decided to give her a sincere hug. After all, she has became part of the family, a “real sister.”

“I was surprised when a few days ago Danar told me that you’re here. Why didn’t you report it to me, Dede?” Sister Ratna let go of her arms. Her hand swept Dede’s spiky hair.

The one whose hair was touched dodged. Dede hated being hugged or when someone petted his hair, including me.

“I thought it’ll be a surprise. You surprised me too when you came to Singapore unannounced.” I smiled.

“Long time no see. Look at you, you’re even more beautiful now.” Sister Ratna praised me for the umpteenth time.

I smiled as I stepped aside so they could both moved closer to Mother’s grave.

That was when Sister Ratna saw Adi for the first time.

“Who’s this?”

That meant *he* didn't tell Sister Ratna. I swallowed hard. Why didn't *he* tell her?

I once again introduced Adi as a "close friend". The one being introduced smiled happily. Dede looked at me with a grin ("Liar!"). But my brother had hastily stepped forward to give the remaining roses to both of them.

Being the "guard" of Mother's grave for the past eight years, my brother led the unofficial ceremony. Dede stood slightly to the front, cleared his throat, looked at us. I grinned, Dede did have the gift to lead such ritual.

"Mother... We're coming here today to visit you. Four of us." Dede didn't even attempt to glance in Adi's direction (whose face showed disapproval).

"It's been eight years since you were gone. And you never once came to see us. That means you're preparing a lot of things over there. It was not like when you were preparing breakfast for us in the morning."

I grinned. *He* grinned too. Those were *his* words when persuading my brother to go home after Mother's funeral eight years ago.

"But it doesn't matter how much longer you're going to prepare a lot of things over there, there's one thing we will always remember from all this."

My brother paused solemnly, then raised his head.

"*Leaves that have fallen never hated the wind.*" My brother choked up.

I sighed. That sentence. I glanced at my brother. Dede's face

was transformed from a face of an awkward college kid into a face of someone who was so serene. I was very moved instantly.

"I didn't understand what it meant then. The sentence even sounded annoying. I pushed away the hand of the person who said it. Mother... I thought you left me because you didn't love me anymore, because I was stubborn, because I didn't listen to you, because I just wanted to play all the time. I knew you always loved Sister Tania, so you would never leave because of her."

I swallowed hard. *He* and Sister Ratna kept silent. Their hands clasped together.

"I was wrong.... You left not because you didn't love me anymore. You left because you wanted to teach us something...."

Dede's voice was hoarse.

"That we need to accept whatever happens in our life.... *an acceptance that is beautiful*. That we need to comprehend whatever we're facing in life... *a comprehension that is truthful*. That we need to understand whatever occurs in life... *an understanding that is sincere*. Regardless of where the acceptance, comprehension, or the understanding comes from. It doesn't matter even if we have to get them through sad and painful experiences in our lives.

"We were still very young when you left us. Trembling, we looked at a bleak future. We were scared looking at the reflection of our bitter past.

"You were right.... There's nothing to be sorry about. There's nothing to be feared. Let her fall as it should be. Let the wind sweep her and take her away. And we will understand, we will comprehend.... and *we will accept*."

Dede was silent for a long time.

Then my brother turned to *him*, gave *him* a chance to say something. *He* shook his head. My brother looked at me. I shook my head (Dede's words was more than enough). I looked at Sister Ratna. She shook her head, smiling.

Together we laid the red roses on Mother's grave. The wind was blowing, gently stroking my hair. Leaves falling from frangipani trees around the grave. A leaf fell on my shoulder. Morning sun was rising. The sky was clear with no clouds. Blue! My favorite color.

And we headed home.



9.10 p.m.: The First Piece of the Puzzle

My car is passing the path leading to the cemetery where Mother was buried.

I smile, turning my head to the direction of the cemetery. Before leaving tomorrow, who knows where depending on the result of our conversation this evening, I will take the time to visit Mother's grave. But my goal is not visiting Mother's grave tonight.

With traffic still heavy, it takes a few more minutes for me to arrive at my destination.

The full moon is getting brighter. I see more and more stars popping up in the sky.

I glance at my watch. 9.10 p.m.

The sidewalks are crowded again with people strolling up and down. Some couples walk toward the food stall tents that are

lined up neatly along the way. They're walking with their arm around each other's waist, intimate.

I figure they may not be hungry.

In silence, I stare at them.

* * *

Arriving home from Mother's grave, we had lunch together. *He* and I didn't talk much during lunch. Not that we suddenly felt uncomfortable to each other, but rather because Sister Ratna was always

around me and focused too much on asking me a lot of questions. She asked me about my pastry business (Sister Ratna knew about it from my email). She asked about Anne (*"I can't believe she still doesn't have a boyfriend."* Sister Ratna laughed). She teased me about Adi. *"That means so many guys must be broken-hearted right now!"* Sister Ratna commented, glancing at Adi. I didn't pay too much attention.

I made it a habit to ask about their "family"; so that at least our conversation would be a normal two-way conversation. I asked her about their new home (*"Renting. Danar decided to just renting for now, we're still unsure where we want to live,"* Sister Ratna explained). I asked about her current job (*"I'm just a housewife now, though I really wanted to be like you. Ah yes, how's your internship? What about your co-workers? They're nice, aren't they?"*). And we talked about various other topics, anything that crossed our mind at the time.

They returned home in the afternoon. I opened the gate for them, watching their car disappeared as it turned the corner. I said goodbye to them feeling nothing unusual. It was like seeing a happy young couple returning home from a visit. I smiled and sighed. Relief.

That night I decided to go to the bookstore.

My brother informed me earlier in the afternoon that *he* had just published his new book; and since I had made a promise to myself to always read *his* books, I felt it was important to get the book as soon as possible. Adi, as usual, offered to accompany me. I nodded nonchalantly. Dede decided to stay home to finish his new Lego.

That night, the annoying incident involving Adi that I told you earlier happened. It was then when Adi impatiently expressed his feeling to me in the middle of the rain. What an impulsive behavior! I really have no idea what was the trigger. It's probably because for the past two days, I had told everyone that he was a close friend. It was probably my fault too, but he could express his feelings in a more simple way, don't you think? He didn't need to draw many people's attention like that.

Ever since that night Adi had avoided seeing me, even after we returned to N.U.S. Anne just looked at me with concern but didn't say much; she knew all the details of what happened in Jakarta, including the matter of meeting with *him* and Sister Ratna, and the event involving Adi.

I didn't care about Anne's complaints regarding my behavior that was even more paradoxical by now. I was back to my routine

at N.U.S. and my pastry business. I focused on finishing my college in six months and my internship at one of Singapore's largest brokerage companies.

Busy! Who cares! I didn't mind it at all. With all these activities, at least my life was back to normal so to speak. But I had to pay the price. My attitude and perspectives had changed. I hardly smiled anymore. My attitudes were often contradictory. That was okay with me, I considered it as a side effect in the process of making peace with myself.

* * *

I returned to Singapore two days later after the incident in the rain with Adi. Miranti and Dede accompanied me to the airport. Adi didn't return to Singapore until a few days later; said he was having a fever after being in the rain for hours.

Sister Ratna only sent me a text message ("*Have a safe trip back, my dear.*"). He didn't contact me at all. But it was not a big deal. Seeing *him* for two days at home gave me some comfort. I figured *he* was busy or something.

Nothing significant happened until six months later. I graduated from college right on schedule, with good grades. This time I was completely alone at the graduation ceremony. Anne would graduate in three and a half years, so did my friends from senior high school. My name was engraved on a plaque; the best graduate; the graduate who completed her study in shortest

period of time; the graduate with the highest GPA. I touched the carving with my fingers, softly, and smiled.

Look, Mother!

My brother couldn't make it to my graduation, although I did offer to pay for his airline ticket. Dede was having a final exam. Sister Ratna sent a short email to congratulate me and to apologize that she was not able to come. She had never delivered any message from *him*; most likely because *he* had never asked Sister Ratna to deliver any message to me.

Dede emailed me to deliver a message from *him* that he could not attend my graduation. Together with his company's marketing team from other countries, *he* was busy preparing for the auto-show in Frankfurt.

So I attended my graduation alone.

