"Kemunting : a journey" - Malay identity in pre- and post- independence Singapore

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**"KEMUNTING: A
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IDENTITY IN PRE- AND
POST- INDEPENDENCE
SINGAPORE**

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SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES

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POST-INDEPENDENCE SINGAPORE**

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Summary

Kemunting follows a young village girl, Yah, living on the rural beaches of 1950s Malacca. Based on my own ancestral village, Padang Kemunting (Kemunting Field in Malay) is the village where the novel's events play out. The Malay name for the rose myrtle, "kemunting" refers to the shrubs commonly found growing wild along the sandy stretches of the seaside where Yah spends most of her days. A hardy species, it is often treated as an invasive plant capable of altering ecosystems of foreign habitats but for the village children of Padang Kemunting where the plant is native, its bright flowers and soft, sweet fruit makes it a beloved part of their everyday life. As a novel, *Kemunting* fills a void in Singapore literature in English, being one of the few works written by a Malay writer to represent the Malay experience of the 1950s and 1960s in the English language. Historical novels dealing with the postcolonial realities of self-rule feature prominently in the Singapore literary canon. However, a diversity of perspectives is needed to avoid a truncated view of Singapore's history. *Kemunting* adds to that diversity.

Kemunting: A Journey

Chapter 1

While stomping towards the padi fields with Ani, Yah was imagining Nek Busu screaming for mercy while being pecked to death by all the chickens they had ever kept. Kill her before she kills you, Yah cheered them on in that other world. Look at what she did to Cik Yam, she cried. In that world, they would all listen to her. For those who didn't, Yah would sprinkle grains of raw rice all over Nek Busu's body, after which they would of course peck her wrinkly skin hungrily with their sharp beaks which would cut and tear. They would all then eat her up. Yes! Then Nek Busu would feel sad about killing Cik Yam, and would beg Yah to save her.

Forgive me, Yah! Please, the horrible old woman would cry.

Yes. Nek Busu was begging Yah for forgiveness. And Yah forgave her and *then* saved her — she chased all the chickens away with Mak's rotan and said to Nek Busu, in the voice Ani sometimes used to lecture her, "This is what good people do. Good people don't kill chickens that belong to Yah."

In that other world, that world in her head, Yah wouldn't be crying. She wouldn't be rubbing her tears and snot all over her face. Sobs she was trying to hold in wouldn't escape from her chest every few seconds. The angry gusts of grief would be contained, no matter how hard they tried to escape.

It made her angry, longing for that other world. She hated crying. And in front of Ani no less, who never took her side in anything. Maybe it was because Yah was eight while Ani was fifteen. Maybe it was because the older you got, the meaner you became.

“Enough! Keep crying and tigers will come out and eat you,” Ani growled. She was taller than Yah, and older, and bigger, and so she was the one leading them to the padi fields where their father and brothers were. “You like chicken, right? Right, Yah? You’re being unreasonable,” she added, exasperatedly shaking her loosely tied hair at the eight-year-old girl.

A sparrow chirped above them and flew over the old abandoned remains of the burnt-out house nearby. Three charred wooden posts and a pile of rotting planks were all that was left of what once seemed like a big house. Yah paused for a moment to stare angrily at the bird as it disappeared into a grove of ketapang trees, hiding from her under their broad, waxy leaves. She wondered where the bird was going. She wondered why Cik Yam didn’t try to fly away. Maybe she was too fat to fly.

“That’s Nek Busu’s old house, you know. She used to live there before she moved in with us,” said Ani idly, as they turned to a path that circled around a patch of wild kemunting.

It was a hot day and the tall bushes seemed to sparkle underneath the yellow-hot sun.

No fresh fruit to pick, thought Yah as she kicked viciously at the shriveled kemunting fruits that were decaying underfoot. A stray lalang caught her slippers and she kicked it too. It slid in between her slipper straps and she stopped to stomp on it with her other foot to set it free. Stupid dead dried grass. How dare it bothered her? And stupid Ani! Of course Yah knew the house was Nek Busu’s. Everyone in the village knew the old burnt house was Nek Busu’s! Ani was always like this, telling her things she already knew. Nek Busu was so stupid, she had probably burned her own house down!

The thought immediately made her feel guilty. Yah wiped her face with the back of both her sleeves, one after the other. Her loose baju was already dirty. Mak would scold her again. And Ani would join in. Her sister never took her side. In anything. Sometimes, Yah thought of Ani as her enemy. Pak often talked about enemies. How they should be fought. How they were bad people. Yah would fight. Yah would fight Ani, because Ani was always scolding her and because Ani's hair was stupid-looking tied up like that. Yah would slap her, the way Ani sometimes slapped her and Panjang. Right in the face. And Nek Busu. Yah would fight her. She could win. Nek Busu was the oldest person in their family and she had bad bones. She always said so. And Panjang. She would fight him too. All her siblings. She imagined Cik Yam clucking. Gently. Supporting her. Something rose in her again, something that made her want to cry and wail.

In that other world, she wouldn't be so loud whenever she cried.

"Cik Yam was old and she was going to die soon anyway! Better to eat her than to bury her for the ants and worms. Why are you so sad? You like chicken," Ani continued ranting, shaking her head as if she was the one suffering.

Yah was beginning to think of the waves that come in when the sun sets, rising up and up and up until it's suddenly too deep to swim in. That was what sadness was like. And tears taste so much like sea water. And there's so much sea water. Before she could stop herself, another keening sound wrenched itself from her throat.

Ani sighed loudly, the way she did when she thought Yah was being difficult. Stupid Ani. And her stupid hair and stupid basket. Why did they have to bring the lunch basket together anyway? Ani always carried the basket alone. Yah wanted to go to the beach and throw seashells into the water.

Something jumped from the branch of a nearby tree and scampered away through the tall lalang. Both girls paused. Yah fought with all her might to be silent. What if a tiger was nearby? She didn't want to get eaten! She wasn't a chicken like Cik Yam! Then Ani snorted impatiently and continued to walk.

They were nearly there. Yah counted down what they were supposed to see whenever they walked to the fields. The red dirt road. The gajus tree. Nek Busu's old house. The kemunting patch. They should be there soon.

At the end of the red dirt path they were following was a pondok built on sturdy stilts, its roof of dried, stacked kelapa leaves sheltering a wooden platform. Pak was already there, fanning himself with his field hat, leaning against one of the posts holding the roof up. He was bare-chested and so were her brothers, with nothing but their seluars and their kains tightly wrapped around their waists. It was a hot day after all.

By the pondok's steps, Abang Long and Bahrum were speaking to each other heatedly. Yah recognized the edge in Bahrum's voice but she couldn't hear what they were saying. Abang Long was probably nagging as usual because Bahrum was casting angry glares to the side, his lips twisted as if he was keeping his tongue from leaping out. His sweaty arms were crossed because it was just Abang Long and not Pak or Mak or Nek or he would have been slapped. Bahrum's words could be as sharp as a sickle when he was angered but he almost never used it in front of their elders. Especially Pak. Mak had a tongue sharper than anybody's in their village but Pak had a hand quick to slap away any disrespect. And because Abang Long was the oldest, all of their siblings had to respect him.

"Be like your Abang Long. He listens to his elders. Don't be like Bahrum," Pak would tell all the younger children. "He is selfish and disrespectful."

Yah rather liked Bahrum, at least whenever he paid her any attention. Sometimes, he plucked kemunting fruits for her and told her scary stories. Other times, he ignored her, or told her to go away. Sometimes, he'd be mean and tell her that her hair looked like a sparrow's nest. Those times, she hated him too. Right now, he was glaring at a mango tree nearby. As Yah walked closer and closer, Abang Long's voice became clearer.

"... you should have scolded them the moment you saw them playing with the sickle. If anything had happened..."

From the look on Bahrum's face, Yah could tell that she would hate him today. He liked to eat chicken too. Cik Yam. Oh Cik Yam! She felt tears welling up again. When would she stop crying? She wanted to stop crying. She wanted to be angry. She wanted to shout and scream. Cik Yam was mine! I fed her every day!

"Pak," she called out as they reached the pondok.

Ani laid out the wrapped rice she had been carrying in her basket. Yah could hear her sighing again.

"Yes, Yah?" replied Pak.

The edges of his seluar were muddy and damp while sweat was dripping down his face. Yah scrambled up the short steps and paused before her father.

"Nek Busu killed Cik Yam," she reported, hoping to see him frown in displeasure. Then she would tell him Nek Busu did it. Then he would get angry at the stupid old woman. Tears were threatening to fall again but this time she held it in. Pak hated it when any of his children cried.

"Is that so? Is that why you've been crying?"

"No, I wasn't crying," Yah quickly replied.

"She's lying," said Ani, off to the side. "From the house and all the way here, she was crying."

"I wasn't crying!" Yah shrieked at Ani.

Liar! Ani was a liar!

"Don't shout at your older sister," said Pak, a warning note in his voice.

Yah looked away but Pak sat up and framed her face with his hands, pulling her close.

"And if you weren't crying, why are there tears on your face?" asked Pak.

Yah remained silent.

"Are these tears of happiness? Are you happy your Nek Busu killed your chicken?"

Yah stared hard into Pak's face then looked away. She didn't reply. She couldn't.

Pak brushed his fingers against her cheeks and suddenly chuckled.

"What a liar you are. What a liar you're growing into," he said, finally, after a silent moment. Yah tried to look away but Pak gently turned her face back to his.

"Who taught you how to lie, Rohayah? Tell your Pak. Who taught you how to lie?"

Yah looked to the fields. She could see the bare water shimmering like the sun. She could see where the fields were green. There were still people there. From afar, they looked like spots of browns and reds, women in their kains and men with cloths tied in a band around their heads, with large hats woven from dried mengkuang leaves protecting them against the sun. Most were walking out

of the fields. Everyone tried to finish all their work in the padi fields before the midday sun got too hot.

Suddenly chuckling, Pak released her. He seemed relaxed, almost satisfied. A nice breeze was blowing.

“Go call Panjang and Angah. Tell them the food is here,” he then ordered, pushing her gently away.

Yah nodded and, keeping her eyes down, jumped from the platform to the ground. Pak made a noise of disapproval.

“You shouldn’t be jumping—” Ani began but Yah ran away before she could hear the rest of the sentence. Stupid Ani with her stupid face and her stupid hair.

She was a liar!

Yah ran past Abang Long and Bahrum — Abang Long’s voice was softer now and the ugly look on Bahrum’s face was gone — past the mango trees, gingerly slid down a short slope, and into the field. The ground softened from firm, brown soil to slippery grey mud and wet grass as she stepped onto one of the bunds crisscrossing the field.

“Yah! Don’t run!” someone shouted from behind her. Abang Long. He was always very bossy. Go away, Yah wanted to scream back. She just kept running. None of her big brothers ever bothered chasing her down.

She had an idea where Panjang and Angah might be — they were always playing at the border between their field and Paklong Man’s. There was a bund there that was especially high and thick, a bridge of earth on which people walked so that they would not have to wade through the muddy water and padi.

Walking in the padi field, you must keep your eyes on your feet, Mak told her once before.

Brushing her hair back from where it was blocking her eyes, Yah stopped just as she reached a junction. The bund in front of her was known simply as Jalan Tengah. It was originally meant to be a large bund but time had flattened the top into a path that they could use to guide one large buffalo through the field, if necessary. To her left, she could see two boys walking away in the distance. One of them was swinging a long stick. That was Angah. Yah started running towards them. The ground here was drier and firmer. She could run faster here. Yah decided then that she quite liked Jalan Tengah.

“Angah! Panjang!”

Neither responded at first. Yah called out again, louder this time. Both boys spun around so quickly Yah immediately knew they were doing something they weren't supposed to. She could see them talking to each other. Angah pointed at her with his stick. When they suddenly began running away from her, Yah knew she had to run as fast as she could to catch up.

“Angah! Wait!”

They continued running but Yah was a good runner. Nek Busu once told her that no boy would ever catch her, the way she ran. Yah had been thrilled to hear that.

“Angah, come back!” she shouted again. In the distance, she saw Angah pause, turn back to look at her, and then shout something to Panjang. Panjang shouted back without breaking his stride.

Yah could feel herself tiring but anger, bright and sudden, pushed her on. Stupid Panjang! Never letting her play with them! She drew in a long breath,

ready to scream at them again, but something caught her foot and she found herself on the ground, breathless and stunned. One of her knees throbbed. She didn't know which one. What happened? She pushed herself onto her side and saw the stick Angah had been waving around. She scrambled to sit up and tried to stand. Her elbows hurt. Her left ankle too and now both her knees were aching. Anger welled up inside her as tears prickled from the corners of her eyes. Not again. No. No more crying!

“Yah!”

Angah appeared beside her.

“Yah, are you hurt? You fell,” her brother asked, his eyes wide.

Sometimes, Yah felt as if Angah was the only person in the whole village who really liked her. He wasn't as tall and mean as Panjang and was always nice to her.

Yah swung her arm and smacked him on his cheek as hard as she could.

Angah yowled like a cat that had stepped on a nail and slapped her shoulder, his hand flying quicker than thought. Rage surged through her. Yah grabbed a fistful of dirt and tried to throw it into his face, only for him to smack her hand away, an angry red already blooming where she had hit him on his face.

“You made me fall!” Yah shouted at him.

“Are you crazy? I came to help you!” He had one hand rubbing his face where Yah's palm had landed and another raised up, ready to hit Yah if she tried anything else.

“Your stick! Your stick made me fall!” Yah shouted back. Was she crying again? She was crying again. Why was she crying again? She was angry! So angry!

She stood up, the twinges of pain in her legs disappearing, as if taken away by the hot midday breeze.

“Why did you go back, Angah? Why?” groaned Panjang as he stepped up to the two. He ignored Yah, his frustration clearly with the younger boy. “Why did you go back for her?”

“She fell! She was crying,” said Angah, his face slightly turned up to meet Panjang’s glare.

“I was not,” wailed Yah as tears ran down her cheeks again. “I wasn’t crying! I wasn’t!”

Panjang turned to her. He was tall, taller than her and Angah, almost as tall as Ani, even though she was older. He always stood with his back straight, and his head was always tilted just like that, as if she was somehow not worth talking to. Yes. Panjang was her enemy too.

“Go back Yah,” Panjang said, eyes furrowed impatiently. “Go back to the pondok. Go and eat. We’ll be back later.”

Yah wiped her eyes with her sleeves again. But there was mud on her hands. And now on her face. Why was there mud everywhere?

“And stop crying,” Panjang said flatly, turning around, putting one arm around Angah’s shoulders and pulling him along. They began to walk away.

“Pak is calling,” Yah cried out to them.

Angah turned.

“Abang Long said we could go to the river,” he said uncertainly.

“Quiet!” Panjang hissed. “Why? Why did you — Angah!”

“What?” Angah said, his voice rising.

“The river? You’re going to the river?” asked Yah.

The river was a long walk away but not too far that they couldn't spend some time there swimming before making it back in time before the sun started to set. Yah loved going to the river. Everyone loved the river.

"I want to go swimming!" cried Yah. It was a realization as sudden as her fall just few moments ago.

"We're not going swimming," Panjang said, glowering.

"Yes we are! You said we are," said Angah, sounding betrayed. Panjang looked as if he had bitten into a sour mango.

"I want to go swimming! I want to go! I'm following you," declared Yah.

The river water would be cold and she was feeling warm from all the running. The heat was only getting worse. And her kain was already wet from her fall anyway. And she would be able to wash the mud off!

"No, you can't. You don't have permission. And I don't want you to follow us," said Panjang impatiently. "You'll just be troublesome. And you cry a lot. Look. You are crying now!"

Angah looked down silently. He looked as if he wanted to say something but he was never very good with words. Not the way Bahrum or Mak was. And he didn't like fighting. Panjang, on the other hand, was very good at fighting. And he loved winning.

"And you're slow. And Pak will get angry because you didn't ask permission from anyone," he said, walking away with Angah in tow.

Yah knew he made sense but she didn't care.

"Go back Yah. Go back and cry all you want. Don't follow us."

Yah decided then that she hated Panjang more than Ani. More than anyone. And so she began to follow them.

They all walked in silence, past the odd neighbour or two, past empty plots filled with still water and bundles of young padi waiting to be planted in the watery fields again.

“Go back, Yah,” said Panjang again after some time, not even bothering to turn back to look at her.

They were still walking on Jalan Tengah but instead of turning to another smaller bund that would have led them out of the padi fields and through Maklang Jah’s vegetable garden — where they could have then walked down to the river—they were approaching the end of Jalan Tengah. From there, there was no other way to turn. Not unless they wanted to go into the forest. This was the nearest to the forest Yah had ever been. Yah’s neck turned a little cold.

Angah, who had been shooting pitying backward glances at her along the way, pulled Panjang down to whisper something in his ear. Panjang listened, before hissing something back. Angah shook his head. Panjang sighed. He then turned back to Yah.

“Yah, we are going to walk into the forest. You’ll be scared. You should go back now,” he said, almost gently.

“Why are you going into the forest?” asked Yah, her voice small, even to her ears. Only old people walked into forests. And even then, they almost never went in alone. It must be dangerous! Yes, that’s why no one ever went in alone!

“We want to go to a different river,” said Angah, his voice trembling. “And this river is in the forest.”

“What’s wrong with the other river? Why can’t we go to the other river? The river we always go to?” asked Yah. She didn’t want to go into the forest. She didn’t want to.

“Because we don’t want to,” said Panjang, stretching his arms up over his head, as if going into the forest was something he did every day.

“Go back Yah. If you are scared, go back,” said Angah.

Panjang nodded. He was looking at Yah carefully. Almost as if he was concerned.

A bird from deep within the trees burst into a series of chirps and trills but Yah ignored it determinedly.

She could already feel the river water flowing around her, cooling down her face and shoulders and sticky neck. But the forest was dark. It was filled with shadows. And civets. And tigers!