I gave a very brief speech. I thanked God, Mother, my brother, and *him*. I didn't feel anything. I was not sad, not moved. Then hurriedly stepped down the podium, returned to my flat, getting ready to move out.

* * *

The day after graduation day, I was promoted to a full-time senior associate at the brokerage firm where I had been working as an intern for the past six months. They offered me a great compensation package. Great benefits and various other remuneration, including a free vacation every year for twenty four days anywhere in the world.

However, that was not the reason why I chose the company. To me, the most important was the work culture. Every employees there was a typical true workaholic. They were individualistic and used to push their limits. And that was important to me. At least other employees would not be asking me about my background or my family, much less my love story. They were too busy working, too busy taking care of their own business.

Having a busy schedule was also important to me. Especially with the deadlines and all other crazy success indicators. They provided a great opportunity for my paradoxical nature. I enjoyed using various “advantages” I had at work. I didn’t care if it hurt other parties. In this office, the more willing you take the risk, the brighter your career.

I had nothing to lose. I enjoyed working there.

Although I had to admit, every time I was home alone at my apartment—I’m renting a unit near my office now—I felt empty inside. I had no idea what I had done. More importantly, I had no idea whether what I was doing was useful or not. My life started to feel hollow.

Anne had completely taken over the storytelling program. My pastry business was doing well, I had two stores now; but they were fully managed by Encik Faisal, one of my senior employees. I only came to visit the shops once a month. And it was nothing more than to make sure everything was okay. Encik Faisal submitted a report to me every month and I checked it. That was it.

I befriended empty hallways at the office at night. I never went home before nine o’clock. The elevator was buzzing from 45th

floor to the basement floor. Nonstop. I was the only one inside. Tired. Everything was quiet and empty. Employees rarely talked to each other at the office. Everyone was busy doing their own job.

Driving home, I just stared through the windshield with a blank stare. Thousands of array of lights beautifully flooded Singapore streets. But I had long lost my interest to stop for a while to watch this moment in life like what *he* taught us to do as we were looking out the window from the second floor of the bookstore. I was too tired to enjoy a break, even for just a moment.

Arriving at the apartment complex, I took another elevator to my floor. Buzzing.

Once inside, I tossed my shoes carelessly, took off my blouse, and lay on the couch for fifteen minutes, staring at the ceiling. I was too lazy to walk to the bathroom. When I did, I soak in the tub for a long time, too lazy to get up. I then opened the fridge, trying to find unhealthy snacks and read a book for a while.

I jumped cheerfully when I saw my laptop which was always on, blinking. My brother Dede was online. Since last year my brother had made a habit of opening a portal to chat at ten o'clock at night. "It's more enjoyable to chat in a quiet atmosphere." That was his explanation.

This was the only remaining pleasant moment in my life. Talking with my brother. He was now in college. The college was not far from the house ("*So I can take care of Mother's grave,*" he explained). And I knew my brother was more than deserved to get a seat at the college where I had studied.

He always opened the chat by inquiring about how I was doing, and I would ask the same to him. My brother has many habits similar to *him*. Asking about how someone is doing becomes a standard conversation opener for those who have been close to *him*. We then talked about other things. Movies. Songs. Books. Since Dede had grown up, a college kid, our discussion occasionally became more serious.

My brother also casually mentioned about his girlfriend. I was glad that he finally found a girlfriend. A girl who wore a hijab. I laughed as I reminded him to pray more diligently. Dede just replied with a grinning emoticon. She was a friend from college. They met during campus orientation in a religious mentoring program at the beginning of the semester.

“Well, we aren’t actually dating, you know,” my brother clarified two weeks later.

I laughed. “What do you mean? Two weeks ago you proudly announced that you guys are dating, didn’t you?”

“Well, our relationship is unique, you know. She doesn’t believe in dating. She wants to get married right away. It’s really problematic for me, Sister Tania! I’m not ready to get married!”

I swallowed hard, mused. I thought to myself, was his problem really that serious? “Do you want me to go home right away and propose to her?” I teased him. My brother didn’t say much other than sending me several angry emoticons. I laughed again.

It turned out, their relationship was fine. They did have that important issue, but at least they liked each other. Their feelings was as clear as the stars in the sky. I smiled remembering that

sentence. I made a promise to myself to send an email to Anne. She might be busy right now preparing for her thesis.

Two weeks later, my brother sent a picture of the girl. Sophi was her name. I forgot my brother did mention her name in one of our chatting. And I immediately understood why Dede liked her. It was not because of her beautiful face. Not that. But look at her eyes. They were calm and reassuring, just like Mother's eyes.

For a guy with a personality like my brother's, characteristics reflected in Sophi's face became a perfect match. She was mature, understanding, willing to listen, and patient. I swallowed hard. In some ways, Sister Ratna, not me, possessed these characteristics. That was probably the reason why *he* liked Sister Ratna.

Ah, everyone has their own strengths and weaknesses. I grinned, immediately pushed away memory of the past from my mind.

In between our conversation, Dede conveyed a message from *him* asking how I was doing. At the beginning of the first semester, Dede always saw *him* once every two weeks on campus in accordance to *his* teaching schedule. But since last month, *he* suddenly quit teaching, according to Dede's report a week ago.

At the time, I just commented, "Maybe he just doesn't want to do it anymore because it's hard to teach students like you." Dede sent me an angry emoticon.

During chatting a week ago, my brother mentioned something that now had been bothering me for days. "I went to their house a few days ago. I didn't know why, but I found Auntie Ratna was crying in the backyard."

I swallowed hard reading the sentence. Whatever that meant, I felt uncomfortable with the news. *Sister Ratna was crying?*

"You must be mistaken. Perhaps she had dust in her eyes." I tried to neutralize the effect of the news on me with a joke.

"It was obvious that she was crying," my brother insisted.

"She could be crying because she was happy," I replied firmly.

"It's possible, but I think people my age will know the difference between sad tears and happy tears."

My brother signed out, annoyed.

I thought about many things the rest of the night. I worried about both of them. I honestly worried. I merely worried about my brother's family, as we would be concerned when we heard bad news from other family members. What was going on?

It happened six months ago. I was twenty two years old. My brother was almost seventeen, and *he* would soon turn thirty six.

When all the fire had been extinguished. When I managed to run away welcoming a different story, though not knowing what the ending would be. When I was hoping they would be happy. When I thought all of these had been finished. When I was ready to close the book.

That pieces of the puzzle suddenly came to me, suffocating me, stirring up all those memories from the past, that tonight, no matter how painful, has to finish.

* * *

At the time I thought Dede was just exaggerating the issue about Sister Ratna crying. Firstly because only a week ago Sister Ratna sent me one of her regular emails saying that everything was fine. She wrote that she was very happy with her life now.

Secondly, for whatever the reason, I know *he* would not let anyone who is very dear to him cry. He never left us alone to cry. I remember well when *he* scold the doctor who was in charge of treating Mother at the hospital. But this news about Sister Ratna crying seemed odd and made me feel uncomfortable.

I was concerned, and decided to send an email to Sister Ratna, of course without mentioning what Dede had told me directly. I wrote it in such a way so that Sister Ratna would be encouraged to tell me what was going on. However, before I had a chance to send that email the next night, I received another email from Sister Ratna.

It was a long email. If the words were written on a piece of paper, there would be patches of tears everywhere. The email was really depressing. It touched my heart, although I didn't really understand what she was talking about. And I was even more confused of how to respond.

"Dear Tania....

How are you, dear? I hope you are doing well and healthy always. May God always provides protection to the girl as beautiful and as kind as you.

Unfortunately for me, I'm not well at all when writing this email. I'm having a cold. I've been having a fever these last few

days. It makes me hard to go anywhere. My fingers are trembling when typing this email. But I force myself to write, dear, because this is very important. But honestly, the reason is not solely due to the physical problems that I have trouble writing this email. There's something more painful.

It's not the pain all over my body, but it's in my heart, my dear. It is so painful that I often buried my face into a pillow, not knowing what to do. It makes me physically a lot more painful than the common cold virus.

I apologize if this email bothers you, but I really don't know who else I could talk to. You're the only friend I have who will best understand the situation. So, I decided to send you this email.

I apologize if the contents of this email is not like my other emails over the years. I warn you there will be many sad things I'm writing in this email. Something I've been hiding all this time. I decided to tell you everything.

I swallowed hard, sighed, staring at the ceiling of my bedroom. A few seconds ago Dede was online, but I quickly asked him not to bother me for the next half an hour. I told him that I have to take care some of some important business ("Well, well, since when did you have to take care of important business at night. In that case I better go to sleep then," my brother sulked and signed out).

Tania, I have always prayed that God will predestine me to marry the man I love. At the time, I really didn't believe what people told me: it is better to marry someone who loves you than the other way around!

I thought to myself, how could you be happy if you should marry someone you never loved, no matter how much he loves you. You'll be miserable. How will you live your days?

Turns out, they were right. My dear, you can never imagine how your life will be when you're married to someone who doesn't love you, even though you love him very much.

When I decided to love him, then decided to marry him, I thought my prayers were answered. I really love him, what more can I do? I thought he loves me too. But it's all just a lie. A big lie that was wrapped so neatly.

Turns out, he never loved me at all.

My dear, I feel like I'm competing with a shadow that I will never be able to defeat. It's as if I'm competing with someone I didn't know. But real.

It's definitely there, yet you can't see it. The shadow he always loves.

Dear Tania, when I managed to persuade him to move to a new house, I thought I could slowly win the competition against the invisible shadow, but no, he still loves that shadow. And I really don't know what it is! You might think that we were so close and intimate while we were at Mother's grave, or at home, but it was all fake. It was just a mask.

I rarely talk to him anymore this past six months. He would

mostly be silent. More aloof. And it was compounded by his busy work schedule. We just exchanged a few words to each other in the morning, when he arrived home from work, and when we kissed goodnight before we go to sleep. The rest of the day was empty.

And those eyes, his eyes never again looked at me the same way. Those eyes have completely changed. From the beginning, since we first met, I tried to do anything I could so that he would continue to love me, so that he would feel comfortable next to me, but now there's really nothing left anymore.

Dear Tania, everything is so bleak here. I have no idea what really happened to this family. And I'm really afraid to ask him to explain it to me. I'm afraid to hear the explanation. Because, because it might be painful to hear....

Forgive me, my dear, you shouldn't have to hear all these bad news, but I really don't know who I should turn to. There's no way I'm sharing this with Dede, right? (although he has written two books of love poems).

A big hug from your miserable sister. May you always be healthy and beautiful. Send my regards to Adi.

Your sister,

Ratna.

I sighed. Dede was right. The crying was not a happy one, let alone because of dust in Sister Ratna's eyes.

I moved the mouse and pressed the reply button. How would

I answer this email? More precisely, what was Sister Ratna expecting from me in my reply?

All of this was complicated and disruptive. First of all, I was shocked with the news. How was this possible? Didn't they look very happy at Mother's grave? Secondly, what exactly was happening to them? How could *he*, a very kind man, abandon Sister Ratna? It didn't make sense, did it?

Third, what position should I take in this matter? Simply put, what should I write to reply to this email?

* * *

Grinning, Anne suggested that I distance myself from them. "I know that you don't have any interest anymore rather than wanting to help Sister Ratna. But we don't really know what's going on, do we? I think it's better to wait. You don't want to get caught in the middle by your own kindness. No good deed goes unpunished. Remember?"

I looked at Anne, confused. What was she saying? That I should take advantage of their family problem? No way! That would never happen. All that was over. Didn't I pray that they will have a happy family together forever?

But then, what did Sister Ratna mean by competing with a shadow?

Anne chuckled. "Men always have a hidden room in their heart. No one knows about it, but believe it or not, that small room is much more absurd than even the most absurd woman."

I looked at Anne, again confused. Anne herself didn't seem too convinced with her own explanation just now. She shrugged. As usual, laughed at herself. Smart ass.

"Perhaps he's just busy doing other things, or stress out because of his work routines, or something like that. I mean, there's no way he's having an affair with another woman, don't you think?" Anne hurriedly explained further.

I shook my head. Chances of it happening was very small. In the loyalty department, *he* is a man who can always be trusted.

"Sister Ratna feels that she will never be able to make him love her. That's interesting, Tania. Perhaps that's what she meant by the shadow. She's competing with herself to make him love her. But isn't that strange though?" Anne said with an expression of a full 100 watts.

"Strange how?" I grinned, looking at Anne who was very seriously discussing the issue.

"Well, men, as well as most women, believe that you don't always have to marry someone you love. For them, marriage is a rational choice. Getting married for a postmodern man like him is not merely a love affair.... What doesn't make sense in this matter is that there's another party whose way of thinking isn't in line with him.... See, he's very mature, isn't he? People like that are rarely impulsive in issue like this, right? So, how could he suddenly reluctant to speak with Sister Ratna during the last six months? Why? What's the reason?"

I grinned more broadly. Ever since she joined a philosophy

class on campus part-time, Anne often explained something with more complicated explanations.

“So when he decided to marry Sister Ratna, the problem should have been obvious in such a way.... That was the most rational choice he had. Meaning, his biggest problem is no longer whether he loves her or not. The problem is commitment, and frankly I never doubted the commitment of a man with characters like him. But.... Ah, this is all just my theory, okay?” Anne was unsure how to continue.

“The point is this, Tania. It’s important to know more about this problem. It could be because Sister Ratna is too possessive, so that even the slightest change in his attitude bothers her. I think you need to find out what their problem is first before doing anything....”

Anne nodded her head. There was no telling what she was thinking. I lost my interest to continue the conversation since it had been turned into a more complicated discussion by Anne’s expression and her hands gesture.

I hurriedly finished my breakfast corn soup.

* * *

Later that night I forwarded Sister Ratna’s email to Dede, after forcing him to make a promise not to tell anyone. “Since when did I do something that low,” my brother protested. Dede had ignored the fact that he often unintentionally divulge other

people's secrets. I let him read the email for a few minutes before continuing to chat, and my brother changed his profile.

dedebisadipercaya: Auntie Ratna has underestimated me. I know problems like this. Two books of love poems (what about that?) :-P. Anyway, the important thing is that I was right about what I told you last week. She was indeed crying.

Tania: Have you seen her crying on other occasions too?

dedebisadipercaya: I rarely go to their house in Menteng. Dunno. Maybe.

Tania: How about Brother Dabar? Did he act unusual lately?

Dede didn't type anything for a long time. I suspected that maybe my brother was trying to remember. I didn't have any idea at all that at that point my brother was trying to decide whether he should tell me or not. Five minutes later, still no message from my brother. I was annoyed. For someone with great memory like him, it shouldn't be difficult to retrieve memories about strange events involving *him* over the last two years.

Tania: Hey, you're not falling asleep, are you? Where's the answer? X- (

dedebisadipercaya: Sorry. I don't think there's anything odd.

My brother was lying, but I didn't know that at the time since I couldn't see his face. I just found out about it a month ago.

Tania: Can you find out?

dedebisadipercaya: Why do I want to get involved in this? They're probably just having an argument like any other married couples. Besides, Auntie Ratna herself thought I would never understand problems like this.

My brother's annoying behavior has returned.

Tania: It's our problem too, my handsome brother. That's why I used to pray to have a younger sister, and not a younger brother. Be sensitive a little bit, okay? This is our problem too. You could ask someone at Sister Ratna's house. You can do it, can't you?

dedebisadipercaya: We'll see. I'm busy with my semester exams right now. I just don't want to be involved, you know.

Tania: You must. If not, I'll tell Miranti to suspend the transfer money.

dedebisadipercaya: Geez, you don't need to threaten me like that, you know. The transfer money has nothing to do with this issue. Okay. I'll ask.

Dede didn't fulfill my request until two weeks later. Not that my brother was not affected by my threat of withholding his monthly transfer from Miranti's bakery, but as I found out later on, he already knew everything. He was just still contemplating whether or not he needed to tell me.

Dede worried these things would bother me.

Like a giant Lego game, my brother held many important pieces. Not only that, but he was actually trying to collect other pieces during the last six months. He was trying to put together the pieces like the most complicated Lego he had ever had.

He had all the answer, but unfortunately, I didn't know it at the time.

* * *

Dear Tania,

How are you, my dear?