The path leading into the rustling leaves seemed to narrow into nowhere before Yah, disappearing into the dark shade of trees taller than anything she had ever seen. She looked down at her kain, and noticed that there was a slight rip at the edges of the fabric, just beside her right ankle. Stupid Angah and his stupid stick. Stupid Panjang running and coming back only to scold her. They were both stupid. She looked up, ready to tell Panjang that, yes, maybe she should go back. Maybe she would go and beg Bahrum to bring her to the river, to the other river, the nicer one, the one near Maklang Jah’s vegetables.

She was just about to open her mouth when she noticed that both her brothers were no longer looking at her. They were, instead, staring at the trees. Angah looked as uncertain as ever. Panjang still had that concerned look Yah was so unused to seeing on his face. His back was straight, and his arms were crossed over his chest.

Then Panjang turned to her, tilted his head, and said, “Now what? You are going back home, right?”

That tilt of the head. Always looking at her sideways. It's like he didn't like looking at her properly. It made Yah angry.

"No," she said, jutting her chin up, "I'm following you."

As they walked into the forest, Yah realized that the three of them were walking closer to each other. Panjang had his arm around Angah's shoulders and Angah was holding on to Yah's hand. When had Angah grabbed her hand? She hadn't noticed.

The road they were on narrowed into a trail that, though dark, was clear of vegetation and easy to walk through. There were branches that had been chopped off that would have blocked their path. No plant seemed interested in growing in the middle of what was obviously a trail used often. Once, they came across a flat patch of earth that was blanketed in dried kelapa husks, obviously meant to fix a particularly slippery mud patch. The trail itself seemed perfectly safe.

But the sounds. The noises. The heat. From the treetops, amongst the leaves, Yah could hear birds singing and screaming both. Sometimes, something could be heard dashing away from amongst the dense bushes. The three children would jump and, realizing that nothing had eaten them, giggle nervously.

"What if a tiger finds us?" Yah suddenly asked loudly.

"Watch your mouth or I'll pull your tongue out," Panjang spat, his eyes never leaving the bushes.

Yah found herself less frightened and feeling slightly cheated. It was like when she found out that all those ghost sounds that made the outhouse so scary had all been made by Bahrum.

“Abang Bahrum told me that if you want honey, you must look inside the forest,” said Angah, his eyes darting from branch to branch.

“He told me that too,” said Yah. Bahrum had told her no such thing but he really should have. Why hadn’t he? What if Bahrum liked Angah more than her?

“If you want honey, you must find the bees first,” said Panjang. He was having a hard time trying to wave away mosquitoes. Yah wanted to laugh at him. This is why you should wear your baju! See?

“Why?” asked Yah instead.

Panjang ignored her and walked on.

Yah turned to Angah.

“Why look for bees Angah? Why must you find bees to find honey?” she persisted.

Angah shrugged.

“Bees suck honey out of flowers and keep them in their nest,” said Panjang, finally, after some time.

Yah thought about this. Was that why Mak loved flowers?

The forest was becoming a little brighter. The trees were taller but spaced out further from each other.

Yah was just about to ask another question. She wanted to know why bees take honey from flowers. And she wanted to know why bees keep honey in their nest. But just as the question appeared in her mind, a nearby bush began to rustle.

“Look out,” shouted Panjang, as he wrenched his two younger siblings back and away. Angah’s hands were around Yah, pulling her with him. Acting on instinct, Yah tried to pull away before she realized that something was whining under the bushes. Something that was small and terrified and sad.

“I want to see,” said Yah.

Angah’s arms were blocking her.

“Don’t!” shouted Panjang.

The rustling intensified briefly before the leaves settled down into mere trembling. Something was crying. An animal. Yah stepped forward, trying to pull herself from Angah’s arms but Panjang pushed them both behind him and, picking up a stick from the ground, walked slowly into the bushes. Angah and Yah both watched as their older brother parted the leaves and bent down to look at whatever it was hidden behind the bush.

Panjang then turned to them, his eyes bright.

“The two of you should come and see,” he said.

Yah wasted no time hurrying forward, her hand still clasped onto Angah’s.

“What is it?” Yah asked.

It was a small animal. Very small. It looked like a baby goat. Yah had seen those before. Paklang Man kept goats and sometimes the females would give birth to baby goats. And the baby goats can be either male or female. And only the female ones give birth, her uncle had told her. Yah had found it strange. It would have made more sense for female goats to give birth to baby female goats and male goats to give birth to baby male goats.

“Is it male?” she asked.

Panjang gave her a strange look.

"It's a kancil! Like in the stories!" Angah gasped. His smile shined for a while before suddenly darkening. "Look, there is a rope around its leg."

Angah was right. There was a length of rope tightly knotted around one of its hind legs, and the rope was looped around the base of a nearby tree. It was funny, Yah thought, that the big tree could only catch this small little kancil.

"Someone fixed a trap here," Panjang sighed, straightening up. "We should just leave it. Come. We must be near the river. Kancils are always near water."

He turned to go.

"But we should let it go! Look, it's crying!" said Angah.

Sure enough, the mouse-deer's eyes seemed large and wet. And it was making soft little noises, almost like chicken hatchlings chirping.

"But it's someone else's trap. The mouse-deer belongs to him now, whoever he is," said Panjang. He was already a few steps away, hands on his hips.

"We must set it free!" declared Yah. "It's a baby kancil. Look at it. It's so small!"

Panjang stared at her, eyes steady.

"And I want to keep it," she finished.

"No, we should set it free, Yah," argued Angah.

"No!" said Yah. She jabbed her finger at the small animal. "I want him. Nek Busu killed Cik Yam this morning so I want him. I want to keep him!"

There would be no more tears for Cik Yam, Yah decided then. She would keep the kancil. She would bring him home and name him. She would keep him safe from Nek Busu.

"But Yah, what if the mother is looking for —" Angah began.

"I'll be his mother!" Yah snapped.

"The two of you can do what you want," Panjang said slowly, exasperation plain on his face. "But you will be stealing. That trap might be Paklong Man's. Or Pakngah Yusop's. Someone's. You would be stealing," he said, and marched off.

Angah quickly squatted down beside the mouse-deer, fingers already fiddling with the knot. It was tight and the frightened animal made it more difficult. Every time it pulled its leg, the knot tightened. Yah knelt beside Angah and helped him to hold the mouse-deer down. She didn't want it to escape. After what seemed like a very long while, Angah's fingers finally pulled through and the knot came undone. The mouse-deer sprang up but its tiny legs wobbled and Yah was able to grab the little thing to her chest. Tightly.

"We should let it go," Angah pleaded softly. "It's the right thing to do. It wants its mother!"

"No," came Yah's reply.

They soon caught up with Panjang, who was waiting for them by a large tree.

"Look," he pointed. "There it is. There's the river. We've found it."

Panjang, who was always frowning and scowling, almost looked happy. And very relieved. The river was smaller than the one they usually went to, narrower, and there were more rocks and boulders down its sides. But the current was gentle and there was a pool to one side that had glistening green water, the exact shade of green Yah had earlier imagined.

As her brothers started undressing, however, Yah realized that there was a problem.

"You didn't bring the rope with you," she accused Angah.

Angah shrugged at her and slipped out of his seluar. Panjang, already

naked, waded out into the river and into the pool, testing its depth. It reached to just below his waist. Satisfied, he leaned back and sank into the water.

"It's cold!" he cried gleefully.

Angah jumped in soon after.

"But wait, where should I put him down?" cried Yah, looking down at the baby kancil in her arms. It was staring at the water. She looked around. What could she do? The animal was already struggling, trying to kick out with its legs and Yah was getting tired. And she wanted to swim! And there was no rope!

Her brothers were already laughing and splashing water at each other.

"There's fish! A fish! Panjang, there's a fish!" Angah exclaimed, pointing into the water.

"Catch it!" cried Panjang and both of them dove into the water.

Both boys then came up, gasping for air.

"Do you think there are rivers in Tanjong Pagar?" wondered Panjang.

"Where? Tanjong Pagar? Where is that?" asked Angah.

"It's the place where we are moving to! In Singapore! Don't you know anything? Mak's old house was there."

Yah sat down by the water's edge on a big boulder. The stone was smooth and slightly warm from the sun. She dipped her muddy ankles into the green water. It was just as cool as she had imagined it to be. The mouse-deer squirmed. But no. She would never let it go. Never.

"It's not fair," she cried out.

No one heard her.

She shouted at her brothers.

"It's not fair!"

"It's your own fault," sang Panjang, as he lazily leaned back to smile at her.

Yah briefly considered throwing their clothes into the water. But her hands were full. It wasn't fair!

"I can help you hold it. Later, maybe," offered Angah. But he looked too happy for Yah to believe him. She wanted to swim. And she wanted to swim now. But she wanted her kancil. Yes, she wanted to say. Please, help me, a part of her begged. But her mouth remained silent. She was angry again.

"No, leave her," said Panjang. He splashed water at Angah. Some of the cool droplets splattered against her cheeks, against her eyes.

It's not fair, thought Yah. Her face was wet. Was she crying again? She could taste salt. No. She was angry.

Maybe I'll swim in the sea later. Maybe Bahrum will take me to the beach later, Yah thought. She was crying again. And he was struggling, her mouse-deer. He didn't want her. She didn't care.

Her brothers were laughing again. There's fish in the water. And the water was green. And the water was cool. There's salt on her face. Her arms were burning.

I can't have anything, Yah realized. It was then, with water flowing in between her toes and her kancil kicking against her chest, that Yah felt as if she was learning something, something she felt she already knew but still couldn't fully understand. Cik Yam was dead. They were all leaving for Tanjong Pagar. They were going somewhere else to live. Singapore. Things were changing. And all she could do was to hold on tightly to something that wasn't really hers in the first place.

Chapter 2

When they reached home, the sun was just setting. The heat gentled from scorching to just slightly warm and everything was bathed in more light, which made the whole world seem wet with oil or honey. Underneath their feet, red soil and dried grass had faded into coarse brown sand. The closer they got to their house, the paler the sand became. From where they were approaching, the house seemed quiet. The clucking of their chickens, the banging of pots in the kitchen, Mak nagging at Ani—all the noises Yah heard every day in the house was being drowned out by the sea waves crashing onto the shore.

The verandah was empty. Pak must be down by the beach. Somewhere. She could see the beach in between the trees but she didn't see anyone. Hopefully, wherever he was, Abang Long and Bahrum was with him. Pak was always complaining about how her two older brothers never fixed their shrimp nets properly.

Panjang was talking, in that bossy, big brother voice of his, but Yah was more concerned with her baby kancil. The poor thing in her arms had stopped struggling. Instead, it was breathing hard, like it had been running. Which was strange, because Yah had carried the tiny animal all the way back. Why was it tired? Or... maybe it was crying?

"And remember not to tell the others where we went. Abang Long allowed the two of us, not you, to go to the river. And—are you listening? Yah? You're not listening to me, are you?"

"Yes I am!" Yah replied hotly, not bothering to turn around to face him. Yah was still angry at both of them. They had played all day in the river. They had

even tried catching fish with their bare hands! It was not fair! And her kain was torn and muddy still. Mak would notice and get angry for sure.

Yah briefly wondered if she had to go home at all. Maybe she should just run down straight to the beach. But Mak would get even angrier. And Pak would tell her to go home anyway.

"—maybe next time, we should bring a net!" Angah chattered excitedly. "A fishing rod is for cowards. We should bring a net, jump into the water, and catch the fish using our hands!"

"Yah! Angah! And there you are, Panjang! Where were you?"

Mak suddenly barged out of the front door and stormed down the two steps from their front door to their verandah. Her large eyes were wide with anger and her shoulder-length hair, tied back, had loosened, the way it often did after a long day.

Once, a long time ago, maybe last year, Yah had resolved to one day be just like her Mak. Mak always stood tall and her clothes were always neat and clean. She always took care to oil and comb her gently curling hair, something she made sure Ani and Yah did as well, before she went to sleep. She was tanned but also a lot fairer than many of the other village women. Every once in a while, Mak would send for Wak Sarong the pawancar, who would then drive her, Yah, and either Bahrum or Abang Long to Masjid Tanah. There, among the people in town, Mak seemed truly like a queen, speaking clearly and fiercely to the storekeepers there. Yah even heard Mak speak in a different language once!

Then, there were the things her neighbours and relatives would say to her. Sometimes, they would say things like, "You are as pretty as your Mak!" Once, even mean, old Nek Busu said, "You are so clever with words. You must

have gotten it from your mother." Yah loved it all. She also loved it when Mak scolded her siblings. Some of the things she would say!

Of course, this time, Mak was glaring at all three of them, so any pride Yah felt for her mother had quickly been buried under a dusty, choking fear that squeezed her throat. There was a moment of silence before everyone suddenly seemed to be talking at once.

"Mak, I found a baby kancil! See? I am going to—"

"We were just at the fields, Mak, making sure the chickens didn't—"

"Mak, do we have an extra net? The river has—"

"—Angah! Don't say—"

"What is this? Quiet! All of you! What is all this noise?"

Another voice, raspier but just as harsh, rose up from inside the house.

Mak glanced behind her before fixing a fearsome glare back on the three siblings.

"These three, Mak Busu. They disappeared during midday meal. Ani was looking for them all but she couldn't find them," Mak said, her voice severe. "She had to run up and down the padi fields like a mad tomcat in heat."

Nek Busu then came out, taking the two steps down their step ladder gingerly, her thin hands grabbing onto the sides of the door frame for support. She was an old woman, with deeply tanned, heavily-lined skin and graying eyes and hair. Yah also knew how evil she could be, as the memory of a white-feathered old hen struck her with a pang of old grief. Had it just been this morning?

Oh, Cik Yam! Nek Busu was a killer!

She tightened her hands around the baby kancil. She would protect him. She had to!

Nek Busu's gaze slowly turned to her.

"Yah? What is that in your arms? Child, come here. Show your Nek Busu what you've got there," the old woman said, walking to the edge of the verandah, her hands beckoning at Yah to come closer.

She could hear Panjang trying to stifle a groan. From Angah, silence. Which was to be expected. He was always especially terrified of Nek Busu.

"Come here, Rohayah," Nek Busu said again as she slowly sat herself on the edge of their verandah to peer down on Yah, resting on the wooden railing.

Yah walked slowly, gently pushed forward by Angah, who whispered, "Go Yah. Or we'll all get it."

Yah quickened her steps.

"I want to keep him," she said, softly, just as she got closer to the verandah. She looked up into Nek Busu's eyes which had latched onto the quivering animal in Yah's arms.

The old woman's eyes narrowed slightly as they drank in the sight of the kancil. Looking up at her, Yah realised how old Nek Busu must be. She didn't have a single black hair in her tight bun. The lines on her face all seemed to be pointed downwards, as if what little flesh that lingered there had grown too heavy. It made her look like she was always tired, or bad-tempered, or sad, or disapproving. Yah knew then, by just looking at Nek Busu's face, that she wouldn't be allowed to keep the baby kancil. Nek Busu was the oldest in their house, even older than Wak Sarong, who was older than Pak. In one way or another, her kancil would be taken away from her. Because she was just a little girl, not like Mak and Nek Busu or even Ani, and because little girls like her weren't allowed to own anything.

Yah could feel a deep sadness welling up inside her and, without really knowing why, she began to cry.

"Where did you get that?" Mak asked as her gaze alternated between Yah, the baby kancil and her two brothers. Her voice was low, dangerous, and her arms had snaked up to rest on her waist.

Yah cried harder. Mak's face remained stony.

"The—the forest," Angah said, his voice soft, as if he had finally understood how furious the woman was.

"And what were you doing in the forest?" Mak asked, her voice rising.

"Angah—don't—" Panjang began, something like a whine painting his voice.

"You keep quiet! Let your little brother talk!" Nek Busu cut in, her voice like the knife she used to cut chillies. "Stop teaching him how to lie!"

"We—we went—went to the ri—river in the forest," Angah stammered.

Yah opened her eyes, trying to look at Mak's face through her tears. The kancil then started squirming, as if it sensed danger and was trying to run away.

Then, Ani appeared at the door, a bewildered expression on her face as she stared at all of them.

"Mak... I think the chicken is cooked. You should look at it," Ani said softly.

Mak ignored Ani and marched down the steps, making her way towards the three of them. She looked as if she wanted to stuff all of them into the pot with Cik Yam.

Yah wondered why everyone seemed to hate her.

"You two should have just kept quiet. Why am I always-aaah!" Panjang howled, not caring anymore that Mak could hear him, as the enraged woman pulled him into the house by his earlobes.

When Pak got back and Mak told him where the three children had gone, dinner became a silent, tense affair. Not a single one of the six siblings spoke. No one remarked on the food, which was unusual. They only ever ate chicken either on special occasions or when one of their chickens was about to die. Either way, it was usually a cheerful affair for the children. If any of their animals were old or injured, the only way to make sure that they wouldn't go to waste would be to slaughter them and eat them before they died on their own. If they did die on their own, then their meat shouldn't be eaten.

The end of the dinner came too quickly and while Mak and Nek Busu cleaned up, Pak gathered his children in the main hall of the house. He took out the rotan and started with Panjang first. As the eldest, Pak explained as he swung the springy rod down on Panjang's legs repeatedly, Panjang should have been thinking of his younger siblings and their safety, not himself.

"It wasn't me," Panjang cried, jumping at every swing of the rotan. "Abang Long said I could go! He said I could! No! Oh! Ooh! Pak!"

"Did you?" Pak demanded, his voice shaking their wooden house as he turned to Abang Long.

The rotan swished in the air, the sound sending shivers all over Yah's skin.

Abang Long, who had been cringing with Bahrum and Ani in a corner of their living room, jerked up at being called.

"What? When? When did you ask me Panjang? Don't lie," he stammered, folding his arms, his chin angled upwards challengingly.

Pak, who had received his answer, continued caning Panjang. Angah, who was already crying, was next. Just like Panjang, he squealed and screamed, but he didn't say a single word in protest. Angah always knew when he was in the wrong. Then it was Yah's turn, who received three stinging swipes at her legs before Mak appeared, emerging from the back of the house where the kitchen was.

"Are you done? I need Ani in the kitchen. Come, Ani," she said, sparing an unsympathetic glance at her three youngest children before turning back.

Ani looked at Pak for permission and meekly scurried after her mother when he nodded at her.

Yah sniffled. She hadn't cried. Not like stupid, lying Panjang. Pak turned to her and raised his rotan again.

"That's enough for now, Saat," Nek Busu said as she slowly climbed up the steps from the kitchen. "It's time to sleep soon and the boys"—she motioned to Bahrum and Abang Long—"haven't prayed."

Pak stared at her with a hard look in his eyes, as if he wanted to disagree. Then his shoulders sagged and his expression softened. He sighed loudly and turned to his children.

"Along, Bahrum, go and wash yourselves. Then go pray. Panjang." He turned his eyes to his middle son. "Remember that you have to always keep your younger siblings out of danger. Not put them in it. The forest is very dangerous. People have died because they weren't careful. Understand?"

Nek Busu grunted in agreement.

"Yes Pak," Panjang said, his voice still choked up. He managed to sneak a hateful glance at Yah but Yah ignored him. She wasn't the one crying anyway.

Any anger against Angah that Yah still felt melted away however, like dew in the morning sun.

"Now, the three of you come here," Nek Busu ordered, as she took out a small glass bottle of oil.

"Come, all three of you. Yes, you too Panjang," she said, as she motioned to the rolled up mengkuang mats arranged neatly in a corner. "Spread one of the mats out. Come, let me look at your legs. Your father beat you hard, didn't he? Yes, yes he did. Sit down Yah, raise your—oh, look at that, it's not that red. Not like last time, yes?"

Yah wiped her eyes with her sleeve. She sat in front of Nek Busu as the old woman poured a few drops of oil into her hands and began massaging them into Yah's stinging calves.

"Yes, your father beat you well," the old woman chuckled darkly in amusement. "Did you like the food just now? Cik Yam was no longer laying eggs. So we had to—"

"I know," Yah sniffled, shame suddenly burning her cheeks. Cik Yam was delicious. Yah had eaten everything on her plate.

"And what about your new friend you brought back? Are you going to keep him? It's been so long since I last cooked and ate a kancil. But it's so small, it has no me—"

Yah recoiled in horror and wrenched her legs free from Nek Busu's hands. "No!" she cried, but Nek Busu was already cackling.

"Oh, Yah. I was just teasing you," she said, her eyes sly and twinkling. Beside her, Angah was giggling into the palms of his hand and even Panjang snorted.

Off to the side, Pak made a similar sound as he took out a cigarette, a set of matches and walked out to the dark of the verandah. It was maghrib. A while later, after prayers, he and the older boys would have to go out to trawl for shrimp.

The baby kancil escaped that very night. It must have. Yah had pushed it under an overturned basket near the chicken coops with some leaves and a tempurung of water but the tiny helpless animal was gone when she returned the next morning. She hadn't even named it yet.

She scrambled to Angah and Panjang, who were both at the chicken coops where Bahrum was replacing rotting planks with new ones. It was a hot morning and the sand burned against Yah's bare feet.

"It probably went looking for its mother," Angah said, as he handed Bahrum another nail from the tempurung he was holding. The dried out round bowl was made from the hard shell of an old coconut. Yah remembered, with a twinge of grief, the tempurung she had carefully left with the kancil. Her kancil. She had been thinking of calling it "Kecik" because it was so small.

"Maybe a tiger came and ate it," snorted Panjang.

Yah remembered then that she hated them both. She could hear Bahrum laughing softly to himself as he hammered the nail Angah had given him. She kicked his ankle and ran back into the house. She could hear him laughing, louder

this time, muffled though he was underneath the chicken coops. I hope it falls on him, Yah thought viciously.

"Rohayah, Rohayah," Mak sighed, shaking her head, as Yah walked through the door. It was the back entrance to her house and led straight to the kitchen where Mak and Nek Busu were. Nek Busu was pounding something in a stone mortar. Yah could smell the raw sharp scent of chillies. Curious, she moved towards Nek Busu, who looked up to frown at Yah.

"You're getting sand all over the floor!"

Yah never understood why Mak insisted on sweeping up and down their house, once in the morning and once more after maghrib. Every time Yah or anyone else walked out to the outhouse by the chicken coops, sand would come trailing after them, defiant. Every time the back door to the kitchen opened, sand would slide in like an unwelcomed neighbour you were related to. Every time the wind blew through an open window or an unclosed door, sand would come in. It made no difference, Yah thought, if Mak spent all day sweeping.

"Make sure to cover the food with the tudung saji, Ani," Mak called out behind her up the kitchen steps.

"We need a new one," Ani's voice grumbled back. "This one is torn on one side. See?"

"How can I see? I'm down here," said Mak wryly. "Ask your father to go cut some mengkuang leaves. It's about time we dry more."

The kitchen was Yah's least favourite part of the house. It was small and, unlike the rest of the house, sat on the sandy ground, connected to the house by a rickety two-step ladder. There was a slab of smooth stone in one corner where two iron stoves sat, blackened by charcoal and fire, below a window that must

always be opened when they were cooking so that the smoke could fly out. In fact, the entire kitchen was made of stone.

Yah had heard before from Mak and Pak about people so wealthy their entire houses were made of stone. Yah didn't understand why anyone would want an entire house made of something so hard and cold. Stone made the kitchen seem dark, despite the light from the fire. Maybe it was because she didn't like the grey colour of the walls. They reminded her too much of the scary stories Bahrum used to tell her, of people being trapped in caves and buried alive.

The only thing Yah loved about the kitchen was the kitchen door. It opened up to their yard, where their chicken coops were, and if Yah sat by it on a quiet afternoon, she would hear the rhythmic crashing of waves on the beach below the clucking of the hens. She loved how the door itself was split into two. Mak would often open the top half to let the light in while the bottom half kept the sand and wandering chickens out. Sometimes, whenever she was feeling generous, or when Mak wasn't looking, Yah would grab a fistful of raw rice and fling it out to their yard, just so she could see the chickens fight among themselves for her tribute.

"Your Abang Long helped to build it when the old door fell off," said Mak, when Yah had asked her about the door once.

"Why aren't all our doors like this one?" Yah had asked, thinking of the kitchen doors at Maklang Jah's house nearby. They had two doors in their big kitchen, one on either side.

"It's a little too much trouble," Mak had replied, "and the more you split your doors, the more locks you'll have to fix in. It's too much trouble for some people. You, of course, would know that."

Yah and Angah were in charge of making sure all their doors were locked before they went to bed, with Panjang to supervise them. Despite their best efforts, there was always one door they would forget to lock, usually the bottom half of the kitchen door. Yah hated the kitchen even more at night, so she always thought to herself that the kitchen doors were Angah's responsibility. But Pak would always find out which door remained unlocked before they all fell asleep so Yah never really had to worry too much about locks.

The morning seemed to flash by. After Mak had told her to get out of the kitchen, Yah had gone looking for Kecik the kancil. She had poked and prodded bushes with a large stick all the way down to the beach by herself before she had been dragged home by an irate Ani. She and Ani had then helped Nek Busu deliver a block of belacan to Maklang Jah, who had given them a basket of tamarinds in return.

"Send my regards to your Mak, Ani. Tell her she should come over before you all leave. I've not seen her in days!" the plump, cheerful woman had called out as Yah and Ani raced back.

Then they had helped Mak with lunch and delivered the food to the fields again. This time, Abang Long kept a sharp eye on Panjang and Angah. He shouldn't have bothered. Yah could still feel the sting on her calves. All that only for Kechik to run away, Yah thought bitterly. Stupid kancil.

Evening then came. After maghrib prayers, Pak, Abang Long and Bahrum went down to the beach where they and the other men of the kampung trawled the tides for the shrimp they needed to make belacan.

Yah miserably thought about how no one in the village wanted to play with her. Her cousins from the neighbouring houses never visit and Ani never liked bringing her to visit them when she goes out on her errands.

Finally, the lamps had all been blown and the only light to see by were the lines of moonlight filtering through the edges in between the loose planks in their walls.

She and Angah had forgotten to lock the bottom half of the kitchen door again.

"One day, when you have your own house, a burglar would just walk in and take all your rice and you wouldn't even know about it," Pak muttered, as the family settled down to sleep in the main hall.

"There are no burglars here," Yah said. Even to her own ears, her voice sounded small. And it was all Angah's fault too! He was the one who was supposed to lock the back door! Yah knew he was pretending to sleep because she couldn't hear his snores. "If someone wanted rice, they can just ask, and Mak will give it to them. They don't have to steal!"

Surprised laughter rumbled across the planks of the floor they were all sharing. Through the dark, she could hear Abang Long and Bahrum sniggering to each other, their heads right behind hers. Panjang had snorted out loud and Yah was certain even Angah had squeaked. Beside Yah, Mak made a shushing sound, though Yah could tell she was smiling. Though they had one room in their house where they kept all their clothes and books and things, the whole family usually

slept on the floor in the main hall. Panjang and Ani would lay out their mengkuang mats and take the pillows out from the room.

Only Nek Busu sometimes slept in the room by herself. Yah thought she must be silly to want to sleep on her own.

"A long time ago, when the old people invented doors, they also invented locks. And now our locks are made of metal when our doors are still made of wood," Nek Busu's voice suddenly pierced from across the room. There was a note of wistfulness in Nek Busu's gruff voice but Yah could feel Mak wrapping her arms around Yah's shoulders. She knew she was supposed to ask for forgiveness or to say, "Yes Nek, I understand," but sleep was calling and Yah found that she didn't understand and that she didn't care much about respecting her elders.

"There will be locks at our new place, right? In the city? In Singapore?" Ani suddenly asked.

"Don't be silly," Mak sighed, sleep already creeping into her voice. "In the city, every door has a lock."

"I wonder if Busu will be okay on her own here," Mak's voice glided into Yah's ears like a stray sea wave. Yah opened her eyes. It was still dark and the sound of crickets and toads sung to the cold night air. Both the spaces to her left and right where Mak and Pak slept were empty.

"What else can we do? She doesn't want to go with us and she doesn't want to stay with anyone else," came Pak's reply.

"Maybe you should send another letter to Nonya Ong," Mak sighed. "I'm sure she wouldn't mind one more person. After all we did for her during the war—"

Yah got up. She had been dreaming. She was doing something by the beach when she had heard something. Then she remembered feeding the chickens. Cik Yam was alive, pecking at tufts of grass, clucking the way she did when she's satisfied.

Yah must have been in another world where everyone was nicer to her. Then she had heard her parents' voices.

"She can be so—" Mak began, her voice rising, but Pak sharply shushed her.

"Don't be like that. Mak Busu would never leave this village. She's lived here all her life. Her family is buried here. And she looked after me when I wasn't even old enough to walk. I... I know her. She wouldn't leave. I don't want to force her. And I am responsible for her now."

They must be up to watch the fireflies again, Yah sleepily decided.

It wasn't unusual for Mak and Pak to wake up in the middle of the night to sit with a hot drink out at the verandah and admire the fireflies. The bright balls of light would fly from tree to tree. Once, Yah thought she could see outlines of the trees in front of their house just by tracing the lines they made.

Pak would light up one oil lamp and hang it in the kitchen so that Mak could see as she boiled water for hot sweet tea. Sometimes Abang Long would join them. Sometimes Nek Busu would join them though she herself would never drink anything. Yah liked listening to them talk and she used to love watching the fireflies, which looked like a million floating matches. But she realised a long time

ago that whenever she joined the adults, their conversations never seemed as fun to listen to.

"So someone actually wanted to take her in?" Mak asked. Then, in a voice so soft Yah nearly couldn't hear her, Mak continued, "I thought no one would. Who?"

Pak grunted an answer but Yah's ears couldn't catch it. Something like glee had glowed within Yah's chest. She just heard a secret! It must be. So no one else likes Nek Busu? She quickly shut her eyes, hoping to fall back to sleep. Let me dream of Cik Yam again. Please. Please.

"Your cousin?" Mak said dryly. "Which one? The one who bought our buffaloes? You have so many cousins. I've lived here for so long and more and more cousins keep appearing!"

Both her parents chuckled softly. Yah frowned at the memory of their buffaloes. Yah had always been scared of them but sometimes they can be fun to watch. Of course, Bahrum said that they couldn't possibly bring their buffaloes to Singapore.

How do people in Singapore plant their rice then?

"The turtle season will soon be here," Pak said, his voice suddenly louder and more casual.

Yah's eyes blinked open. Turtles. Sea turtles. That meant turtle eggs buried in hidden, underground nests up and down the length of their beach.

For a minute, Mak didn't say anything. The conversation seemed to have stopped. There was something thick in the air, something that made Yah try to breathe a little softer, something that made her want to be as quiet as possible.

"I don't understand why everyone here likes turtle eggs so much," Mak finally sighed.

Yah remembered how Mak had tried, again, to eat a turtle egg once during the last turtle season. After boiling the eggs, you were supposed to bite a small hole into the thin shell before sucking out the egg white, which never hardens no matter how long you boil it. Then you get to eat the yolk.

"It's like the egg whites from a chicken egg! And raw!" Mak had gagged, much to everyone's amusement. She tried one every year. Every year, she'd give the one egg she tried to eat back to Pak.

Nek Busu always cackled the loudest.

"It's not something orang luar would understand," the old woman had laughed. "Only those who grew up here would know how to like it!"

Mak never liked it when Nek Busu called her orang luar. Yah knew Mak came from Singapore. When they live in Singapore, would Yah be orang luar too?

"Yes, the boys love them. They are delicious, as you know—" Pak said, chuckling.

Yah heard the sound Mak made whenever she slapped Abah's shoulder.

"—but the girls are more like you, I think."

"No, no, you don't know your daughters," Mak replied. "Ani likes them too. She's just quiet about it. And Yah likes to eat everything."

With the sound of distant waves in the still night air, it wasn't hard for Yah to fall asleep dreaming of sea turtles and their eggs.

When Yah woke up the next morning, she was the only one still sprawled in the middle of the house. For a brief and alarming moment, Yah thought she

was all alone in the house and that everyone had left for Singapore without her. It was something Ani had assured her would happen if she misbehaved and Yah knew that she had not been keeping out of trouble. But the sounds of pots clanging in the kitchen accompanied by Mak's loud instructions to Ani quickly calmed her down.

Stupid, lying Ani, Yah thought, her pounding heart calming down. Why do brothers and sisters exist? They seem to be too troublesome to be valuable in any way.

As Yah slowly got up, she looked to the open front door. Pak was sitting at the verandah, which was what he did every day before leaving for the fields. The sun had almost risen over the distant hills and the sky was already a lighter shade of blue. The air was cold. She could hear the boys splashing water at each other down by the well at the back of their yard. Angah was squealing.

"Stop that! I'll tell Mak!" Panjang was whining. He sounded annoyed but he was also laughing.

"I thought you liked swimming? How was the rotan that night? Good?" Bahrum teased.

"Yah? Are you up?" Mak called up from the kitchen. Before Yah could reply, Mak started scolding Ani. "You didn't throw out the ashes from yesterday? How could you forget? Thank God our house didn't burn down last night!"

Rubbing her eyes, Yah began to stand up when she suddenly heard a strangely familiar sound coming from the verandah, where Pak was sitting.

No one else seemed to notice. Not the boys outside nor her mother and sister in the kitchen. From where Yah was sitting, she could easily see Pak sitting at his usual place, sitting while leaning against the wooden railing that fenced

their verandah. Walking slowly and quietly towards him, Yah suddenly saw where the noise was coming from.

From where she stood, Yah could see one side of Nek Busu's face. She was sitting on the other side of the verandah, facing Pak. She was sobbing.

Yah stood still. She had never seen someone old crying before.

Only Pak seemed to know Nek Busu was crying and even then, he was looking into the distance, towards the fields and the rising sun, as if trying to check if the young padi he had been planting all day yesterday were still there.

Why was Nek Busu crying? Did Pak scold her? But Pak never scolds Nek Busu. She's the oldest in the house. Everyone listened to her, whether they wanted to or not.

"You won't change your mind? This is your home. This is your parents' home. Can you bear to just leave it? And you're just going to leave me with him? You know what he did to me. And you know he doesn't want to see—you know he doesn't want me," Nek Busu was saying. Though her cheeks were wet and her breaths were heavy, Nek Busu's voice still sounded steady, if a little softer than usual. "He hasn't spoken to me since that night. And you know why. I've not seen him in... how... I don't even know—"

"More than ten years," Pak said, eyes still fixed somewhere far away, as if he didn't want to look at Nek Busu. Or couldn't. How rude. Even Yah knew you were supposed to at least face someone when speaking to them, especially when they were older. And no one was older than Nek Busu.

Yah watched, silent and unmoving. She wanted to watch and listen to what they were saying. But she didn't want to get caught. She didn't know why.

"Ten years," Nek Busu whispered, barely loud enough for Yah to hear.

"During the war. I thought he'd died, you know. All my other children never—when I found out he was alive, I was... I was... I was so happy."

It was then that Pak turned to look at Nek Busu. Yah could see his face but she couldn't tell if he was angry or sad. Maybe he had scolded her. Maybe that was why she was crying.

"It's about time he comes here to see you. What kind of son is he, to leave you here like this?" Pak's voice sounded gruff.

In the distance, a rooster crowed, half-hearted, as if it knew it wasn't needed. The sun was well above the hills, too yellow and too bright. Yah realised she was nearly by the door.

"Yah? Are you awake?" Ani's voice rang from the kitchen. "Yah?"

Both Pak and Nek Busu turned. Pak didn't seem disturbed to see Yah staring at them. Nek Busu, however, quickly wiped her face with her sleeves. She then looked up and narrowed her eyes at Yah's silence.

"What are you waiting for? Your sister is calling you! And go wash your face!" Nek Busu ordered. Every trace of emotion seemed to have evaporated in an instant. Except for her tears. Her cheeks were still wet.

Yah quickly turned and ran towards the kitchen.