I'm feeling better now. My cold is mostly gone. Danar took me to a clinic yesterday evening. We didn't say anything to each other all the way to the clinic. I was too afraid to say anything, too afraid to ask. I imagined the question would only disturb our brief pleasant moment together. Forgive me, I shared too much bad news already.

How's your job?

You're right, maybe I need to find one or two activities to make my days go by faster. But how am I supposed to tell him that I want to work again?

I sighed. That's what I had suggested to Sister Ratna in my last email, after giving some thought to her email for a long time. I told her to find something to do, doesn't matter what, so that at least she could momentarily took her mind off this mess. But now she claimed she was too afraid to say anything? Too afraid to ask for *his* permission? This problem was complicated, was it not? How could Sister Ratna be afraid to tell her own husband about it?

Ah, but tomorrow morning I will try to discuss it with him, Tania. He's taking a week off from work. He said he wanted to keep me company, but he's not home most of the time. Hopefully he would be willing to listen to me.

Good night.

*Your sister,
Ratna.*

Many questions rushed through my mind. *He* is on leave but rarely home? So what is *he* doing? Going out with *his* male friends? Probably not. Spending the nights in places of entertainment? Probably not. Men like *him* would never do that. So where did *he* go?

* * *

Tania: What did you find out?

dedebisadipercaya: Auntie Ratna seemed okay. I went to their new house yesterday. Said she starts working at her father's company today.

Sister Ratna didn't tell me about this in her email last week. At least by reporting the progress, my brother had done his "job".

Tania: Did you see Brother Danar there? Sister Ratna said he's taking a week off from work.

dedebisadipercaya: No. I only saw Auntie Ratna.

Tania: Where is he? Sister Ratna said he rarely home.

Again, my brother didn't type anything for a long time. What the hell was he thinking about? I was really annoyed.

Tania: Were you dying to pee just now or what?

dedebisadipercaya: Sorry. I had to answer the phone.

Lying, my brother lied again. Dede was thinking.

Tania: Do you know where Brother Danar is?

dedebisadipercaya: Well, if Auntie Ratna didn't know where he is, how would I know?

I cursed my brother from across the sea. I thought to myself, that's exactly what my brother needs to do: finding out what's going on.

Anne's explanation still didn't make sense to me. The problem was, just like me, she didn't have any experience at all in matters like this. If she was often correct in giving advice when we were in senior high school, it was because the problem was close to the reality of our daily lives.

But now? The problem was much more complicated. Let alone married, Anne didn't even date anyone for nearly six years.

Sister Ratna's problem more or less began to interfere my daily activities. I could still do my job well, but now as I was walking down the empty hallways, or in the elevator, this issue was always on my mind. What's going on? What's their problem?

And do you know what I did two days later? I decided to stop at one of the intersections on the way home. I walked up the pedestrian bridge, stood there, staring at Singapore's brightly lit streets. It was amazing. This country never bother with the issue of energy efficiency.

For whatever reason, I suddenly wanted to relish that memory again. I relished the moment as I stopped and observed the lives of others. I looked at the deserted streets. The city that was now getting ready to sleep. I stood there and stared at the traffic lights that change alternately: red, green, yellow, red, and so on.

The traffic lights was faithfully carrying out its duty, and the residents of the city faithfully followed its instructions. No one recklessly running red lights even though the streets were

practically empty. Everyone was waiting for their turn patiently. Everyone was waiting for their turn patiently.

I sighed. In many ways, the view was not as good as the view from the second floor of the bookstore in our city. But still, I obtained the same energy. A pleasure energy in recalling pieces of memories from the past, stitch it together and making it a positive energy. Imagining a better future.

Does *he* still do what *he* has taught me ten years ago? I thought to myself.

I swallowed hard, walked down the bridge, got in my car, headed toward my apartment. If *he* still did, *he* should have known exactly what Sister Ratna was feeling. Or could it be that all this was just Sister Ratna being too possessive like what Anne had said?

* * *

What I didn't know at the time, hundreds of miles across the ocean, *he* had been sitting deep in his thoughts at the same place for the past six months. A very significant place in our lives.

He observed that piece of life carefully, stitch it together, creating a fragile future from a brittle past, while looking at our linden tree.

I didn't know yet.



9.15 p.m.: Everything Changed Very Quickly

I'm driving through an overpass. If you continue driving straight you'll be heading to the north. If you turn left, you'll be entering the sturdy gate of a college's lush front yard. Turn right to an access road, pass the riverbanks, and you'll be heading towards the slum area.

I turn my car there.

To a place where this whole story begins.

I glance at my wrist. 9.15.

Tonight, everything has to end.

* * *

Over the past two weeks since I stood on that pedestrian bridge in Singapore, the situation was deteriorating very fast. It became

uncontrollable. Every evening since that night, Sister Ratna sent me update emails of the bad news. Her emails were brief, short, full of broken sentences. But they were much more tiring to read than a memo email from my office staff with a twenty pages attachment of a soft copy of market analyst full of charts and graphs.

Those emails were painful to read.

Dear Tania,

I've started working again at Papa's office. He didn't nod nor shook his head when I told him about it that morning. As always, he just looked at me with a blank stare and grinned a bit.

I fell silent, felt sorry that I said it. But I've already said it. What else can I do? Does he not agree I work again?

I'm much healthier now, Tania. Thank you. You must have prayed a lot. Prayer from a girl as kind as you would definitely be answered.

Oh yes, Dede came to our house a week ago. Came with his female friend (his girlfriend, isn't she?). Very beautiful. I immediately thought of you! Her eyes look like yours.

I sighed. Sophi's eyes looked like mine? No, of course they looked more like Mother's (but because my eyes look like Mother's, so I supposed Sophi's eyes looked like mine too).

Dear Tania,

He went out at night twice this past week. Always returned very late. I was too afraid to ask. Just opened the door, then followed him inside. Silent.

I cursed my brother. Dede still has not managed to find out where he went at night.

Another night. Another email.

Dear Tania,

I couldn't take it anymore. Last night I asked him about those two nights. And my God.... He didn't say anything.... Looking at me with that blank stare. You know, Tania, his silence was much more painful than his anger. I prefer to be scolded for asking too many questions than getting a wistful gaze, an empty look, a blank stare like that.

I murmured something. The situation began to deteriorate. Another night. Another email.

Dear Tania,

I tried to make up for what happened that night with inviting him to go on a vacation like you suggested in your last email. You're right, everything is too depressing. But he just shook his head, smiling. I tried to talk to him again. He just said quietly, "There's no problem between us." How is it possible that we don't have any problem?

I'm competing with something. He doesn't love me anymore. Or perhaps, he never loved me at all. I was just a distraction or something. I wanted to ask for an explanation from him. But I didn't dare. I didn't dare to ask. I didn't dare to listen to his explanation.

I suddenly turned into a coward, Tania. I will never win this competition.

God, I remembered the time when part of me ridiculed the confession email I had written earlier. I thought I was a coward too. I never had the courage to send it.

I bit my lip, grinning, hurriedly pushed the thought out of my mind. I immediately sent an email to my brother, asking about his "task".

Dede just sent me a short answer fifteen minutes later: in progress! I sent another "threatening" email to my brother. How difficult would it be to find out where *he* often went. My brother replied with an emoticon: be patient!

* * *

Another night. Another email.

Dear Tania,

We had a fight last night. No, not a fight. I was the one who was shouting with rage at him. As usual he just looked at me without saying a word.

I wanted to know why he returned home late more and more often. Has he been reluctant to return to this house? I almost let slip the question whether he was tired of this marriage, but the words got stuck in my throat.

I don't know whether I was lucky or not by not having the courage to ask that question. He just hugged me, whispering again, "There's no problem, Ratna." That was it! If so, why does he stop talking to me? Why is he distancing himself from me this last six months? Why? I'm really tired of wondering.

This morning he kissed me on the forehead before leaving for work. That was the first time in months. I could tell that the kiss was brisk. Cold. Ah, Tania, I never mention this to anyone for almost six months. And I really don't know what I should do now. Everything feels so confusing, so depressing. And I'm worried about all the possibilities of the future.

Anne let out a short sigh of despair when she found out that their problem had been happening for a long time.

"Can't you ask Sister Ratna what the problem is? What is it exactly that she's concerned about? Does she have any idea at all what's going on?" Anne finally allowed me to engage further.