"I'm awake, I'm awake," she called out.

"Oh, finally!" Ani replied, as she appeared in the doorway that led down to the kitchen. She had an annoyed look on her face but Yah didn't care. Who cares about stupid Ani anyway? Nek Busu has a son!

Chapter 3

After Pak and all her brothers left for the fields, Yah had to check the chicken coop for eggs with Ani. Yah thought about how empty the tiny coop seemed before remembering that they had eaten Cik Yam. They still had five hens and eight chicks, though one chick seemed to have disappeared. They also had a rooster who wandered around, even at night. Bahrum said it helped to guard their house.

"The chick will turn up later," Ani said lightly, but only after she had checked that Yah hadn't counted wrongly. "Are you going to cry again?"

"Maybe it went out looking for Cik Yam," Yah said.

"Did you give that one a name too?"

"Its name is Cicik."

Ani snorted, picked up the small basket of eggs they had collected and walked back towards the house.

"How do you even tell the chicks apart, anyway?" Ani asked cheerfully, as if Yah hadn't lost yet another friend.

Following her sister without bothering to answer, Yah stuck her tongue out at Ani's back. She didn't know how she can tell the chicks apart. She simply could. Ani couldn't because Ani was both blind and stupid.

As they reached the backdoor, Mak stepped out, wearing a white selendang around her shoulders. It was one of her more expensive ones, Yah noticed. There was another one in her hand.

"I want to visit the cemetery for a while," she said briskly, handing the piece of cloth to Yah. "Yah, you follow me."

Yah frowned, taking the piece of cloth and settling it on her shoulders, letting the tail ends hang down both sides of her neck, the end nearly brushing the ground. Mak adjusted it quickly.

"Can I come too?" Ani asked, her eyes lingering on Mak's selendang. "I've already checked the chicken coops. Oh, and one chick is missing."

"It will probably turn up later. If it doesn't let me know," Mak said, sliding her feet into her slippers, "and no, you have to help Nek Busu at home."

She held out her hand to Yah, who took it instinctively. Mak's hands were rough to the touch but warm and large. Holding Mak's hand made Yah feel as if she didn't need to worry about anything.

"Try to make sure the house is still here when I'm back," Mak drawled, a playful twist at the edges of her lips as she looked at Ani. "Your Nek Busu sometimes forgets things. Like my name. Or whether a fire is lit."

"Yes, Mak," Ani said, always obedient.

It was very easy to get to the cemetery. Even Yah knew how to go there on her own, if she wanted to. It was just a long way away. They had to turn left in front of their house, follow the red dirt road past a field of kemunting bushes, past the old blind well and continue walking all the way until they reached the junction at Pengkalan Balak. There was a mosque there beside a food stall and some old shophouses where some of the Chinese families lived. In the mornings, there would be a small and lively market by the shophouses. It was where everyone who wanted to buy, trade or sell anything went, be it eggs or mengkuang mats or fish. Whenever Mak or Pak wanted to look for Wak Sarong to

drive them to town, they would look for him either at the masjid or at the small food stall beside it.

Wak Sarong was a big, round man with greying hair and a rough, grating voice. Everyone Yah knew in the village knew who Wak Sarong was because he was the only one in the village who drove a proper car, the kind that Yah sometimes saw on movies posters or pictures in Masjid Tanah. And he lived in Masjid Tanah! It was an even bigger town than Pengkalan Balak. Yah only recently found out, from Panjang no less, that everyone called him Wak Sarong because he would accept any amount of money as payment for his services, no matter how small, and slip it into a hidden pocket in his sarong.

"Teja," he greeted Mak as they walked through the open food stall when they reached the junction. Though the stall itself boasted a tin roof held up by four, sturdy-looking posts, the wooden tables and benches spilled out into the open space outside the masjid, shaded only by a tall jati tree. There were groups of men nursing small cups of black coffee or tea, munching on bananas or small plates of kuih. The constant hum of muttered conversations fell slightly when Yah and Mak arrived but quickly picked up again. Yah knew it could be even more crowded depending on the time of day. Not all of the tables were occupied and most of those who were there were old, with greying hair and wrinkled faces.

Wak Sarong, even with his faded black hair and mustache, seemed to be among the youngest there and was seated at a small table alone at the edge of the crowd. A big black car was parked nearby.

"Not going into town today?" he asked warmly.

"Not today," Mak answered Wak Sarong, smiling slightly. "We're just going to the cemetery for a while. Just to visit, you know. Any stories from town to share?"

Behind the counter, Yah saw a man in a white shirt and a black songkok making the drinks. Yah called the couple who ran the stall "Maklang" and "Paklang" but she never knew exactly how they were related. Today, Paklang was at his usual spot, clattering about making hot drinks while loudly disagreeing with someone who seemed to be discussing something with him from the table closest to the counter.

"The Tengku may have royal blood but not all of royal blood can just..." he was saying. Yah didn't understand what he was talking about so she didn't bother listening any further.

Maklang was nowhere to be seen, probably somewhere at the back.

Yah wondered why all the customers were men. Mak was the only woman there. But while some men stared at Mak nervously or shot her strange looks, the way Mak ignored them made Yah feel something fierce and gleeful in her chest.

Panjang hadn't known Wak Sarong's real name. Yah wanted to know but looking at the man now, sitting on the stool, wearing a cream short-sleeved shirt and a checkered yellow kain sarong, she couldn't find the courage to ask him for his real name.

"The usual. This thing with the British and the communists. And the Tengku was in the papers again. You know how it is," the big man sighed loudly.

A few men turned to him, interested.

Mak nodded, pursing her lips, but she didn't ask for more details, as if she already knew what Wak Sarong was talking about. She probably does, Yah decided.

"Is this your youngest? Rohani, is it?" Wak Sarong turned and Yah suddenly realised he was smiling down at her.

Without thinking, she hid behind Mak. Then she peeked out. He was still smiling at her so she smiled back.

"No, Rohani is the other girl. This little one here is Rohayah," Mak said. "Yah? Greet Wak Sarong properly. Shake his hand."

Yah stepped forward, embarrassed that she had forgotten her manners. She took his right hand into hers and kissed the back of his palm.

"Such a quiet girl," he chuckled.

"No, she's just not used to other people. She really isn't quiet at all," Mak said, in the drawling voice she liked to use. "Come, Yah. I'll go off first, Wak."

Wak Sarong just nodded and turned back to his drink. As they walked away, Yah saw one man joining Wak Sarong at his table, greeting him before talking animatedly. Everyone loved asking Wak Sarong for news from outside the village.

The cemetery was right behind the masjid. The masjid itself was an old, weathered, wooden building but it had thick walls and was larger than any of the houses in the village. Before they entered its compound, Mak reached for her selendang to cover her hair and neck. Yah did the same and looked up at Mak to see if she had noticed Yah copying her. Mak didn't look at her, guiding her gently past the building itself and into the cemetery, her eyes scanning the white tombstones before them instead. It was like entering another world, the way the

murmur of the men at the food stall melted away as they walked deeper into the cemetery.

The tall woman paused, uncertain, before pulling Yah along with her towards one end of the compound. Yah tried not to trip over tall weeds and the small rocks outlining the individual graves. The air was still damp from the morning dew but the sun had been up long enough for Yah to feel the heat creeping up her neck. It would be very hot soon. They stopped in front of two small graves that were side by side.

"Here we are," said Mak. "Yah, you know how to say Al-Fatihah, right? Nek Busu taught you, didn't she? Good. Sit down here," Mak pointed to a small patch of grass beside the two graves, "and recite it loudly. I want to hear you say it correctly, understand?"

"Yes, Mak," Yah said. She sat down, raised both her palms upwards in front of her, and began reciting the only surah she had memorised from the Quran.

As she recited the surah out loud, Mak pulled up the weeds that were growing by the tombstones. Yah could hear her muttering to herself as she moved on from weeding to checking the cloth coverings on the tombstones. Both still seemed new. Yah knew this because while other tombstones in the cemetery either had no cloth coverings or greying ones, the cloth coverings on the two graves were still relatively white.

After Mak offered her own prayers, they just sat there by the two small graves. Yah knew they were her younger siblings. They were twin boys, brothers who were born at the same time. Yah couldn't remember them. She had also forgotten one of their names but she didn't want to ask Mak. She would ask

Panjang later. She had been too young when they were born. Angah couldn't recall them either but Panjang could.

"They were always crying," Panjang had said when Yah asked him about them once. "Then they both fell sick and died. Everyone was very sad."

Panjang told the worst stories. All he was good at was lying.

After what felt like forever just sitting there listening to herself, Yah guiltily realized that she was bored. The cemetery wasn't as interesting as she remembered. The stones were all still and quiet and no one else was there. The last time they came, Panjang and Angah were with them and they had hopped from tombstone to tombstone, trying to read those that had words painted or carved into them. Mak had caned them all herself for being disrespectful.

Mak was still gazing at the graves, her expression distant. The sun was rising higher. The morning chill had long disappeared, replaced by a wet heat Yah knew was going to leave her clothes and skin sticky with sweat. Maybe she would ask Panjang and Angah if they wanted to swim at the beach later.

"I wonder what kind of older sister you would have been," Mak said, breaking the silence, her eyes catching Yah's as a soft smile played on her lips.

Yah frowned at the two graves. They really were much smaller than the other ones. Together, they were even smaller than her. The realisation made her feel guilty and quiet inside. She had never thought about them much. She should feel sad right? But no one ever told her stories about them so she didn't know what to feel sad for. There would have been more children to play with. Maybe they would have wanted to race her to the beach and swim with her all day. Maybe she could finally have siblings who had to listen to her because she was older and not the other way around.

But then, she would have had even more brothers.

"Panjang and Angah are enough," she said, louder than she thought she would, wiping a bead of sweat that was sliding down her neck with her selendang.

Mak looked at her with wide eyes before smiling again, weakly this time.

"I suppose so. Come, get up. Since we're—well, since he's here—come Yah, I have to tell Wak Sarong something," she said as she stood up, dusting her kain down with her hands.

Yah jumped up, impatient. She held out her right hand and Mak took it. They both left the cemetery together. Neither of them looked back.

Mak greeted Maklang, who had taken her usual spot behind the counter with her husband at the food stall. She was a fleshy woman with round cheeks that jiggled lightly whenever she talked. Paklang, a tall, thin man with dark skin, was in charge of making the drinks while Maklang took care of the basket where they kept all their coins and made sure all their cups were clean.

"I just got back from Cik Zahra's house. I heard she was sick so I brought her some young coconuts," Maklang explained, wiping her cups with a rag that looked like it had once been white. "You know how good coconuts are for fevers. But that woman has been alive for so long, I wouldn't be surprised if—"

"Oh no, please give Cik Zahra my regards. Maybe I'll drop by later," Mak said, a note of concern in her voice.

Yah was trying to remember who this Cik Zahra was. She gave up after a few minutes. She sounded old, the way Mak and Maklang were talking about her, so of course she was sick. Nek Busu always complained about being sick, though

Mak sometimes said it was just because of her age. Yah knew about falling sick. She had been sick once or twice. Are all old people sick all the time?

"Of course you should. Maybe tomorrow would be better. Not today. You... well, Atan and his wife just got there when I was about to leave. You know how... well, I know they don't get along with you," Mak Lang said, carefully arranging the cleaned cups on the counter. "You should bring Saat along. Between the two of us, I think the old woman likes Saat best among all her nephews. Keeps talking about him and his father. You know how she is."

"And I should tell Mak Busu, also, shouldn't I," Mak said, slowly, as if she was uncertain of something.

Maklang stopped talking, glancing at Paklang beside her, who had been listening quietly to their conversation. Yah felt an itch springing up from behind her neck and reached over to scratch it, letting go of Mak's hand.

"So that old liar is still alive, I take it," Paklang spat, his rough voice as hard as steel.

Yah looked up at Mak. Her mother's eyes had hardened and her lips were pursed in displeasure. Her hands had gripped one tail of her white selendang tightly, twirling it around one of her fingers.

"You can tell that old ghost that one of the few cousins she hasn't killed is going to die soon, that's what you can tell her," Paklang continued, loudly, flinging his hand in the general direction of Yah's house.

Something heavy seemed to fill the air and the murmuring of the customers seemed to have been silenced.

"That's right," someone from one of the tables called out before being shushed.

Yah wondered if Mak was going to get into a loud argument again. This wasn't the first time Yah had heard of people talking badly about Nek Busu. But Mak always said that old people deserved respect. So of course she was going to scold Paklang for being disrespectful towards Nek Busu. Mak was always scolding people. She was very good at it.

Maybe that is why everyone is afraid to visit us, Yah thought as she glanced around the stall. People were staring. There was the old Chinese man who always sells fish at the market. There was Tok Imam of the masjid, who was sitting with his coffee and who had a very severe look on his face. There was even a group of boys who were all around Panjang's age, gawking at them openly from the edges of the stall. One of them even looked excited, as if he was happily watching a show!

Yah shot the boys a dirty look, trying to make the face Panjang always makes at her. She couldn't tell if it worked. They all ignored her.

"Actually, Saat and I get along very well with Atan's wife," Mak said firmly, letting her voice fill the air. Yah admired the way she turned away from Paklang as if he wasn't there, facing Maklang instead, who Yah thought must be very particular about cleanliness, since she seemed to be wiping the same cup for a long time.

"Oh, is that so?" Maklang said in a strangled voice as she glared at her husband.

Paklang made a disgusted sound and looked away, his face fuming. He didn't say anything else, even though Yah thought he clearly wanted to. He was looking at the rest of his customers. Maybe he had seen Tok Imam's fierce face and didn't want to get a scolding from him.

Yah almost giggled.

"Yes," Mak said, her voice deep and dangerously low. "She, at least, knows how to treat members of her own family."

Yah suddenly felt her hand being grabbed and pulled. She very nearly tripped but the firm hold Mak had on her quickly steadied her feet.

"Come, Yah. It seems Wak Sarong is no longer here anyway."

"Mak, why does everyone hate Nek Busu?" Yah asked, blinking up at Mak just as the house appeared in the distance around the bend in the dirt path. "Can you tell me? What's her... what's her story?"

The sun was well and truly hot now. She squinted as she tried to catch Mak's eyes. The heat bearing down on them had also made Yah shrug her selendang off her head. She liked the way the two tail ends seemed to catch every passing breeze though, so she had pulled it back when Mak had tried to take it away.

"Story? No, they don't hate her," Mak said, softly, her eyes looking straight ahead.

"But some of them don't like her. Many of them. Sometimes, when some of the other boys come near to our house, they shout things at her."

The sun and sky were both too bright for Yah to see Mak's face properly and Mak was so tall, Yah had to look nearly straight up to look at her face since she's walking right beside her.

"Oh, they do, do they?" Mak muttered ominously. "It's been awhile since I last caught them doing that."

"Well, they still do. Sometimes. When you and Pak are not home. When it's just Ani and me and Nek Busu. Sometimes, Ani shouts back but they just laugh."

"Ani never told me anything about that kind of thing happening," Mak said.

Yah could tell she was not happy. She wondered if Ani would get into trouble. It only took a few moments before Yah decided that asking questions now, when she had Mak all to herself, was much more important than not making Mak angry at Ani. They were nearing their house and soon Yah would have to go back to doing whatever it was that Mak wanted her to do.

"Well, I don't know why Ani didn't tell you anything," Yah said, looking away, trying to pretend that she didn't want Ani to get into trouble.

Mak looked down at Yah, narrowing her eyes.

"But sometimes the boys from down the road come over and shout things at Nek Busu. And sometimes she scolds them back. 'Who's your mother?' she would sometimes shout back. Or 'Whose son are you?' Or something like that. But most of the times, she would just hide in the kitchen and keep quiet."

Mak had been walking quite slowly but even that was a little too fast for Yah, whose kain seemed to have been tied tighter than usual that morning by Nek Busu, who had dressed her. They had nearly reached the edge of the kemunting field.

"Oh? And what do they say when Nek Busu asked them those things?"

"They would just laugh and run away," Yah said.

As she gave her report to Mak, a burning sensation was spreading across Yah's chest and up her neck and ears and it took Yah by surprise to find that it

was anger. She was angry. Those cowards! She hated those boys. Sometimes, Nek Busu looked really, really sad.

"I hate them! I hate boys! I will beat them all up one day!" Yah firmly declared, wrenching her hand from Mak's so that she could ball them up into a fist.

Then, recalling that she wasn't supposed to beat anyone, Yah looked up at Mak to see if she was angry. Yah wondered why Mak suddenly looked like she wanted to laugh. Maybe she didn't actually believe her?

"Believe me, Mak! I will beat them all up! Even Panjang!"

"Of course you will."

They walked past the old blind well. It was an old stone well which had been covered up by thick wooden planks. Three big rocks, each too heavy for a single man to carry, had been arranged on the planks to keep them from being blown away by the storms that sometimes came in from the sea. Because no one used it anymore, weeds and shrubbery had started growing around it, almost covering the whole well from view.

Yah gingerly moved to Mak's other side, away from the well.

"Hmph, has Bahrum been telling you ghost stories again?" Mak snorted as she glanced at the well briefly.

Yah looked up to see Mak staring down at her, one eyebrow raised in amusement. The young girl nodded, smiling sheepishly.

"What did he tell you about the well?" Mak asked, as they walked further away from the mass of stone, planks, and weeds.

“Abang Bahrum said a boy lives inside it. A boy ghost,” Yah said. Of course it wasn’t true. Bahrum’s stories were silly. But they still frightened her all the same.

“Oh? And did Bahrum tell you what the little boy will do to children who don’t pray?” Mak smiled.

Yah nodded. This one story, she knew very well.

“He will pull them down. He will come up and pull them down with him. And eat them.”

It was only after they had reached home and Yah was allowed to go to the beach with Ani that the girl suddenly remembered how Mak hadn't answered her question.

What was Nek Busu's story? Nek Busu sometimes told her stories about the old days, when little girls weren't even allowed to leave the house. Or how when she was Yah's age, she could cook rice and not leave it to burn, like Yah had the few times Mak had asked her to watch the pot.

Yah and Ani were both sitting on the dry part of the beach, where the sand stretched white and glistening, like sugar. The sun was still high in the sky but it seemed less white and more yellow now. The tide was still low however, so they could be out for a while yet. They could have sat in the shade of the kelapa palms, which Ani loved to do, or even on the sloping tree trunks themselves but it was a terribly windy day and on days like these, sitting under a kelapa tree wasn't the best idea. They could have sat under the lone gajus tree nearby but that was also where Pak kept their sampans and nets and Abang Long always got testy when

he finds out that they had played near them, as if anything that was torn or broken was their fault.

Besides, sitting out here in the open allowed Mak or Nek Busu to see them from their back yard, which was just up the slope from where they were. If they wanted anything, they could just shout loudly from the kitchen and Yah and Ani would be able to hear them.

Yah preferred sitting closer to the water anyway.

"Ani? You know how some of the villagers don't like Nek Busu?" Yah asked her sister, who seemed to be glad to be out of the kitchen.

Yah remembered a time when Ani used to be much more fun. She would carry Yah everywhere she went, like Yah was her favourite kitten, and tease her and make her laugh.

"My little sister is so cute!" she would say, over and over, and Yah would giggle and nod. She used to let her hair run loose and wild like Yah and swim with Panjang and Angah, once even bringing Yah along into the deeper part of the ocean, where Yah's feet couldn't touch the sandy floor below.

Mak had screamed at them then, or rather, at Ani, and she had been caned by Pak until she cried the whole night through. Pak had scolded her again for making noise when everyone wanted to go to sleep. She must have tried. Or maybe she had continued crying. Yah couldn't remember. She did remember sneaking up to her though, at her sleeping spot on Mak's other side, and Yah had hugged her, and Ani had hugged right back, and both of them had fallen asleep together just like that.

Then a few years ago, a very long time, something had changed. Mak and Nek Busu had kept Ani home one day to talk to her and allowed Panjang and

Angah to bring Yah outside to play. It was the first time Panjang had been left in charge of Angah and Yah. It was also the time when Ani started tying up her hair and nagging at them. Ani no longer played with them or brought them around the village. She would no longer carry Yah around on one hip and wave around the big stick she was allowed to carry because she was the oldest. She started staying in the kitchen all morning and sometimes all afternoon too. She no longer wanted to play with Panjang and Angah. She no longer wanted to play with Yah.

"Ani?" Yah asked again, when her older sister didn't respond, choosing instead to gaze out to the sea. "Ani, did you hear me?"

"Hmm? What?" Ani said distractedly, her eyes reluctantly turning to look at Yah, who suddenly felt annoyed. Stupid Ani and her stupid hair.

"I asked about Nek Busu! Why does everyone hate her?" Yah asked loudly, her voice carrying across their empty stretch of beach.

"Oh, are you talking about those boys from last week?" Ani asked, her eyes now fixed on Yah's. "You don't have to think about them. Soon, we'll be leaving and they won't bother us anymore."

She sounded as if she didn't like the thought of moving, despite what she was saying. There was a twist to Ani's lips, as if she had bitten into something bitter.

"But why do we have to leave? Why can't they leave?" Yah asked petulantly. "Is it Nek Busu's fault? It is, isn't it?"

"How would I know? And why are you asking?" Ani sounded suspicious.

Yah told her all about what Paklang had said to Mak that morning when they were at the food stall.

"--and then he said, 'She is an old ghost!' and... and... 'She killed her cousins!' and... and...," Yah wasn't completely sure if she had gotten everything Paklang had said right but she thought it was accurate enough.

"Oh," was all Ani said as she stared back out into the waters again, resting her chin against her knees. She looked thoughtful. "Maybe it's just gossip."

"What's a gossip?"

"It's when you share a story about someone that might not be true."

"But why would anyone do that?"

"I... I don't know. Maybe he just...," Ani trailed off, frowning.

"Well? Do you know why he said that or not?" Yah asked, impatient.

"Well," Ani began, looking around them with a strange expression on her face, "don't tell anyone I said this, because I'm not supposed to know, but just the other day, I was at Makcik Dara's house--"

Yah leaned in, her eyes widening. Makcik Dara was Pakcik Atan's wife. And Pakcik Atan was always very fierce and mean to their family.

"Why were you at her house? Pakcik Atan didn't scold you?" Yah interrupted.

"No, he wasn't at home. And I was just passing by, going back home from the fields, when she called me in from her house. She just wanted to ask about, well, about everyone I suppose. She asked when we were leaving for Singapore, and why, and if Mak would visit her—Oh no! I was supposed to tell her! Remind me when we get home, Yah—and well, she just started talking about how Nek Busu did something very bad during the war but that it wasn't our fault. And that Pak was a good man for taking her in. I didn't understand and I didn't dare ask.

She talked a lot and—well—she talked as if I knew everything," Ani finished, before suddenly blushing so brightly, she hid her face,

"What? Then what happened?" Yah asked, alarmed.

Then Pakcik Atan came home and scolded her and made her cry, Yah was sure Ani would say.

"Oh, nothing, it's just," Ani rambled, "it's just she—she said something about how boys in Singapore are different from the ones here. And that a girl like me must, well, both of us, I guess, have to be careful. She's very straightforward, Makcik Dara."

Yah couldn't even decide if Ani looked fearful or delighted, let alone fully understand what her older sister had just said. The thought that there would be boys in Singapore too disappointed her slightly. She had been trying to imagine what Singapore might look like. She hadn't thought to imagine boys there!

An image of a group of boys, all with Panjang's face and sneer, appeared in her head.

"Did she say anything else about Nek Busu?" Yah asked, brushing aside her thoughts about Singapore, standing up and patting down her kain to brush away the sand. She felt like running but her kain felt loose and the heat from the sand made sitting on it quite uncomfortable. Her feet were feeling warm and she looked at the foamy sea waves longingly.

"No, she didn't. Well, I can't remember. She's been there before, you know. She said she met Pakcik Atan there. Maybe he's from there."

"Well, I don't like him," Yah said flatly.

"And she said I was pretty, like Mak," Ani continued, before looking at Yah with a considering look on her face. "Well, maybe you won't understand now, but when you've grown a little more—"

"I think Mak is prettier than you," Yah said, sticking her tongue out, challenging Ani to disagree with her.

Ani took one look at her and simply sighed.

"Come Yah, let's go back. Pak might come home early and--"

"No, let's wash our feet first!" Yah interrupted, dashing off towards the water. As she reached the gently foaming waves, Yah turned to see if Ani was following her. She had expected Ani to protest or scold her, like she usually does when Yah dashed off on her. Instead, the older girl was looking around the beach with sad look on her face.

Yah stopped, just a few steps away from the water. She looked around, wondering if Ani was looking at anything in particular. There was nothing interesting. Just the white sand and clear seawater, kelapa palms and gajus trees. Well, some of the kelapa palms were very tall. And some of the shorter ones were bent in strange and funny curves. Further upland, the kemunting bushes rippled against the ocean breeze, their shiny leaves glittering.

Further up and down the beach, so far into the distance that they were mere black and brown spots, there were of course other people from other houses and villages. Yah always saw them and Yah thought, sometimes, that they must have seen her too. But they always kept to their parts of the beach and Yah was never allowed to wander too far away anyway so that was that.

"What are you looking at Ani?" Yah finally asked.

Ani had slowly walked over to where Yah was. Ignoring Yah, she tossed out her slippers where the sand was still dry and then continued walking into the gentle waves, pulling up her kain, until the water was halfway up her calves, too far for Yah to follow without getting her own kain wet.

"I wonder if the beach in Tanjong Pagar will be the same as this one."

Yah could barely hear Ani's voice, as soft as it was, as if she was asking herself that question, as if Yah wasn't there at all.

"Yah? Did you hear me? What do you think?" Ani asked again, looking over her shoulder.

Yah didn't bother answering her. Ever since Mak and Nek Busu talked to Ani that day a long, long time ago, Ani has always been acting very strange. Stupid Ani and her stupid hair.

Chapter 4

A few days later, Yah decided that everyone in her family had started acting strange or stupid. Beyond a sudden series of visits into Pengkalan Balak and even faraway Masjid Tanah with the help of Wak Sarong, Pak and Mak seemed to talk a lot more at night on the verandah. It was always about Singapore and Tanjong Pagar and about people they both knew who were still living there. Abang Long even joined them once to say something strange and stupid Yah didn't understand. He even said it in an angry voice. In front of Pak! Was he tired of living?

"It's not fair! I can stay here! I can get married here! I'm old enough," Yah had heard him say.

Stay here? With Nek Busu? Who was he going to marry? Nek Busu?

Her parents had then started interrogating Abang Long about which girl in the village he wanted to marry and Yah, no matter how hard she strained her ears, couldn't hear him clearly through his sudden bout of nervous stammering.

Maybe it was Paklong Man's daughter, Timah. She was always in the fields beside theirs.

Or, for all she knew, it might have been Nek Busu after all.

Yah had fought down her giggles at the thought. It had been quite difficult. Then, while trying to go back to sleep, which wasn't easy with Pak's ill-disguised chuckles, she had tried to imagine a world where Abang Long was in charge of the house, and had to work in the fields, and then trawl for shrimp at night. And Nek Busu would stay at home and cook for him. It didn't seem very different from what was happening in the real world but the image of Nek Busu and Abang

Long sitting on the verandah together drinking hot tea made her feel both entertained and slightly ill.

Then there was Bahrum, who seemed to be moodier than usual, picking arguments with Abang Long and neglecting his job of fixing things around the house.

"What's the use?" he would grumble. "We won't be here for long anyway."

"So, this boy thinks that just because we'll be living somewhere else that this place will no longer be ours, does he? So he'll leave the house his father and his grandmother had been born in to just rot, will he?" Mak had nagged loudly into the pot of raw rice she was rinsing when Bahrum had, again, ignored a plank on one of their walls that needed to be knocked back into place.

Ani moped around the house and when she was allowed to accompany Mak to visit some of the other houses—Makcik Dara included—she seemed to be obsessed with copying how Mak dressed and spoke, which Yah found both stupid and understandable. It was understandable because Yah wanted to be just like Mak too, with her elegant walk and her gentle manners and daring words. It was stupid because Ani was stupid, especially if she thought she could be like Mak.

Even Panjang and Angah seemed a little wilder than usual, disappearing for longer periods of time in the afternoon. Yah had tried her best to follow them to see what they were up to. Panjang, as usual, tried his best to exclude her. Angah, who was usually happy enough to let Yah join them, seemed to have been convinced that their latest round of caning had somehow been her fault. It meant that she had lost her one ally against Panjang. It wasn't fair. The two boys were supposed to follow Pak, Abang Long and Bahrum to the fields and help them with the padi. They weren't supposed to be having fun on their own without her!

As a result, she had to spend most of the last few days alone with Nek Busu at home. Nek Busu, who seemed to have changed the most, who seemed to have taken to talking to herself, sometimes sniffing, sometimes muttering harshly as if she was cursing someone.

Sometimes, unsure who Nek Busu was talking to, Yah would reply, only to be ignored.

Finally, deciding to be miserable over how no one seemed to want to be with her, Yah sat in the kitchen at her favourite spot by the door. Its top half was open and the bottom half was closed so that she could rest her elbows on them as she gazed out into her backyard. The chickens were out pecking about but the chicks were oddly silent, as if they too had somehow sensed the strange mood descending upon their entire house. Yah wondered what would happen to all their chickens. She wondered if they would feel sad about her leaving. What if they missed her?

Nek Busu was pounding raw rice into flour. Usually, she would get either Ani or Bahrum to use the big mortar they kept under the house, the one with a giant wooden pestle, but the sun was so hot outside and Nek Busu was old and only strong enough to use the smaller one in the kitchen.

"Did you know, Yah? Your parents have asked Paklong Man and his sons to take over their fields," Nek Busu was raving again, her voice rough and raspy. "Your poor grandmother's fields are going to be barren by the time he's done with it, that stupid boy."

Yah wondered who in their right mind would consider Paklong Man, with his big round belly and bald head, a 'boy'. She rarely spoke to him, only waving at

him when she bumped into him if she ever went to the fields. His daughter Timah was really nice. Yah wouldn't mind it too much if Abang Long married her.

"Did you know? During the war, he disappeared. Everyone thought he had been taken. I thought, surely, he must have died joining the British, since he loved them so much," Nek Busu continued, her unhappiness obvious.

"Oh, he disappeared?" Yah said, deciding to indulge Nek Busu. Nek Busu wasn't coming with them after all. It made Yah feel as if she should talk more to the old woman, to make up for all the time in the future when they wouldn't be able to see each other.

Yah wouldn't miss her like she would miss her chickens, she had decided. She was sure she wouldn't.

"Oh, everyone thought so. He was gone for a good two years. Or three. I don't remember. But he was gone for a good while. Then, one day, he appeared with a wife, a daughter, and two sons and it turned out he had been hiding out in Batu Pahat. Said he had wanted to join the British but had lost his way. Only his parents believed him, the poor fools," she ranted.

The story prodded at something in Yah's mind and she wanted to find out more. But she wasn't supposed to ask Nek Busu about the war. She wasn't even supposed to ask Pak. Mak had told her about the war once, since Mak knew everything. The British were good because they fought the Japanese. The Japanese were evil because they killed people. They were murderers. They had even killed people from their village.

That was why the war isn't talked about, Mak had said. If we don't talk about it, maybe we'll forget it. If we forget it, maybe we won't have to feel sad about it anymore. Mak did say it was a little silly though and Yah agreed. Mak

was always right after all. If people were purposely not talking about it, it must mean that they still remember it. Right?

"And now, he is going to take care of your grandmother's fields. He is going to take care of my sister's fields. What if the crops fail? What if the drought comes? What is he going to do? Run to Batu Pahat?" she went on and on. Then she started talking about Pakcik Atan and someone called Ishak.

"I remember wiping his buttocks clean when he was a child. And I looked out for them, you know. I took care of them. So many disappeared. So many never returned. But they were safe. I never mentioned their names to anyone. Not even when they said they would kill me! Then they burnt my house. And now this is how... this is how... is this how? I don't, Yah, I don't—" Nek Busu suddenly trailed off.

Yah turned to look at her when she heard the old woman's voice rising in volume, as if she was shouting. Nek Busu looked confused, as if she wasn't sure what had happened.

"Nek?" Yah asked, her voice cracking.

Her heart was pounding but she wasn't sure why. Was she scared? No, she wasn't. And yet, she could feel a heavy weight in her chest. Like she wanted to cry. Nek Busu had been shouting. Had she been shouting at her? No. But she had been shouting. Why? No, she had been shouting at her. There was no one else here!

Then, like a sudden storm cracking open from beyond the sea, Nek Busu started crying. Loudly.

And for a long time, she didn't stop.

Mak and Ani returned home just as Yah was about to run out and look for them, filling her with relief. Taking in the sight of both Yah and Nek Busu, Mak quickly and firmly instructed Ani, who only paused long enough to shoot Yah a worried glance, to run to the fields to fetch Pak before helping Nek Busu up from the corner of the kitchen she had collapsed into.

"What's wrong, Mak Busu? Come here, come," Mak said. "You can stand right? Help me, Mak Busu. Stand up for me, Mak Busu."

She then half-carried, half-guided Nek Busu up the kitchen steps and into the house. Loud sobs continued to wrench themselves out of the old woman. Every gasping breath she took seemed to twist her bony frame into itself. Her eyes, when Yah saw them, were barely open and tears had zig-zagged down her cheeks and neck.

"I don't want to leave, I don't want to leave," Nek Busu cried, again and again, which confused Yah.

Wasn't Nek Busu staying?

Yah had never felt as useless as she did at that moment when she saw Mak single-handedly make everything good and normal again while she just stood there and watched. She felt as if she needed to do something, anything at all, but she didn't know what she could do other than to stay out of Mak's way.

This is all I can do, Yah thought, feeling even more miserable than she had earlier in the day. All I can do is watch and listen to Nek Busu crying.

For a short moment, Yah noticed that she was all alone in the kitchen. Only the sunlight, gentler now than it had been at midday and shining in from the kitchen door, accompanied her. Then a sob from beyond the kitchen steps sharply reminded her of what had just happened. Deciding that she had to do

something, she slowly started to clear the mess Nek Busu had made. The small stone mortar Nek Busu had been pounding rice in had toppled on its side somehow and a layer of half-crushed raw rice covered that corner of the kitchen floor. Yah gingerly picked up the broom leaning against the wall beside her and pushed the bottom half of the kitchen door wide open to sweep everything out, the way Mak swept sand out of the kitchen.

"Why are you sweeping it out?"

Yah jumped. Behind her, Mak stared at Yah incredulously before wrenching the broom out of her hand and pinning her down with a furious glare. "Such a waste," she said, visibly upset, as she looked at the kitchen doorstep, where crushed rice had already mixed with the sand and dirt.

Yah fought with every urge she had to cry. She could feel the tightness at the back of her throat and the way her breaths go in and out of her chest unevenly. But she could still hear Nek Busu crying and, somehow, Yah knew that she wasn't supposed to cry now.

Maybe it was in the way Mak tensed her jaw and bustled around the kitchen, righting the mortar and pouring a glass of water.

For Nek Busu, Yah realised.

"I don't want to leave, please help me. I don't want to leave," Nek Busu was still moaning.

"Go watch out for your Pak," Mak then said, shoing her out of the kitchen.

Ani came back soon with Pak, who began talking to Mak in a low, terse voice on the verandah.

"What happened?" he asked Mak.

"I don't know. She was with Yah and I—" Yah stopped listening because Ani took her hand.

The teenaged girl dragged Yah back to the kitchen. She started lighting the stove and was soon frying the eggs Mak had set aside for dinner earlier that day in hot kelapa oil. By the time everyone else— anxious looking Abang Long, curious Bahrum, Panjang and Angah who were looking drained, as if they had actually been helping in the fields—returned, the tense air that had engulfed the house had mostly disappeared to the point where Yah felt as if she could breathe properly again.