I grinned, smiled a bit, reminded Anne how protective she used to be when she found out that I was going to ask a lot questions to Sister Ratna or him about their problems.

Anne just shrugged her shoulder. "Everything is about timing, Tania. Now is the right time to ask. What's going on with them?"

However, the question (which I sent to Sister Ratna that same evening, witnessed by Anne) didn't help much.

The following night, I received the response.

Dear Tania,

I really don't know what the problem is. That's exactly what makes me more confused. I just felt completely defeated. By something. You know he doesn't have a past with someone, so no one is coming back into his life. Or, could it be that someone is back into his life? God, I'm really confused.

You know he would never have an affair. So it's not possible there's other woman in his life now. I don't know, I just feel like I'm competing for his love with something very significant. Something that means a lot to him.

And I don't know who or what it is.

I swallowed hard, annoyed. So what was the problem then?

Besides, Dede still had not report anything. I had lost patience on this issue. Should I ask *him* directly? As a "sister", I had the right to ask. And it would be perfectly normal (Anne hastily rejected the idea, "For the time being, Sister Ratna is the one who should ask *him*, not you. We'll wait."). And I cursed Anne.

It seems that in Anne's mind, all of these events was a war game. Waiting, developing strategies, and so forth. Didn't she understand this concerns the future of someone's family who is very important to me? That this concerns happiness of my

brother's family? *Him* and Sister Ratna. The hell with my old feelings. It's already in the past.

I finally decided to ask directly to *him*, if within two days Sister Ratna still didn't come up with any explanation of what exactly their problem was. Anne shrugged her shoulder. She agreed with the deadline.

* * *

However, I never did have a chance to send the question to *him*. More precisely, it was too late to send the question. The following night, Sister Ratna's email came, and it was severe.

Dear Tania,

I couldn't take it anymore. I finally asked him whether he still loves me. Did he ever... ever love me! He was just silent, didn't shake his head, didn't nod.

My God, it was so painful looking at that face. I know he never answered my question directly when we were dating, but back then he always smiles at me. A pleasant smile. At least I felt that the answer was yes. But now, that face was looking at me with a blank stare. It was as obvious as what's in his heart....

I asked him what I should do. He stood up, took hold of my arm, and shook his head, "You don't need to do anything, Ratna." I asked, "What are you going to do?" He shook his head again, "I'm not going to do anything, Ratna." Then he went off somewhere, returning home very late.

I can't take it anymore.

Tania, I decided to move away from this house. I'm going to go home to my parents. I feel so depressed. We should split up for a while. Evaluating everything, whether or not we will continue with this marriage.

I'm sorry, my dear. I made him unhappy. I made him uncomfortable. Forgive your sister for bothering you with these miserable emails for the past month. Forgive your sister who can't be patient anymore. I'm not a good wife for him. I'm really not a good wife....

Tania, I miss you. I really want to talk to you about other pleasant things, not just talking about all this sadness. I miss our time together when we talked during dinner in Chinatown or when we had a chat at home. Moments when everything still felt good. The happy moments.

I miss everything.

*Big hug from your friend, your sister,
Ratna.*

* * *

After reading those dire emails, I immediately decided to return to Jakarta the following day. This is a serious problem. I can't just remain silent. I'm part of their family, and I have the obligation to at least ask. Mother would have done the same if she was still here.

No. I will not engage further. I'm just going to ask *him*. What's going on?



9.17 p.m.: When All the Pieces Come Together

My car slowly moves along the small road, towards *that place*, where our cardboard shack once stood firmly drenched by torrential rain, soaked by the blazing sun. Where I, my brother, and Mother lived for three miserable years. A piece of land on a landfill site along the river.

The full moon above makes the place looks beautiful.

There's no more trash scattered about as before. The cardboard shack that for us was like a monument, a landmark on the one acre land, was no longer there.

This piece of land on the riverbanks is now beautiful. The land has been crushed flat in such a way, then soft grass were planted on it. The grass looks like the one you would find on the best soccer fields anywhere. You can sit on it comfortably. The rest of the land is empty, except for a linden tree right in the middle of it.

Have you ever seen a linden tree? Linden trees are part of the Tilia species and their leaves are heart-shaped. It's a beautiful shape, like a symbol of love.

This linden tree has long stalks which covered with heart-shaped leaves hanging along its branches and twigs. The tree is in bloom right now. The flowers are beautiful, turning the entire surface of the tree yellow. Its fragrance fill the evening air, creating a pleasant atmosphere on this piece of land, providing a comfortable sense of solitude.

Leaves that are dry and have fallen from the stalks blanketing the ground around the tree. Brownish heart-shaped silhouettes cover my feet with every step. Dry. Brittle. Creating a crunching sound when I step on them.

I sigh.

Bright lights mounted high on the edge of the park, creating a more unbearable atmosphere for me. My heart is pounding as I get closer to the tree. Ten years ago, this tree has already grown. I still remember how impressive it was to see the tree in full bloom.

I, my brother, and Mother often sat under our cardboard shack, looking at the tree in bloom under the moonlight, like tonight.

"We have the most beautiful tree in the world," Mother once whispered in between my hair. My brother grinned. *"What's so beautiful about the tree?"* Mother just smiled without saying a word. However, on another full moon night she said softly, *"This tree is beautiful because it's amazing. Because it could provoke*

something. It could provoke feelings that we could never understand. Love. This tree makes us be honest in life...."

I swallow hard. I stop as I recall Mother's words. As a child, I couldn't comprehend what Mother meant. But now I do. Mother was right, the tree is indeed very beautiful. It provokes feelings that I can never understand when looking at it.

Those feelings.

I'm only ten steps away from the linden tree. And that means I'm only ten steps away from *him*.

Our *angel*.

Someone, who is my first love. Someone, who I always admire. Someone, who always mesmerizes me. Someone who came, giving us the promise of a bright future. Someone who raised hope that I could never figure out why they thrived.

Someone who could answer all my questions tonight (who knows whether or not he would answer them). Someone with whom all the stories must end tonight. Someone, who is now sitting under our linden tree.

* * *

"When did you arrive?" *he* asked flatly. *He* doesn't move from his position. *He* still sit pensively under the linden tree, facing the river. *He* is toying with a heart-shaped leaf solemnly.

On the way here, I thought of a thousand ways to start the conversation, but now I can only heave a sigh. I take another step toward him from behind. Of course *he* could hear my footsteps.

The rustling sound of brittle leaves gave *him* a hint that someone was coming. Of course *he* knew I'm the only one who might come here. Only me and my brother who have memories of this place where once the cardboard shack stood. Only us.

Of course *he* knew, it's only a matter of time before I return home from Singapore to see *him* here.

"Two weeks ago." My voice is a little hoarse.

I mutter to myself. If the tension is this high in the beginning, this is going to be a difficult conversation. I take a deep breath to try to calm myself down.

"Can I sit next to you?" I ask quietly.

He doesn't turn around or move. *He* is just silent (I know his character, silence means yes). I sit five inches away from him, watching him toying with the leaf in his hand. *He* remain solemnly looking at the sheen of light falling on the mouth of the river.

He is silent for a long time.

I notice the beautiful grass illuminated by the lights. This place is nice and beautiful, with long stalks dangling from the stems of the linden tree and leaves scattering around where we are sitting. I pick up a brownish leaf falling next to me. A heart-shaped leaf that starts to dry and turn yellow. My heart suddenly feels dry.

"How do you know I'm here?" *he* asked quietly.

How did I know?

* * *

Dede was not surprised at all when I arrived at home that afternoon. I forced myself to be on the first flight that morning. Encik Faisal had hurriedly bought the ticket. I took a leave from work, which in my case is unrestricted. Anne drove me to the airport, reminding me to behave like an adult. I promised her I will.

My brother stared at me in front of the door frame, greeted me, said flatly, "I knew it. It's only a matter of time before you return home."

I sighed.

My brother helped carry my suitcase up. The room was round like a jar (just like the shape of the house), painted in blue.

"When did the last time you see Sister Ratna?" I asked with concern before Dede had a chance to put down the suitcase near the closet. Straight to the point.

"It was... uh, when I went to her house with Sophi."

I glowered at my brother. So that meant that the last time he saw Sister Ratna was a month ago. That also meant that all this time Dede never did what I told him to do in my emails.