Ani had helped too; calm, soothing, gentle Ani who Yah reluctantly conceded was surprisingly good at the stove, even on her own, and who gave Yah simple, easy instructions to follow in a kind voice, as if she knew how Yah was feeling. Even though Ani herself kept shooting anxious glances up the kitchen steps, her older sister was still able to smile faintly at Yah.

"It's okay Yah. Don't look so upset. Nek Busu will be alright. She's just old. Sometimes, they are like that. Mak and Pak are with her now," she gushed soothingly.

Yah faintly recalled Ani speaking to her just like that a long time ago, back when she still kept falling and skinning her knees on the sand.

"Now take this plate—oops, carefully, yes, like that—and just put it on the tray. Right there, beside the ulam. Yes, good, now help me wipe these plates," Ani then said, pushing a stack of three plates into Yah's hands.

Nek Busu did not join them for dinner. She was instead tucked underneath a thin blanket in a corner of the house. Dusk had swept in quietly, as it always does, and it was only after Bahrum had quietly lit all their oil lamps did

Yah realise that the sun had disappeared beneath the ocean. She wondered what it would be like to watch the sun rising out of the ocean instead. The sun only ever rose from beyond the distant hills. Why couldn't it rise out of the sea every once in a while? The question leapt to Yah's throat but Pak had a grave expression on his face as the rest of the family settled down on the floor in the middle of their house in a circle with their their food, as always, in the middle.

Mak silently scooped rice onto their individual plates, setting one plate aside and filling it with whatever it was Ani had managed to conjure up: fried eggs, yesterday's sambal kelapa, and freshly boiled tapioca shoots someone must have picked somewhere on their way home. No one needed to ask who Mak was saving food for.

Nek Busu hadn't even turned when dinner was being served, not even when Pak tried to gently coax her into getting up. Yah wondered if maybe Nek Busu was sick, and maybe properly sick this time, not just sick from being old. Maybe that was why her parents seemed to let her lie down instead of eat. If it had been Yah who didn't want to eat simply because she was crying, she wouldn't only end up eating, her calves would have been stinging as well.

Panjang and Angah had stared at her questioningly, knowing she had been there to see what had happened, but not even they dared to voice whatever questions they must have had, not with that look on Pak's face. Yah happily breathed in the slight satisfaction she felt at knowing something Panjang didn't. She knew more of the story for once, and not Panjang. Maybe, when he asked her what happened, as he surely would later on, she would swish her hair at him and say, "No."

Her two oldest brothers shared knowing looks between themselves, largely ignoring their younger siblings. Bahrum managed to sneak a wink at Yah though, who once again reminded herself that Bahrum was much better than Abang Long, who Yah decided could stay in the village if he really wanted to. Yah wouldn't mind. Only Ani seemed to be eating as she always does, her eyes focused on her own plate, as if determined to forget that Nek Busu was still mumbling and weeping softly into the blanket.

Yet, it was Ani who finally broke the silence, just when Pak had pushed his plate away, done.

"Will she be alright, Mak? Pak?" she asked as she got on her knees, stacking the used plates to bring them into the kitchen.

"She'll be fine. She... Sometimes, feelings can become so strong that you just have to let it all out," Mak said, as she too helped to clear up. "If you keep it all in, you can become sick."

Yah stood up, careful not to let her dirty hands touch anything but her own used plate.

"Maybe, tomorrow, I can go ask Maklang to come and see her. Or maybe get one of the boys to go," Mak continued, giving Pak a questioning look. Beyond just helping with Paklang at his food stall by the masjid, Maklang also helped with sick people.

Yah recalled what Maklang had said about giving someone kelapa water for fever the last time Yah had seen her.

"We'll see how she's like tomorrow," Pak replied, giving Nek Busu, whose back was facing them, a troubled look.

She had quietened down, somewhat.

"Pak, just now, after you left the fields, Paklong Man came over to," Abang Long began to talk but Pak waved him away. "Tell me later," he sighed, giving each of his two oldest sons a weary look. "I'm tired. You boys go and wash up. We'll pray together later."

It was clear that he meant Panjang and Angah too and they all went outside by the outhouse together in a soft, subdued stampede of footfalls.

Mak, Ani and Yah all headed to the kitchen one after another, each carrying whatever they could, be it leftovers or dirty plates, everything except for the plate full of food that had been set aside. As she reached the steps down to the kitchen, Yah paused to turn back to look at Nek Busu.

From where she stood, she could see a sliver of Nek Busu's face where she was lying down. There was movement in her eyes, like she was blinking. Maybe she was just staring at the wall. She had stopped crying and wailing, Yah noted, which was good.

"Mak Busu? Are you awake? Come and eat. Look, Ani made this. Your own sister's granddaughter. Isn't she grown up now? Come, eat," Pak said, a tender note in his voice, his back to Yah. "Mak Busu? Come and eat, Mak Busu. Mak Busu?"

"Yah?"

Yah turned around. At the bottom of the kitchen steps stood Mak, one eyebrow raised.

"Give those plates to me," she said, holding her hand out.

Yah realised she was still holding on to the plates she had meant to bring to the kitchen. At the kitchen door, Ani had already brought in a small pail of

water to wash the dishes in. Yah took two steps down and handed the plates over to Mak.

“Good Yah. You’ve been very good today. Now go and wash up.”

Chapter 5

The drumming of rain against their thatched roof nudged her awake while a cool wind blew against her cheeks. Yah opened her eyes. A part of her begged to go back to sleep, to snuggle up against Mak whose deep, familiar breaths made her feel like there was no other place on this earth where she could possibly belong to. Mak was on her side with one arm around Yah, as if Yah was an extra pillow Mak didn't want to lose.

It was still dark. Even the chickens outside seemed oddly silent. During a storm, they would usually kick up a fuss with their clucking but the drizzle now falling upon them all was the kind Yah knew quietly covered every inch of land with water before leaving the way it came: without warning.

Pak's rumbling snore was the only sound that filled the peace that had enveloped the house but even that seemed dampened. Yah sat up. She glanced at both her parents then turned back to look at the rest of her family. Ani was tucked in on Mak's other side, still as a log. Her brothers had arranged themselves in a row behind her, their feet pointing to the other wall. Further in the corner, away from the boys' feet, was what looked like a pile of breathing cloth. Nek Busu.

Yah blinked.

The pile wasn't breathing. It was just a pile of cloth. Nek Busu's blankets. They seemed too flat to be alive. And the front door was open. There was a soft glow of an oil lamp coming from the verandah. It was so faint, Yah only noticed it after her eyes had adjusted to the gloom.

Curious, Yah slowly pulled herself away from Mak's arm and stood up, making as little noise as she could. She stepped around Mak and Ani carefully to get to the door before popping her head outside.

The gentleness of the rain surprised her. There was no lightning lighting up the sky. There might have been a soft rumbling that could be faraway thunder but the ever present song of sea waves falling on the sand drowned it out like it did everything else. There was a cold wind and a gentle drizzle. Nothing more.

Nek Busu was sitting alone, staring out into the darkness in front of her. Her grey hair was loose, falling in soft curls down her shoulders. Against the low flame flickering in the oil lamp beside her, Yah thought Nek Busu looked like she was glowing.

"Nek?" Yah called out.

Nek Busu turned. Seeing Yah, she smiled faintly and beckoned to Yah with her hand.

"Come, Yah," she said, patting the space beside her.

Yah walked over. The rain was still falling and seemed to be growing heavier. A chilly breeze was blowing up from in between the wooden boards beneath her feet. Yah wanted to go back to sleep. She wanted to snuggle in Mak's arms like a cat to warm herself.

But Yah remembered that Nek Busu was supposed to be sick so she moved and sat down beside Nek Busu, who pulled her closer to plant a kiss on her forehead.

"What are you doing up?" Nek Busu asked.

She didn't seem angry so Yah just shrugged.

"It was raining so I woke up."

Nek Busu chuckled at her answer and didn't reply, choosing instead to continue staring into the night.

Yah looked at where Nek Busu was staring, which was also the direction of the padi fields. In the dark, Yah couldn't see very far though. All she could see was the road and even then it was very faint. Yah couldn't even see the turn in the path that led past Nek Busu's old burnt-out house.

"Nek? How did your house burn down?" Yah asked idly. The question had suddenly appeared in her head. Nek Busu didn't answer. Maybe she hadn't heard her?

"Nek?" Yah asked, looking up at the old woman.

Nek Busu was staring down at her with a strange look on her face. Yah couldn't tell if she was angry or shocked. She immediately felt guilty though she didn't exactly understand why. She just wanted to know!

The silence of the night had felt peaceful before but now a tense air seemed to be building on the verandah, stoked by Nek Busu's unmoving lips. Then something seemed to break.

A thunder from somewhere beyond the sea rumbled the same moment Nek Busu sighed, shaking her head.

"So many questions, always asking and asking. I'm so tired of your questions," she said, finally looking away.

"Pak said it was the Japanese," Yah tried. Maybe if she told Nek Busu what she knew, Nek Busu would do the same.

"Oh, that's what your Pak told you, did he?"

"Yes. Eh, no. He didn't tell me. But I heard him say the Japanese beat you. And they burned your house down."

"Oh? And what else did he say?"

"He said you were very angry and that you cried."

For a moment, something ugly and terrible rose in Nek Busu's expression but it faded away in the flickering lamp light.

"Now—" she said, her voice soft, "now that... that part is true."

"So it's true? The Japanese burned your house down?"

A breeze blew Nek Busu's loose hair, covering her eyes momentarily.

"The people who burned my house down were bad people, Yah."

They sat together quietly. The rain stopped and the sky lightened from deep black to dark blue. A rooster from a distant neighbour's house crowed. Their own useless rooster seemed to have gone missing. From inside the house, Yah could hear Mak muttering something to Pak. Maybe she was trying to wake him. Or maybe she was dreaming.

Yah had more questions but she knew Nek Busu wouldn't like them.

"Nek?"

"Yes, Yah?"

Another question was on the tip of her tongue. Yah wanted to know if Nek Busu missed her old house. Or if Nek Busu had ever been married. Or if she had ever had children. Once, long ago, Pak had said something about Nek Busu's son. She wanted to know!

"Can you tell me a story?" she asked instead.

As a faint light began to emerge from beyond the now visible hills in the distance, Nek Busu told Yah a story. It was an old story, one Yah had heard before many times. Nek Busu sometimes forgot what stories she had told so she would repeat them over and over until Yah could tell them herself if anyone asked her to.

It was the old story about Tanggang, who left his mother and became a rich man. When he came back with his princess wife and big ship, he was ashamed to see his poor, ugly mother, and said to everyone who asked that he didn't know who she was.

"Then, because she was very angry and very sad, she asked God to punish her son. Then the clouds above the sea turned black and lightning struck him and his wife and his boat, along with everyone who was laughing at the poor mother. And they all turned to stone," Nek Busu finished, a faraway look in her eyes.

They both sat in silence, letting the story linger in the air for a while. Yah didn't know why they had to do that. There was always a silence after a story was finished. It was simply what people did.

"Nek?"

"Yes, child?"

"Why won't you come with us?"

Nek Busu didn't answer. She didn't look at Yah either.

"Are you angry with me?" Yah didn't know why her heart ached. She didn't like Nek Busu. Nek Busu was always scolding her. She was just an old woman who lived with them, wasn't she? It was then that Yah realised that she couldn't remember a time Nek Busu didn't live with them.

"I'm not angry with you, Yah. It's not you... It's not you I'm angry with."

The sky had grown lighter. The dying light of the oil lamp was no longer needed but neither of them paid it any attention.

Nek Busu turned to her, eyes piercing and sharp in the gloom.

"You won't understand now. Maybe in the future. When you're bigger. And older. Like a ripe mango. When you're old enough to understand why old people do the things old people do. The good things. The stupid things. You know Yah... I'm very old. Do you know that?"

Yah nodded.

"Yes, of course you do," Nek Busu chuckled softly, bitterly. "I'm very old and in all that time I've been alive doing all the stupid things that I have done, I have never gone away from this village. Do you know that?"

Yah hesitated before nodding. Yes. Nek Busu had never gone anywhere else.

"And do you know that I had a family here? Do you know that I had a husband and many children? I even had three grandchildren. Who knows how many more I..."

As she trailed off, Nek Busu was no longer looking at Yah, pulling her knees closer to her body, as if she was cold. Yah was no longer nodding. She just stared. She knew Nek Busu had a family. She didn't know how she knew. She couldn't remember now who had told her. She tried to imagine Nek Busu with an old man by her side. A fat, old man. No. A thin one. With a thick mustache. And Nek Busu's children? Would they be old? Like Bahrum? Or Ani? She tried to imagine it all. She tried to imagine Nek Busu with a house that wasn't burnt

down. With a thin old man beside her. And children. And maybe a baby. That was what grandchildren looked like, right?

She thought about the cemetery, About the two tiny graves for her baby brothers, whose names she had forgotten to ask Panjang for. She wondered if Nek Busu's family were all at the cemetery. But why doesn't she go and visit their graves? Were their graves somewhere else?

In another world, in that other house, the one that the bad people didn't burn down, Nek Busu was smiling.

"What happened to them?" Yah asked. She wanted to know. She really did. This was Nek Busu's story. This was a real story. And that meant that it was all true.

"War," whispered Nek Busu. "Bombs. Planes flying right above our trees. You see those kelapa trees? Those very tall ones? Sometimes, the planes would dive and fly between them. Playing. We could hear the bombs they dropped, far away. We dug holes to hide in. Not far from my house. A hole big enough for our whole family. If a bomb had dropped on us, we would have been buried together. But then the soldiers came. And you can't hide in holes from soldiers."

Nek Busu stopped, breathing heavily.

"And now all my children are buried here," she continued, pressing on, as if she was panting. Her eyes were staring into nothing, as if she was looking at something else. "Somewhere. I don't know. In the forest. Maybe in the fields. One of them ran away. Maybe more of them ran away. Maybe they will all come back. One day. Maybe they are coming back now. Maybe they will... All of them. If God

is great and good and merciful... so... so I can't go with you. What if they come back?"

Nek Busu's eyes were shining. Yah looked away. She didn't want to ask anything anymore. She didn't want to know anything more. Whatever it was, it was terrible. And sad. Nek Busu was all alone now. Then when Yah and Mak and Pak and all her sibling move to Singapore, she would be left behind. Like the small graves.

Maybe they turned to stone, Yah thought to herself. Like Tanggang. Because that's what happens to children who run away.

Yah shifted, twisting slightly to look at the front door. She wanted to go back inside. She wanted Mak to hold her close. Yet the image of Nek Busu smiling beside a husband and children wouldn't leave her mind. What remained of the old house, the one which burnt down long ago, looked like it might have been even bigger than their house. It was further inland, closer to the fields, built on course, sandy soil. There were bushes of kemunting everywhere around the house now, thick and wild. Sometimes, Panjang and Angah would crawl deep into the tangle of leaves and branches, looking for the sweet fruit that grew there in their shadowed depths.

Did Nek Busu's children look for kemunting fruits too? And her grandchildren? If they did, they could have been friends, Yah realised with a pang. Suddenly, something seemed missing in her family. In her village.

"Nek, I want to pick kemunting fruits," Yah suddenly said, loudly.

Nek Busu looked at her, eyebrows arching at the girl's sudden outburst.

“Later. When they wake up, you can ask your brothers to go with you. Pick more. Bring some back. It’s been a long time since I’ve had some,” she said finally, her face softening. “When I was your age, I picked kemunting fruits every morning. It was better that way. The fruits will be cold. The air wouldn’t be so hot. It could be hard to see the fruits but you know they are always there. Waiting. Always waiting for you to come back.”

As Yah nodded in agreement, the sun’s soft light was already shining from somewhere far past the distant hills. The forests were emerging from the dark blue of the dawn, a thin dark line beyond the padi fields, where the brightening sky was reflected on the still water visible in between the stalks of young rice.

Within the house, her family members were already waking up, one by one. Someone was already clattering about in the kitchen.

“You don’t want to come with us, Nek?”

“I’ve already told you. All my children are buried here. I can’t go.”

After Yah and Ani returned from delivering the midday meal to Pak and the boys, there was a man they had never seen before sitting on the very same spot Yah had sat on earlier that morning. He was a sullen looking man, wearing a white short-sleeved shirt, long black pants and black socks. A pair of black, shiny shoes gleamed beside him while one of Mak’s nicer tea cups rested in his hands.

He gave them a curious look, one that Yah returned. She slowed down just enough to let Ani walk in front of her.

“There you are, Ani!” Mak called out, emerging from the kitchen door. “Go back to the fields and ask your father to come back home. Tell him Pakcik Ishak is here!”

Yah turned around, the urge to run to the fields suddenly surging through her limbs. They have a visitor! Someone Yah has never seen before!

"No, Yah! You come back! And bring that basket with you!" Mak called out again. She had walked out of the kitchen door and her hands were on her hips.

"But I want to go and call Pak," Yah protested.

"No," Mak replied, her eyes dangerously wide.

Yah couldn't help but pout when Ani pushed the basket she had been holding into Yah's arms. Ani snorted and turned around.

Glancing at the man on their verandah, Yah could see him smiling faintly at her.

Yah looked away. She ran back to Mak to bury her face into Mak's kain but her mother was already walking back to the kitchen.

"Come to the back with me. You can help me watch the stove," Mak said, walking briskly, ignoring the little girl trying her best to impede her movements.

"Who is that?" Yah asked, taking her mother's hand in between her palms. "The man there. Who is that?"

"That's your father's cousin," Mak said.

Yah could immediately tell that Mak didn't like that man, Pak's cousin or not.

They walked through the kitchen door. Yah immediately noticed the empty spot where Nek Busu usually sat grinding chillies or belachan.

"Where is Nek Busu?" she asked.

Mak ignored her and grabbed the broom. Yah guiltily looked down at the sand on the kitchen floor. She looked up to see Mak holding out the broom to her.