My brother returned my gaze with an innocent look in his eyes. He didn't feel guilty at all.

Dede was never sensitive over my "threatening" gaze, or perhaps he felt that my "threat" was never really a threat.

"When did the last time you see Brother Danar?" I took a deep breath, crying to control my anger.

"Last night," Dede said slowly, biting his lip.

"Where?" I grabbed my brother's arm.

"Where our cardboard shack used to be."

The answer shattered all the rage in my heart.

Where our cardboard shack used to be? I gasped.

What is he doing there? What has happened to him? What does all this mean? My brother shook his head, then gently explained (*"I just watched him from a distance, didn't dare to approach."*).

* * *

Evening breeze gently brush my hair.

"How's work?" *He* changes the subject, doesn't wait for my answer to his question before. *He* realizes it's not important anymore who has told me that he's here now. He himself would be able to guess, wouldn't he?

"Good. Too good, in fact."

I grin, swallow hard. I feel like we are sitting on a boat, only the two of us, having conversation while enjoying the scenery along the river that divides the city of Bangkok. Small talk? I swallow hard. Not really, we're just waiting for the time to heat up. The boat would soon meet a deep rapids and the fall would be painful. All this talk.

"How's work?" I counter.

He just shakes his head. *Not good.* I recognize that expression, it was exactly like his expression before Mother died.

"I heard you just got promoted again recently?"

He nods, sighs deeply.

"Congratulations," my sentence hangs in the air.

We pause again. Silent.

"This place is beautiful. Since when did you decide to buy it?"

He turns to me. We look at each other for a moment. God, those eyes are gloomy. Very gloomy. Where is the bright eyes I used to see? Where? I'm twenty two years old now and he is thirty six. His face is still charming, but there's no sparkle in his eyes anymore like before. It makes me sigh.

"How do you know I bought it?"

* * *

My brother winced as I tightened my grip on his arm.

"How come you never told me," I snapped at my brother. Dede, who was sitting on his bed, grimaced in pain.

"I'm sorry.... It doesn't matter, does it?"

"Dede! The point is not whether or not it matters. I should know, don't you think? That place is part of our past. I need to know who bought it." I looked at my brother helplessly. The issue concerning that piece of land was certainly not the only secret my brother was hiding from me. Surely there were many more things that he didn't tell me over the years. And I don't know why Dede kept it a secret.

"You have to tell me everything now. Everything!" I went to sit in front of my brother while still clutching his arm tightly. Dede cringed.

* * *

It's getting late. Some linden tree leaves are still falling. I can hear the stream flowing quietly.

"The tree is still here." I grin, again refuse to answer his question about how I knew he was the one who actually had bought this piece of land.

Sooner or later, our conversation will eventually reach the important part. Not that I'm afraid to talk about it, I just don't know where to start. My brother's confession last week seems too much to be discussed in the beginning of our conversation. I have to choose the most comfortable subject to discuss first. Hence, the linden tree.

He is silent. Doesn't answer. Doesn't say a word.

"Look, it's a very beautiful tree, isn't it?" I stand up. My hand touches the tree trunk. It's almost 17 feet high now.

He remains silent.

"Have you finished the book? *Love from a Linden Tree*?"

He gasps, turning to me. I smile (though at the same time, my heart is broken when I said that sentence). A bitter smile. He is tearing up when asking the question, how do you know about the book?

I just shake my head, laughing bitterly.

"I know. I know everything. I just know."

* * *

My brother wiped his sweaty forehead.

"Six months ago, when I went to their house, Uncle Danar

asked me to help him print the revision of the second edition of his book which was published last year. The one you bought in a bookstore in Depok with Adi. You remember, right? Late at night after we came back from Mother's grave to commemorate her eight years' death?"

I swallowed hard to hear Adi's name.

"Uncle Danar gave me the password for his laptop. I opened the manuscript file. I really didn't have any intention to open the other files. As you already know, he was really upset when I opened his laptop without permission. So I just print the manuscript as I was told. Two hundred pages. Uncle Danar asked me to deliver it to the publisher the following morning."

My brother gasped. I was still clutching his hand.

"But, but.... I accidentally opened the recent documents. I swear. It wasn't intentional. There was a file with an odd name: *Love from a Linden Tree*.... The name means a lot to me. Later on you'll understand why the name means a lot. Linden tree. I was curious, so I copied the file to a flash disk."

My brother looked at me sadly, then looked down.

"And I was right. When I saw the file name, of course I had an idea about the contents. Later on that night I decided to read the file. My God, it was the novel Uncle Danar has been working on six months ago. It's far from finished, but it explains everything. The novel was never finished, never will be."

Dede looked at me, getting more sad. I was really confused by all this. I did ask my brother to tell me everything earlier. But what was the connection between some novel with all this?

I just asked my brother to tell what he knew about the quarrel between Sister Ratna and *him*. About Sister Ratna who had to return to her family home in Bogor. My grip was slightly weakened. I just needed to hear what my brother found out about what was going on. Not all of these.

Dede got up, grabbed the laptop on the desk, and opened it. The laptop was booting. He entered a password, opened the document folder, and opened the file that he had mentioned earlier.

"I know you'll need more than half an hour to read this 50 pages manuscript, but this is important. You have to read it now. The novel that will never be finished."

Dede moved the laptop to my lap.

I looked at my brother, confused.

"Read it. You'll understand."

* * *

A linden tree leaf falls on my shoulders.

"How do you know?" *he* asked weakly, a moment after I was just silence staring back at his glistening eyes earlier.

Again the same question: how do I know? It doesn't really matter anymore how I know.

I smile. I feel more hurt.

"It's not important. I know. That's all. Maybe I knew it from Mother... Let's just say Mother told me everything." At this point, my voice is hoarse.

He gets up.

We're only two steps away from each other, facing each other. I look down, staring at the root of the tree. His eyes are fixed on me (I can't bear to look at his eyes for long, his gaze makes my feet weak. It made my feet weak then, it makes my feet weak now).

"The little girl in the novel is me, isn't it? Isn't it Tania.... Tania, whose hair braids in two. Tania, who is smiling cheerfully in between dangling leaf stalks of a linden tree. Tania, who...." My voice trembles, then lost at the end of the sentence.

Mother, let me cry, I murmur to myself.

Three years ago, I didn't have the courage to send the confession email to him. Three years ago, I was too scared to hear his rejection. He decided to marry Sister Ratna, didn't he? To me, his feelings was as clear as the full moon in the sky.

He never loved me. That was the painful conclusion I forced myself to accept. Conclusion that took away smiles from my face. Conclusion that changed my behavior. Conclusion that changed everything. But tonight I'm the one who raised the issue with a yes-or-no question. I didn't expect this conversation will turn toward the main subject this fast. I don't understand. I just can't take it anymore. In spite of myself, the question slid out of my mouth.

I sob.

"The little girl in the novel that will never be finished is me, isn't it?" I murmur, looking at him, hurt.

"What do you mean?" His voice trembles.

What do I mean? I can't believe he asked me that question.

* * *

Dede, who was sitting in a chair in the corner, looked at me helplessly. It took me an hour to read the half-finished manuscript. Under normal circumstances, I could probably finish it in thirty minutes as my brother had said earlier.

But how could I finish it quickly if at every page I had to hold my breath? Every paragraph, I had to look up to the ceiling to keep my tears trickling down my cheeks. Every sentence, I had to stop reading because my heart hurt as if it was being sliced with a knife.

The book was about me. The book was about *him*.

The book was about us. The book was about *his* feelings.....

I sobbed for a long time. The manuscript was never completed. Will never. It was interrupted when that event happened. When he decided to marry Sister Ratna.

* * *

"You're really good at hiding your feelings.... But why?" I asked with a hoarse voice, looking at *him* for a moment, demanding an explanation.

"What do you mean?" *he* stammers.

I look at *him* helplessly. *He still asked me what I mean?* Look, Mother. How difficult it is for him to confess. My heart aches holding back anger.

"And now you asked me what I mean? Isn't this tree can

explain everything? Isn't this tree can be the witness to what you're talking about, being the title of the book that will never be finished?" I cut him off, screaming.

He rubs his face. "You're wrong, Tania. I don't know what we're talking about. But you guessed wrong. You're wrong."

"YOU'RE THE ONE WRONG. BECAUSE YOU NEVER WANT TO ADMIT IT!" I snap at him.

Oh, Mother, I snapped at our angel. I yelled at him. My body is shaking from an overwhelming feelings of sadness inside me. Trembling, I reach out my hand toward him.

"Fine. Show me your pendant. SHOW ME!"

* * *

"Forgive me, Sister Tania." Dede was sitting in his chair, thinking.

I looked at my brother's face. He looked sad.

"I should have told you. I know that the pendant is special to you, as well as to Uncle Danar. The pendant is always special."

My brother rubbed his face.

"Special? Didn't you get one too? Mother too? There's nothing special about it, isn't there?" I said weakly, wiping my tears.

Reading the manuscript alone had made me miserable enough, what else was my brother going to tell me? What other pieces of events was my brother going to tell me that will hurt my feelings even more?

Oh My God, how quickly was the past catching up with me. All the feelings I had long buried deeply, all desire I had long

destroyed, all hopes that had long withered and died. It was impossible to put back the pieces together, was it not? It would only leave dust of sadness and tomb of despair behind.

"The pendant is special." Dede bit his lip. "A year ago, when Uncle Danar was playing basketball, the chain of his pendant broke. He left it with me who was watching in the sidelines. I accidentally flipped it over and saw a piece of image there. I didn't know what it was at first.

"I recognized it, but couldn't remember what it was. But when I accidentally found the manuscript, I knew what that piece of image was. It's a linden tree flower that was cut in two. The image is not on my pendant or on Mother's. I know because I dug it out from the place where I buried her pendant.

"Give me your pendant, Sister Tania."

I got up, slowly approached my brother. All of this suddenly made my head spin.

My brother reached out his trembling hand to lift my pendant and slowly flipped it over.

"I was right.... This piece is perfect when combined with the image on Uncle Danar's pendant. Of course I remember! Didn't you say that I have a photographic memory? Although it's only briefly, I remember the image. From that point on, I know that your pendant is special."

I swallowed hard.

"The pendant is always special. Forgive me that I never told you. I actually just found out about it six months ago.... I didn't

want to bother you again with all the memories from the past, because I thought this matter was over.” My brother looked down.

My brother was hurt too. He had witnessed everything. He had witnessed the whole story.

* * *

Trembling, *he* looks at me (his eyes is getting dim).

I move closer. Abruptly, I lift the pendant around his neck, remove the pendant around my neck, flip both over, then put them next to each other. They form a perfect image of a linden tree flower in bloom. Underneath, two heart-shaped linden tree leaves join together perfectly.

I look at him with tears in my eyes, faltering.

“Can you explain what is this all about?”

I show *him* the pair of pendants.

“Am I wrong? Am I just guessing? No. It is certain I’m right. Everything is very clear now.”

Sobbing, I slump down to the soft grass.

“Anne once told me, people who harbored feelings are often trapped by his own heart. Busy trying to piece together string of events around him to justify his hopes and dreams. Busy connecting many occurrences, hoarding dreams to please his heart. So that one day he can’t distinguish what is real and what isn’t.”

I gasp. I continue talking in between sobs.

“I used to be like that... busy guessing. I was so happy when

you gave me this pendant on my seventeenth birthday. I never knew my feeling was mutual. My heart does not lie. But why you never said anything to me? Why?"

I fight back my tears. *He* doesn't say anything. Silent.

"I never did admit my feelings to you, because I was afraid the answer is no. I was afraid that the rejection would hurt me. How could a little girl braided in two like me love you. I decided to patiently wait.... Patiently waited for me to be beautiful and mature as you said. Patiently waited for six years."

I blow my nose, sniffing.

"I never had the courage to tell you.... How could I love our angel? I thought I would never be worthy of your love. I patiently waited until I am worthy to touch your heart. Unfortunately, when I feel worthy, you decided to marry another girl. You expressed your feelings by marrying her.

"I didn't know that you have the same feelings too.... I thought by marrying Sister Ratna everything is as clear as the star in the sky. It would be different if you never did love me. That being said, why didn't you admit it? Why?"

I sob for a long time. "Didn't Dede tell you everything the night before the wedding? If it was so obvious to him, shouldn't it be obvious to you too? Shouldn't you know what I feel?"

"You're really good at hiding your feelings. The way you hugged me, the way you looked at me. You're really good.... You deceive yourself."

At this point, I really cry.

I also cried when Dede told me another event that happened the night before the wedding.

“That night I decided to tell Uncle Danar that you like him. I went into his room. His face looked tired. I didn’t say much, I just said, ‘Do you know what Sister Tania feels about you?’

“Uncle Danar asked me weakly, ‘What?’ I looked down when I said, ‘Don’t you know that Sister Tania likes you?’ Uncle Danar was silent for a long time.... I said quietly to him, ‘Sister Tania decided not to return home because she doesn’t like the wedding tomorrow.’

“He remained silent.

“I asked him, ‘Do you like Sister Tania?’

“He remained silent.

“I asked him for the last time. ‘Do you love Auntie Ratna?’ He kept silent. I left the room. Since the night I was totally confused. Uncle Danar couldn’t fool me. If he liked the wedding tomorrow, he would answer my last question. I didn’t understand what he was thinking. I didn’t understand why was it so difficult for him to answer that question.”

My brother was silent after telling me the event on that fateful night. I sighed, remembering, that was the reason my brother changed his username that morning to: *dedetakmengerti* (Dede doesn’t understand).

"You never want to admit it," I say in a weak voice, trying to get up. My voice is still shaking.

"You immediately destroyed the feeling mercilessly the first time it bloomed. You felt it for the first time here, didn't you? Under this linden tree?"

I grin bitterly, looking at *his* face.

"I know. You felt it when you praised me for the first time, 'You're a smart kid, Tania. Very smart.' I remember you were holding a linden tree leaf when you said it."

He keeps silent, looking down.

"But you never want to admit to having fallen in love with a twelve years old girl.

"It didn't make sense, did it? Someone who is mature and terrific like you, falling in love with a little girl whose hair was braided in two, with a red ribbon at both end. But you couldn't fool Mother. She knew everything," I gasp when I mention Mother.

"You kill every bud of that feeling. One started to grow, you immediately cut it. One started to sprout, you immediately step on it. One started to grow out, you immediately pulled it out mercilessly. You never give it a chance. Because you think it's impossible for you, isn't it? You're ashamed of admitting it even when you're alone. How could you love a snot-nosed little girl? The question always bothered you, didn't it?

I try to control my breathing as I start to feel like running out of air again....

"But then I grew up to be like you have expected. And you're

unable to cut those buds of feelings anymore. The more you cut it, the faster it grew back. The more you stepped on it, the more new leaves sprung up. All the while I grew up to be a teenager.”

I wipe my stuffy nose.

“But why did you never want to admit it? Why? At my seventeenth birthday, the pendant said everything. But why do I have to wait until now to find out that the pendant is special? Do you think of me as a sister? Do you feel guilty that you love your own sister? Do you hate yourself for loving me?”

I sob again.

“And, and you even decided to scorch the feeling to the roots. And you burn it down completely when you decided to marry Sister Ratna! But why?”

My voice is getting weaker.

All of this will never make sense to me. If I never feel anything wrong to love someone mature like *him*, why would he think it was such a big problem? I love him and my feeling is genuine, not because I want to return the favor for all good things he has done for us.

What’s wrong if *he* loves someone who’s still a teenager? Didn’t he realize that I would eventually grow up? Look at me now, I grow up to be beautiful as *he* has imagined, right? Why should *he* be afraid to face the reality that he has feelings for me? All of this will never make sense to me.

* * *

"What are you going to do?" My brother asked quietly. Dede was afraid to disturb my sobs. I turned to my brother and shook my head. I didn't know what to do.

"Are you going to see him?"

I didn't say anything.

"Even before Auntie Ratna left the house to move in with her parents, Uncle Danar always goes there every night. To that piece of land where our cardboard shack used to be. He will sit there for a long time until late at night."

I didn't say anything.

"I didn't know what he was doing, but his face looked very sad and subdued."

I didn't say anything, biting my lip.

My brother murmured something to the ceiling.