“Sweep up your own mess,” the tall woman said curtly. “Nek Busu is in the house. She’s still not well. Watch the stove. Call for me when you see the water boiling. I have a visitor to entertain.”

Yah nodded.

With a final warning glare that promised retribution for any trouble she caused, Mak walked up into the house.

The fire in the stove was burning steadily but there was no steam coming out of the kettle. After sweeping the sand out the kitchen door, Yah went to sit on Nek Busu’s stool, the one she always sat on in the kitchen.

Nek Busu then came down the steps from the house. She looked distracted, ignoring Yah as she walked out of the kitchen door, not even bothering to put on her slippers.

Yah wondered if she should call out to her but decided that she must be going to the outhouse.

As the kettle’s lid was just beginning to sputter, Ani walked through the kitchen door, panting slightly.

“Yah? What are you doing?” she asked. Her face was lightly flushed, probably from running to the fields. The wet morning had turned into a stuffy, humid afternoon.

Yah looked at Ani’s feet, before shooting her sister an annoyed look.

“I’ve just swept the floor!” she cried.

Ani huffed, shot an irritated look at her feet, and grabbed the broom from its corner.

“Where is Pak?” Yah asked, remembering what Ani was supposed to do.

“He’s out front,” replied Ani, her eyes warily glancing between Yah and the kettle.

As if she was going to burn water!

Leaving Ani to watch over the kettle, Yah stomped up the steps to the main house. Just as she stepped into their hall, she saw Mak glaring at her from outside the front door. Sounds of a loud conversation could be heard. Pak’s voice was unusually gruff. She immediately regretted stomping on the steps. Mak had told her time and again that the steps were old and could break if she wasn’t gentle with them.

“Yah? What are you doing? Didn’t I ask you to watch the kettle?” Mak asked sharply from where she sat.

“Ani is watching the kettle,” Yah replied as she dashed forward.

As she stepped out onto the verandah and made to sit on Mak’s lap, she became aware of how everyone’s eyes were on her, including those belonging to the stranger.

He was a plain looking man, if a little familiar. If Yah had to describe him, she would say that he looked like a smaller, skinnier and younger version of Paklang, the drink seller outside the mosque Mak had quarreled with.

He smiled uncertainly at her before looking at Pak.

“She’s very affectionate,” he said.

“She’s also very disrespectful and stubborn,” Mak quipped, pushing Yah off her lap and settling her down beside her. “Greet your Pakcik Ishak properly.”

“Is she your youngest?” the man asked politely as Yah kissed the back of his hand.

"Yes, she is," Pak said, a tense expression on his face as he turned to her.

"Yah, listen to me. If you want to sit here, you have to keep quiet and don't interrupt us, understand?"

Yah nodded and settled down again beside Mak.

Pak smiled faintly at her but his eyes remained serious. He then turned to Pakcik Ishak and continued their discussion.

"No, I'm just moving. I'm not selling the house or the fields. And certainly not this land. You will be getting your mother's land, won't you? Mak Busu's name is on the land grant so..."

Yah wasn't very interested in what her parents were discussing with Pakcik Ishak. Something about Nek Busu again. It seemed like she was all the adults ever talked about. However, she was curious about Pakcik Ishak himself. He seemed much younger than Pak and Mak. He even called Pak "abang" so of course he must be younger.

Is he married? Where does he live? His clothes look nice. Does he live in town? In Masjid Tanah? Is he rich?

Their discussion seemed to be getting louder and louder.

"Of course, of course," Pakcik Ishak was saying.

He had a soft voice, very gentle and smooth. But his eyes moved around a lot. He would look at Pak, then look up at the ceiling, and then look to his side, as if looking for something. Sometimes he would look at Yah and when he saw her looking at him, he would look away.

Yah looked up at Mak. She was mostly listening to Pak but she sometimes shot dark looks at Pakcik Ishak.

Then she realized that everyone was quiet. No one was talking. She hadn't been listening so she didn't know what had happened.

Pak was looking into the distance, stretching his legs across the wooden boards of their floor.

Pakcik Ishak was looking at him with narrowed eyes. His lips seemed to be curved, as if he was smiling, but Yah could tell it wasn't one.

After a few moments, Mak sighed and reached over for the now empty tea cups.

"I'll get us more tea. I'll try to put less sugar in it this time," she murmured.

"Oh, you don't need to—I didn't mean—" Pakcik Ishak started but Mak stood up and walked into the house without sparing him a glance, the hems of her kain fluttering smartly against her ankles.

Yah saw the spark of amusement in Pak's eyes. She wondered if she should say something rude to Pakcik Ishak. Maybe she shouldn't. Children must learn to act like adults, Pak had said. No matter how adults themselves act.

Mak suddenly reappeared at the door.

"Pak, Mak Busu isn't in the house."

"What?" Pak looked up at Mak and immediately made to stand up, wooden planks creaking under his weight.

"She went to the outhouse. I saw her," Yah said.

"No," Mak replied, shaking her head, "she isn't in the outhouse either. And Ani doesn't know where she is."

Pakcik Ishak had an uncertain look on his face.

"Is this normal?" he asked carefully.

Both Pak and Mak looked at him the way they looked at Yah whenever they thought she should be caned.

“Mak? I don’t see Nek Busu at the beach from here. Maybe I should go down to—” Ani said, walking up to them from inside the house.

“We’ll all go look for her,” Pak said, readjusting the sarong around his waist.

“Where does she usually go?” Pakcik Ishak asked. He was still sitting down.

“She usually doesn’t go anywhere,” Mak said, a hint of a snarl in her voice. “She usually just sits at home thinking about all her children—”

“We will all go look for her,” Pak repeated, loudly this time, giving Mak a warning look. “Teja, we can talk about that later. Ani, I want you to go to the fields. Drop by her old house. Maybe she might be there. Then go and call the boys to help you look.”

Pakcik Ishak started, “We would have seen her if she had tried going in that—”

“Maybe we didn’t notice,” Mak cut in, nodding to Ani. “Go, Ani.”

“Yes, go,” said Pak, watching Ani walk quickly down from the verandah to the ground, before calling out, “and ask anyone else you meet to look out for her!”

Yah could see Ani walking down the path towards the field, bringing up her hands to her face and calling out for Nek Busu every few steps.

“I want to go with Ani,” Yah said, standing.

“Go,” said Pak. “Ishak, you come with me to the old well and we’ll—”

Yah bounded away towards Ani, ignoring the displeased sound Mak made when she dashed down the steps.

End of Creative Portion of the Thesis

Exegesis

On Writing *Kemunting*

Introduction

This exegesis is divided into three distinct parts. In Roots, the initial questions and conundrums which first inspired the writing of *Kemunting* will be briefly outlined. By examining existing critical work that has already been done, Roots will then show how these handful of seeds germinated into the key themes of *Kemunting*.

In Flowers, the language and other literary aspects of *Kemunting* are critically analyzed. The use of Malay words and turns of phrase will be critiqued, while issues of narrative voice will be further interrogated. Flowers will then connect the text's use of language and literary devices to its themes and subject matter.

Finally, Fruits will provide a final discussion of the novel's endeavor in functioning as a critical commentary of the novel's themes, specifically the evolution of Malay identity. *Kemunting's* commentary on the nature of stories and the storyteller, contextualized within Malay culture and family oral traditions, is also elucidated.

In summarizing the exegesis, the Conclusion will bring together Roots, Flowers, and Fruits to position *Kemunting* as a contemporary in current discussions of identity, history, nation, and the stories we tell ourselves of ourselves.

Roots: Where Stories Begin

I can't have anything, Yah realized. It was then when, with water flowing in between her toes and her kancil kicking against her chest, that Yah felt as if she was learning something, something she felt she already knew but still couldn't fully understand. But that feeling, too, soon hid itself away. All she could do was to look down and stare at her feet. They must have gotten wet somehow, looking as clean as they were.

(Kemunting 23)

In the above paragraph from the end of *Kemunting's* first chapter, something dawns on the main protagonist, Yah; a murky epiphany both emotionally familiar yet intellectually elusive to her eight-year-old mind. Having been denied a swim in a newly discovered river through no one's actions but her own, Yah finds herself prevented from indulging in one desire by the threat of losing another. Beyond that, she gets an inkling that it was not the first time such a thing has happened. A little further into the Chapter 2, we find that both slips through her fingers, her desire to swim the day before as well as the would-have-been pet mouse-deer that kept her from swimming. Loss, fulfillment and how Yah meanders from one to the other thus takes center stage in *Kemunting*, a work of fictional prose set in 1950s British Malaya, a period of revolutionary change and political upheaval in the region. With World War II still haunting living memory, the threat of Communism insurgents promising violence in the present and nationalism driving independence movements into the region's future, the idyllic setting of *Kemunting* at first seems far removed from the machinations of history, with its sprawling paddy fields, pristine white beaches, forests and chicken coops. The fact that the young protagonist is both wilful,

childish, and largely ignorant of anything outside her immediate experience of living in the village further adds to the bucolic atmosphere. However, as Yah takes in her stride her family's impending departure for Singapore, she begins to realise that there is one thing she would like: Nek Busu's story.

"Nek? How did your house burn down?" Yah asked idly. The question had suddenly appeared in her head.

Nek Busu didn't answer. Maybe she hadn't heard her?

"Nek?" Yah asked, looking up at the old woman.

Nek Busu was staring down at her with a strange look on her face. Yah couldn't tell if she was angry or shocked. She immediately felt guilty though she didn't exactly understand why. She just wanted to know!
(Kemunting 78)

In the final chapter of the creative portion, Nek Busu's history is finally revealed to Yah. This scene, in which Yah gains the knowledge she wanted, is also significant as it shows Yah finally beginning to comprehend loss:

She didn't want to ask anything anymore. She didn't want to know anything more. Whatever it was, it was terrible. And sad.
(Kemunting 82)

Moreover, unlike her previous encounters with loss in the introductory chapters, Yah also realises that Nek Busu's loss is also her loss:

Did Nek Busu's children look for kemunting fruits too? And her grandchildren? If they did, they could have been friends, Yah realised with a pang. Suddenly, something seemed missing in her family. In her village.
(Kemunting 83)

Thus, *Kemunting* begins and ends with loss, both small and monumental, individual and communal. Sometimes loss is immediate, sometimes gradual. As the above excerpts demonstrate, sometimes loss is even handed down from one generation to another, through the medium of oral transmission in which family history is inherited through story-telling.

Kemunting was initially conceptualized to interrogate national narratives which have been used in the project of nation-building in Singapore, particularly the 'Singapore Story'—the national narrative that purportedly tells Singaporeans how Singapore, Singaporeans and all their achievements came to be. The Singapore Story builds upon the many narratives employed by the state and for a variety of reasons. Some, as explained by Derek Heng in his book with Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied titled *Reframing Singapore*, which are presented as historical narratives, emerged from the political rhetoric of the independence movements of the 1960s, narratives which continue to shape Singapore to this day (Heng 23). Geraldine Heng and Janadas Devan, in their essay "State Fatherhood: The Politics of Nationalism, Sexuality, and Race in Singapore", also examine how national narratives, especially "narratives of national crisis", are critical in allowing the state to "revitalize ownership of the instruments of power even as it [vindicates] the necessity of their use" (196). Then, there are also narratives that are propagated by non-state actors. In his essay "Manufacturing Authenticity: The Cultural Production of National Identities in Singapore", Terence Chong examines social movements in Singapore's history, both pre- and post- independence, that have attempted to "manufacture authenticity" upon which a national identity could be built, one that could unite the disparate ethnic and religious communities in the island nation. Grand narratives, particularly

those functioning as national narratives for a country, be they of state or non-state origin, have their purposes. Yet as with most things in Singapore, their use comes at a price. What the price is, *Kemunting* was meant to explore.

The problem with grand narratives, particularly those propagated by state actors for socio-political purposes, are many and well-discussed. Firstly, some national narratives propagated by Singaporean state actors to benefit the state are based on dated modes of thought that have outstayed their usefulness. For Heng and Devan, such narratives encourage "reproductions of ideology" as well as the undercurrents informing them, which could include biases, prejudices, and assumptions of those whose hands hold the reins of power (208). Of particular interest to Heng and Devan is the "internalized orientalism" that helps form the basis of what would later come into local political discourse as "Asian Values" (208). It provides the state the rationale for utilizing Western knowledge and social-mechanisms to exercise control over the nation while at the same time demonizing those that threaten its power as "seductively decadent and dangerous" (208). This is not to say that a democratically elected government has no right to exercise its own authority or the means to enforce the laws of the country. What is dangerous, as Heng and Devan highlights, is when a government promotes narratives that justifies "an obsession with ideal replication" (196) that in turn rationalizes state paternalism, in which the country and its population may then be subjected to questionable demands, laws, policies, or even charges, an example being the late Lee Kuan Yew's shockingly public rebuke of Singaporean mothers for "imperiling the country's future by distorting patterns of biological reproduction" in 1983 (197). In Heng and Devan's essay, they propose that Lee Kuan Yew and the state felt at that time

that such a gendered and paternalistic charge was reasonable or even necessary in the Singaporean context because the state-sanctioned narratives underpinning them were similarly gendered and paternalistic. As long as these narratives persist, Singaporean society will find it increasingly difficult to shed off such avenues of thought and reasoning.

Another problem with Singaporean national narratives is posited by notable expert of Malay Studies Professor Lily Zubaidah Rahim. In her essay titled "Winning and Losing Malay Support: PAP-Malay Community Relations, 1950s and 1960s", she laments,

Mainstream and official narratives of the 'Singapore Story' in the 1950s and 1960s tend to focus on the PAP's tryst with communists and radical Chinese students without according commensurate attention to left-wing Malay nationalists, organizations, and newspapers in the struggle for independence. This truncated perspective of Singapore's history downplays the pivotal role of progressive Malay nationalists and trade unionists in the PAP's rise to prominence.

(Rahim 110-111)

Considering that the political rhetoric in the 1950s and 1960s and the subsequent national narratives they birthed continue to influence present day Singapore (Heng 23), they offer a similarly "truncated perspective" of Singapore that excludes parts of itself—be it historical or otherwise. This calls into question the "national" value or nature of these narratives—are they really representative of Singapore and all Singaporeans or are they merely the most convenient ones?

By focalizing a fictional story set in a real place against the backdrop of historically significant events through the eyes of a young Malay girl growing up

on the beaches of rural Malacca, *Kemunting* attempts to resist the big narratives birthed by big events by introducing what some historians might recognize as a microhistorical approach to the relevant historical events. The study of microhistory entails “the introduction of new subjects, groups, and persons previously considered marginal in historical studies” (Peltonen 348) and so by relooking at the tumultuous years leading up to Singapore’s independence through the eyes of a young, female, rural, Malay character, someone who is on the outside but who later finds herself caught up in the currents of history, we can perhaps, through the medium of fiction, engage with the relationship(s) that exists between large, sweeping, state-sanctioned grand narratives and the stories of the ordinary people living in extraordinary times.

Kemunting is by no means the first Singaporean novel that tries to explore the formative years of independent Singapore. It is also not the first novel to explore the Malay experience of the events leading up to independence. Mohamed Latiff Mohamed, three-time winner of the Singapore Literature Prize, did just this in his Malay novel *Batas Langit* (which can be loosely translated as “Skyline”), later translated into English by Shafiq Selamat in 2013 and renamed *Confrontation; A Novel*. In *Confrontation*, Latiff follows the story of the inhabitants of Kampung Pak Buyung that is located in a village in the 1950s and 60s. There is a particular focus on Adi, a young boy who grows and matures as he watches his personal tragedies intertwine with the political upheavals of the period in such a way as to make them almost indistinguishable from each other, exemplified by the final, single paged chapter, in which a political milestone in Singapore’s history, the separation from Malaysia, seems to sound the death knell of Adi’s personal prospects for a bright future (Latiff 176). In focusing

particularly on a character like Adi—young, poor, fully immersed in his day to day family problems—the novel portrays how ordinary people are swept up and affected by historical events, much like what microhistory as a field of study, and *Kemunting* by employing similar approaches, attempts to do.

Of course, *Kemunting* goes a lot further than just creatively engaging with the issues and period it portrays. It is hardly fair to simply write a historical novel—no matter how well-researched—focusing on one character set in a particular time period and call it "adopting a microhistorical framework". However, as much as *Kemunting* is a work of fiction, a significant portion of its source material is based on my own family history. By drawing from tales and stories passed down by older generations of family members who actually lived through the relevant time period and then injecting various elements of those oral stories into the text, *Kemunting* attempts to better reflect the struggles of the villagers whose stories inspired it. Women Studies scholar, Joan Jensen, has observed how "oral history is the core of family history" and that studying one's own family history "brings history down to a very personal level" (93). Therefore, by turning to oral family history, which is in fact a subset of the field of microhistory, as its prime source material, as opposed to state-sanctioned versions of historical accounts or even biographies of people who lived in that era, *Kemunting* attempts to bring to life a very personal version of history, hoping to contrast and perhaps even supplement official versions that exist.

In discussing the role of history and how it is used by the state as a basis for a national narrative, it would be remiss to not touch on the project of nation-building, the project that such narratives are supposedly used for. *Kemunting* was also initially meant to explore this use of national narratives. Part of building

a nation would, of course, entail creating a national identity, especially for a nation as young as Singapore. If we are to think of a nation according to Benedict Anderson's influential definition from his book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*—as an “imagined political community” (6)—we can thus think of a national identity as a self-professed association to any one political community. Since it is Singaporean identity that I was interested in, however, it therefore necessitates an ethnic identity, since “ethnicity is heavily emphasised in almost every facet of a Singaporean's life” (Abdullah 214). But defining what constitutes a Malay identity in itself can be challenging, particularly because of the concept of *masuk Melayu* which exists in Malay cultural practice, in which one can be identified as Malay simply by fulfilling certain requirements such as by converting to Islam, speaking the Malay language, or by adhering to traditional Malay *adat*, or customs (Tantow 335). However, such a concept of ethnicity would have been rather nightmarish for state and administrative purposes. Therefore, when one speaks of a Malay identity in current times, across present day countries with significant Malay populations, one is meant to understand Malay ethnicity in its most exclusive definition, one which centers “genetic and territorial qualifiers” (Tantow 335).