* * *

"You deny everything. That feeling is the biggest denial you've ever done in your life. But why did you do it when you know that I love you so much?" My lips are numb when I said the last sentence.

All these feelings are suddenly rushing back to life like a thousand arrows stabbing me, scrambling to fill every inch of my memory. Events quickly flash through my mind. His face when we met on the city bus, his face when we were in the cardboard shack, his face when he was speaking, his face while we were in the tent food stalls, his face when we were at Fantasy World, his

face when we were in the bookstore, his face when we were at the airport, his face now.

“And look at what I have to face when I found out about your true feelings. We sadly remembering those painful memories of the past here. Cursing life. Wishing that I never met you.

“What do we gain after we managed to get through all the painful events over the years? What? Finding you here, unable to escape from the shadow. Unable to run at all. Regretting everything...” For a moment, my voice is completely lost.

* * *

For a week I came to the bookstore, standing in front of the window on the second floor, recalling the past like a tape being played over and over, trying to decide what action I needed to take, trying to prepare myself to face the available options.

Whatever happens, this place, this second floor of the city's largest bookstore, will always be a beautiful milestone in my life. This is where I first discovered the promise of a wonderful future, staring at a much better life. Here too I found the sturdy shoulders of someone who I love so much.

Understanding the great energy by just for a moment looking at a piece of life across the street. Nourishing the feelings and hopes that I never understand why they must come and blossomed in my heart. And why I should kill them now for the second time?

There's no telling what would happen, but at least by standing

for a moment like this I could recall the past better. Pieces of events my brother had told me last week made me look at the past in a different way. All that should make me feel joyful, but it didn't.

Tonight, all the stories has to be over.

* * *

"Say it... do you love me?" I whisper softly, standing, looking into *his* dim eyes. We are only one step away.

"Say it... even though it doesn't mean anything anymore." *He* doesn't say anything. Silent. *He* whispers something.

Rustling evening breeze blow away a piece of linden tree leaves. It falls on my hair. I decided to leave.



9.00 a.m. (The Following Morning): The Return

Dede helps me packing.

I empty the blue room. I will take everything I have from the past with me. I smile for the last time staring at the whole structure.

My brother is silent, looking down. I punch his shoulder softly.
“Come on. Smile.”

Dede reluctantly grins.

And a moment later my car is speeding down the road towards the airport.

* * *

Last night, I told *him* that Sister Ratna is four months pregnant. That she is waiting for *him* to return any time. Sister Ratna never

know who the shadow that she had been competing with for his love. Never.

And Sister Ratna does not need to know.

Loving someone doesn't always mean that you have to be together with that person. Nothing is perfect in this life. *He* is indeed flawless. *His* temperament, *his* kindness, everything. But *he* is not perfect.

Only love is perfect.

Someday, I might find a rational choice like Anne has told me, but certainly will not be Jhony Chan.

I will never return again. I'm sorry, Mother. I didn't have time to stop at your grave. Mother did know everything.



09.00 (Early morning): Back

Dede helped me pack.

I emptied the room painted blue. All objects past brought.
Smile for the last time staring at the whole building.

My sister just looked down. I punched his shoulder softly.
"Smile."

Dede restrained grin.

And a moment later my car sped towards the airport.

* * *

Last night I told him that Sister Rachael was four months pregnant. Kak Ratna waiting for him at all times. Kak Ratna never know who the shadow that had been competing for her love. Never.

Kak Ratna and do not need to know.

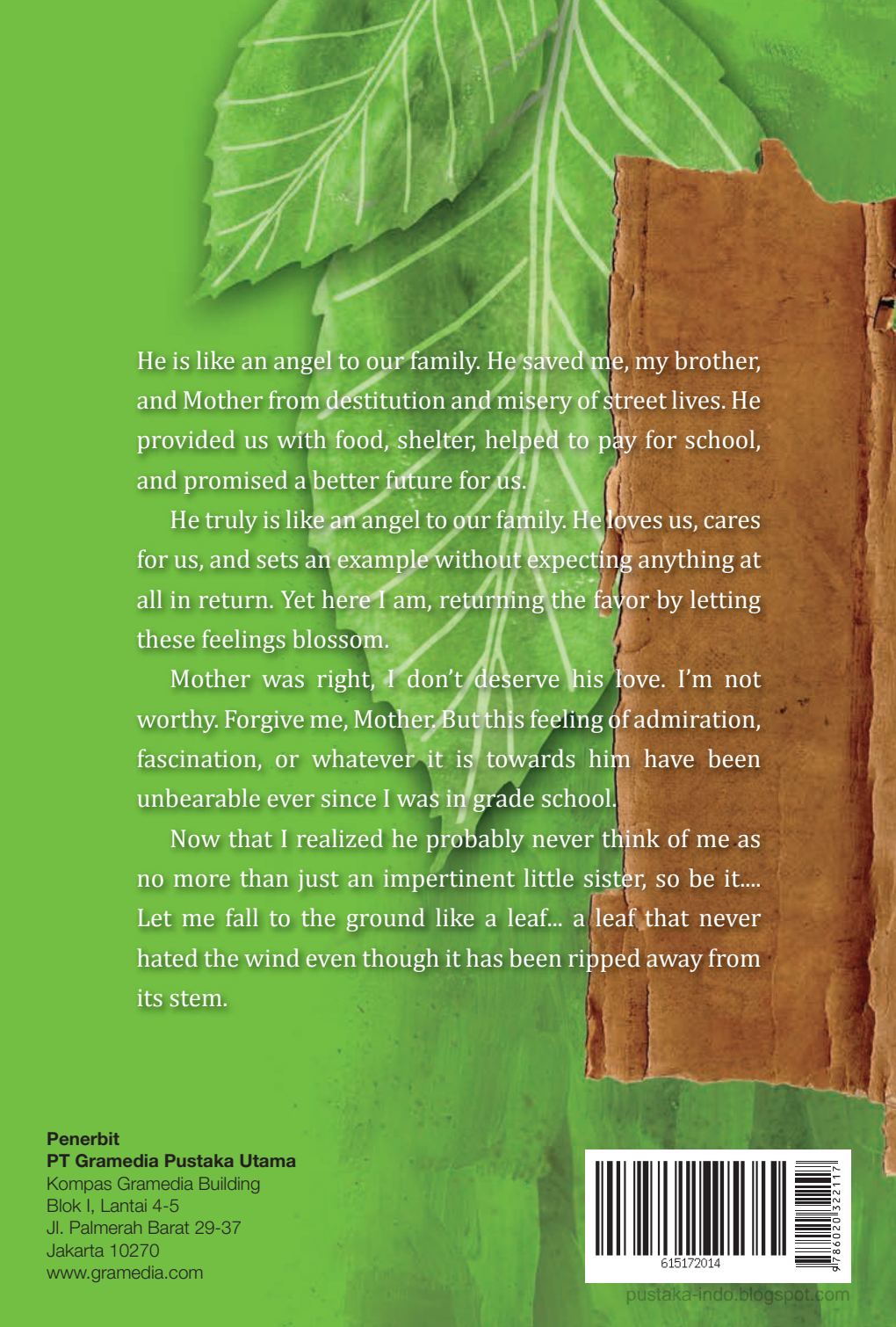
Love may not always keep us together. Nothing is perfect in this life. He was so perfect. Temperament, kindness, everything. But he is not perfect.

Just perfect love.

The day after tomorrow maybe I'll find a rational choice as I've said Anne. Which certainly was not Jhony Chan.

I will never go back again. I'm sorry mother. I do not have time to stop at pusaramu. Mother did know everything.





He is like an angel to our family. He saved me, my brother, and Mother from destitution and misery of street lives. He provided us with food, shelter, helped to pay for school, and promised a better future for us.

He truly is like an angel to our family. He loves us, cares for us, and sets an example without expecting anything at all in return. Yet here I am, returning the favor by letting these feelings blossom.

Mother was right, I don't deserve his love. I'm not worthy. Forgive me, Mother. But this feeling of admiration, fascination, or whatever it is towards him have been unbearable ever since I was in grade school.

Now that I realized he probably never think of me as no more than just an impertinent little sister, so be it.... Let me fall to the ground like a leaf... a leaf that never hated the wind even though it has been ripped away from its stem.

Penerbit

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