What if we then break it down further? What about “female Malay Singaporean identity” and “male Malay Singaporean identity”? Then, what would these identities look and feel like to someone below the age of ten, someone whose identity has not been carved into stone by time and experience? How would such an identity form for him or her? How would it differ from that of someone much older, someone less predisposed to change, someone who, by virtue of status and authority, might have a direct hand in shaping the identities

of their children or grandchildren. Then, I lingered a little longer on what a “Malay identity” might mean. Was it necessary to tie ethnicity to nationality so automatically? Does it not make sense to investigate first “Malay identity”, something that predates “Malay Singaporean identity”, before adding nationality into the mix? And if certain grand narratives have been used to help create a Singaporean identity, then what were the grand narratives used to create a Malay identity? Which elements survived the transition? Why? Then, if we are able to establish a Malay identity that predates Malay Singaporean identity, would it not then be the missing common denominator in an equation one could perhaps use to investigate both Malay-Singaporean identity and, my original interest, Singaporean identity?

Of course, identity does not have an easy equation one could solve by simple addition and subtraction. For Yah, sitting by the river with an arm around a young mouse deer she desperately wants to keep for herself, identity barely registers in the face of her wants and desires. Living in a largely ethnically homogenous village, identity seems secondary to her thirst for companionship and her failure to find it. Therefore, Yah’s world, a world distinctly Malay to an outsider but uninformed yet by nationalistic impulses and fervor, acts as the baseline from which *Kemunting* sets out to trace how an ethno-national identity might form. We see someone whose identity is already forming unconsciously, through a variety of ways.

Yet this complicates things a little further because it does not give us a method by which we can measure the maturity of Yah’s identity. We also cannot really measure national identity and its ties with Malay identity without venturing into subjective discussions of what it means to be Singaporean or what

it means to be Malay, discourses that are still ongoing and that have often proved futile. In trying to avoid such pitfalls, *Kemunting* tries to resist such avenues of enquiry and instead latches onto Yah's interactions with her immediate surroundings, her perspective, the methods through which she tries to understand the time and place she lives in. By doing so, we then find ourselves invested not in what constitutes a Malay identity or a Malay-Singaporean but in Yah's individual identity and its maturation.

Yah's individual identity is dependent on the relationships she has with the people, places and things around her. A little further back in Chapter 1, and repeatedly throughout the other chapters, we see how Yah indiscriminately labels both the people and the objects around her. She calls more than one of her siblings "liars" and very vehemently uses "stupid" over and over to describe Ani, her only sister. Mak is "elegant", Pak must be listened to, and Nek Busu is "old" (Kemunting 3-8). Throughout the novel, she asks questions of Mak and Nek Busu of their past. She badgers Bahrum for facts and resorts to Panjang when all else fails. She is interested in stories, be they real or fiction. Childish and simplistic though her actions might seem, they form the bedrock of her narrative identity, explained by Dan MacAdams and Kate McLean as that which "reconstructs the autobiographical past and imagines the future in such a way as to provide a person's life with some degree of purpose, unity and meaning" (233). By following the development of Yah's narrative identity, *Kemunting* thus carves out room for observing how one, distinctly Malay identity coalesces. We find the roots that anchor Yah to her world and how deep, or shallow, they are.

It should be clarified at this point of the discussion that while *Kemunting* was initially meant to touch on the ambitious multitude of themes and topics

raised thus far, how successful it is will be discussed in the subsequent parts of the exegesis. Having shown the seeds of *Kemunting's* themes of loss, history, family, stories, and identity, this next part of the exegesis will move on to discuss the language and other literary devices used in the writing of the novel.

Flowers: Language as Accessory to Plot

The writer writing in English in Singapore is totally permeated by all the contradictions of his setting: he is at once a threat because he is allied to a language and lifestyle that continues to be repudiated, and a promise because it is only he, and not the writer writing in Mandarin, Malay or Tamil who can truly reflect the Singaporean way of life. His voice is considered a false one because he is as likely to draw from the larger world of cosmopolitanism for his writing as from his Singaporean setting, yet if Singaporean literature is to be addressed to a worldwide audience, it is he rather than the other writers who will contribute to the development of that literature.

(Lim 37)

As the 20th century was drawing to a close, the above claim was made by the preeminent doyenne of Singaporean writing Catherine Lim, a Fulbright scholar and author of *Or Else*, *The Lightning God* and *The Serpent's Tooth*, in a plenary lecture she delivered. Reflecting on the role of English as the *lingua franca* of the world and Singapore's language of administration, she shines the spotlight on the inherent incongruity of English as being both the best language to represent Singapore and Singaporeans, while also scapegoated as the foreign

culprit driving Singaporean vernaculars to the margins (Lim 36). Fast forward a few decades later to a Singapore where English literacy is up but where some Singapore vernaculars are struggling to remain relevant (Holden 30), her observation still resonates.

Yet, ever since Catherine Lim made her bold claim, examples of writers successfully weaving their own languages into their writing in English have become a mainstay in contemporary writing, both Singaporean and otherwise. Junot Diaz, in his novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, hinges his plot upon the untranslatable word "fuku", a curse of the highest order that can only be ward off by uttering "zafa", while entire dialogues and sentences are written entirely in Spanish (Diaz). To fully enjoy and appreciate Diaz's masterpiece, readers cannot simply ignore Spanish and Dominican culture, so integral are both in the text. In 2016 Singapore, Epigram Books Fiction Prize Winner Nuraliah Norasid's *The Gatekeeper* intersperses grammatical English prose with vernacular-Malay structured dialogue such as this example:

Barani flared into a new temper and, hitching up her sarong with one hand, snapped her body around. "This child!" she exclaimed. "So insolent already! Come here!" And gave chase.

Ria, small and lithe, sprinted into the house, screaming with gleeful panic, "Nek! Kakak want to beat Adik, Nek!" Barani was red-faced. Her hand was raised.

(Norasid 16)

One could say, of course, that Lim was operating under the assumption that to write in English, one must write only in English and only in the grammatically correct form Singaporeans inherited from the British Empire. This colonial

hangover is summed up by Philip Holden who, in his essay published nearly a decade after Lim's lecture titled "On The Nation's Margins: The Social Place of Literature in Singapore", wistfully ruminates how "literature [in Singapore] still seems very much associated in public perceptions with canonical British literature" despite the "growing body of Singaporean and Southeast Asian writing in English" (31). If the English language being used to write "English literature" in Singapore is held to the British standard, it threatens to exclude local writers who want to explore issues of language by experimenting with the language itself or, at the very least, limit their creative options.

However, despite the obvious changes, growth and development within Singapore's literary landscape in recent years, the anxieties and ambiguities that drove Catherine Lim's position then still exist. In May 2016, Gwee Li Sui, a prominent contemporary literary critic, academic and writer in Singapore, submitted an article to the New York Times that traces the Singaporean government's shifting relationship with Singlish, the local patois widely spoken and understood by most Singaporeans, suggesting that there is an increasing acceptance of Singlish by the state (Gwee, "Do You Speak Singlish?"). This prompted a reply and a reiteration of the Singaporean government's position that "Singlish will make it harder for Singaporeans to learn and use standard English" from the press secretary of the Prime Minister's Office no less (Chang, "The Reality Behind Singlish"). The exchange focuses more on official language policy and its administration in Singapore. On the surface, it has little to do with literary choices a Singaporean writer might make. But a Singaporean writer hoping to represent local culture and the language of its people in English prose,

such as myself, cannot ignore such an exchange, particularly when one side of the exchange is a notable Singaporean writer.

It is against the backdrop of such anxieties and ambiguities that *Kemunting*, the work of an English-educated Malay writer representing a distinctly Malay perspective for English-educated readers, is written. To completely divorce the language of the novel from the language of the characters it features, all for the sake of accessibility, seems too clinical, perhaps even self-defeating, an approach. Yet too much code-switching, weaving of Malay or Malay literary conventions into the writing, risks opaque prose for the bulk of readers, language that may distract from the narrative. A balance has to be sought and how this should eventually manifest itself within the novel was one of the central conundrums that surfaced during its writing. Since oral story-telling is one of the central themes being explored, language, as the medium through which stories are handed down, is a significant aspect of the novel. However, can one marry the themes of the novel with the language it uses when the English language it utilizes has no connection to both the characters and setting?

One of the ways in which *Kemunting* attempts to marry the themes of Malay identity with the novel's language is through the sporadic use of Malay words throughout the novel. The very title of the novel, *Kemunting*, uses a Malay word for the rose myrtle. But beyond just accessorizing the text with Malay words, *Kemunting* uses Malay to enhance and bring to life Yah's world. It is thus no coincidence that the first few Malay words that the novel introduces, like the titular word "kemunting", are all Malay names for trees found in Yah's village like "ketapang" (sea almond), "gajus" (cashew), "lalang" (cogon grass) or for everyday objects one might encounter there, such as "baju" (shirt) or "rotan"

(cane), all within the first few pages of the novel (Kemunting 3-5). The purpose was twofold: 1) to establish distinctively an intimate, Malay setting that invites immersion and 2) to emphasize the relationship between the Malay characters and their setting which, in this case, is the village of Padang Kemunting (Kemunting Field). It's also a slightly different approach than the one adopted by Diaz. None of the words used, except for perhaps "tempurung" (a bowl made from the inner shell of a coconut), are strictly untranslatable.

Creating an immersive Malay setting, or world-building, of course entails more than just using Malay words. Engagement with the setting in *Kemunting* primarily manifests in the description of physical places Yah and her family occupies and move through. The very first scene in the first chapter, which saw Yah following her sister on a path between her house and the paddy fields, is a prime example of this. Through Yah's eyes, we see the shrub-lined path she was on, the ketapang trees, the ruins of Nek Busu's old house, and the kemunting bushes (Kemunting 1-4). Yet by closely intertwining the narrative with Yah's character, I attempted to then allow Yah to name her own setting using the language I did/could not use to write the rest of the text. By naming the nouns of Yah's world with the language Yah would have used, it is hoped that the characters will be much more attuned to Yah's perception of her world, a world that is at once familiar and intellectually easy to conceive, but one that is also distinctly Malay. It is also significant that Yah uses these physical details as signposts, as a map of sorts, for finding her way around. The physical details and her naming of them are thus not merely accessorizing the text but also fulfilling a purpose in the narrative. Moreover, Yah using these physical details, particularly the trees and flora of her setting, as signposts also mirrors a distinctly, though

not uniquely, Malay sensibility towards the naming of places. The very name of the village, Padang Kemunting, makes reference to the abundance of kemunting bushes that thrives there. Similarly, the etymology for the names of places in Singapore that are Malay in origin, are in many cases the names of plants or trees found (or used to be found) in the specific area: Sembawang (for sembawang trees), Changi (from the now rare chengai tree), Ubi (the ubi plant), Kranji (from the keranji tree), Pandan (the Malay name for screwpine), among others. Even Malacca, the Malaysian state in which Padang Kemunting is located, famously got its name from the melaka tree. If an area has other physical features that distinguishes it from other places, then that physical feature features in the name of the place, such as Kallang (for the Kallang River), Paya Lebar (paya being the Malay word for "swamp" and lebar being the Malay word for "wide"), the different Bukits (the Malay word for "hill") and Pasirs (the Malay word for "sand"). This was also partly the reason why I chose the title "Kemunting". As plants, trees, and other physical features inject themselves into the Malay names of the places, so does the kemunting plant Yah so loves mark the novel and its story as being hers.

This brings us to the second purpose of using Malay nouns in *Kemunting*: to emphasize the relationships between the Malay characters and the space they occupy, which is one of the central themes of the novel. In the initial planning of the plot for *Kemunting*, the narrative was supposed to follow Yah and her family after their move to Singapore. Originally, Yah's relationship with her village was meant to be contrasted with Yah's experience of the city she would later move to. As the plot of *Kemunting* was reconceptualized and reworked to bring to the fore Nek Busu's painful history and relationship with the village, something which

demanded more thorough examination, and consequently more of the word count, than initially expected, the original plan was discarded and Singapore and the ties other characters have with the faraway city take a backseat, at least in the part of the novel submitted for examination. But while Singapore fades into the background somewhat, the village itself and the ties binding it to Yah and her family are still forcefully emphasized, and partly through the way characters, particularly Yah, recognizes and labels her surroundings with the language she is intimately familiar with. Initially, one of the ways I planned to portray Yah's alienation in her experience with Singapore as a physical space was through how some of the names in Singapore are completely opaque to her in their meanings. Some of the places she would have encountered in Singapore, such as those named after colonial figures, would have been named after foreigners in a foreign tongue to her. Other places may have names in Malay but are mostly known by non-Malay names. First, she might have felt a disconnection with Singapore, which is full of names meaningless to her. Overtime, as the disconnection becomes less palpable in its increasing familiarity within Yah, she would later find other methods of cartography, other ways of mapping the physical spaces around her in her own head.

In the chapters submitted for grading, however, Singapore exists more as a psychic space, a nebulous thought that remains vague and uncharted. To compensate for the physical Singapore that is missing in those chapters, the psychic Singapore is contrasted instead with the sheer presence of Yah's immediate environment and likewise the certainty and confidence with which Yah navigates through the village acts as a counterpoint to the ambiguity and

uncertainty that she has for Singapore. And part of this contrast is represented through the language the novel uses.

While the use of Malay nouns has been discussed, the need for clarity still requires consideration, however, and this was done through scaffolding; showing the meaning of a Malay word rather than explaining it through exposition. Below are two examples from *Kemunting*:

"It probably went looking for its mother," Angah had said, as he handed Bahrum another nail from the tempurung he was holding. The dried out round bowl was made from the hard shell of an old coconut. Yah remembered, with a twinge of grief, the tempurung she had carefully left with the kancil. Her kancil. She had been thinking of calling it "Kecik" because it was so small.

(Kemunting 33)

At the end of the red dirt path they were following was a pondok built on sturdy stilts, its roof of dried, stacked leaves sheltering a wooden platform. Pak was already there, fanning himself with his field hat, leaning against one of the posts holding the roof up. He was bare-chested and so were her brothers, with nothing but their seluars and their kains tightly wrapped around their waists. It was a hot day after all.

(Kemunting 6)

In both examples, multiple nouns are in Malay. Used as you would any other noun in the English language, they do not disrupt syntax or sentence structure, becoming less jarring to the reader who is used to reading in English. Clarity is achieved since the meanings of the different nouns can easily be inferred from

the surrounding text and context of each scene. The ease at which they can be understood by readers allows for the focus of the reader to remain on the contents of the text; the plot, characters, etc.

This approach contrasts with the previously cited example of *The Gatekeeper* where Norasid uses conventional grammar and sentence structure for exposition only to disrupt them with dialogue such as "Nek! Kakak want to beat Adik, Nek!" (Norasid 16) where Malay sentence structures and grammar conventions are used to arrange English words, resulting in sentences that echo Singlish, the kind that would not be out of place when spoken or heard in an average Malay household in Singapore. While perhaps a little more disruptive to the experience of reading, there is a case to be made that such a choice on the part of the author induces a much more immersive experience while also doing a better job of representing the Malay language to a non-Malay readership. Within the larger narrative of *The Gatekeeper*, language and how it is spoken also functions as a marker of difference between the different classes and races present within the novel.

The larger differences between *Kemunting* and *The Gatekeeper* obviates the differences in approach; *Kemunting* is a realist novel with elements of historical fiction set in a village where Malay is the dominant language, rendering any need to mark character differences through the way they talk unnecessary. *The Gatekeeper*, on the other hand, uses a wide variety of elements of the Malay language, such as sentence structure, words, etc, to differentiate the language spoken by its Medusa protagonist from the other languages used by the other characters in the fantasy novel. Both approaches makes the influence of Malay recognizable to Malay speakers and accessible for non-Malay English speakers.

Apart from language, *Kemunting* also makes references to Malay folklore. Those familiar with Malay folktales would have undoubtedly recognised the kancil, the mouse-deer that mysteriously escapes Yah in the beginning of the novel, as a popular recurring figure in Malay fables. Similarly, the tale told by Nek Busu to Yah when she explained her refusal to move from the village makes use of another popular Malay folktale, that of Si Tanggang, Anak Derhaka (Tanggang, The Unfilial Child). The two are weaved into the text differently.

For the kancil, Yah encounters an actual specimen of the famously elusive creature. In Malay folklore, passed down through the Malay oral tradition, the kancil is often portrayed as an underdog figure typed as a trickster who, despite its small and weak stature, gets the better of bigger and stronger animals it shares its territory with. The kancil, known in Malay fables as Sang Kancil ("Sang" here being an article in the Malay language primarily used for mythical characters, as in "Sang Nila Utama"), is often characterized as mischievous, cunning, and irreverent, sometimes even downright vicious. And it hides all these traits under its unassuming size and lack of physical strength. By invoking the figure of the kancil in the beginning of the novel, readers familiar with Malay folktales can recognize the connection the novel has with Malay culture, hopefully identifying *Kemunting*, if not directly as part of the Malay oral tradition through which much of its folklore is transmitted, at least as drawing inspiration from it. Yet to readers unfamiliar with the kancil as a figure in Malay folklore, enough is shown in the narrative to identify it as a symbol of moderate significance, particularly when read in tandem with Yah's possessive desire for companionship. Its disappearance soon after its entrance into the narrative after the tragi-comedic complications it causes for Yah is also given just enough

attention for readers to be able to read it allegorically, with or without prior knowledge of Sang Kancil. The kancil is thus meant to both bridge the novel with the Malay oral tradition while at the same time hinting at Yah's own desire to connect, in some way, to the world around her.

In contrast, the story of Tanggang is positioned as obviously fictional to the readers, featuring as a favourite story of Yah's. Familiar to Malay readers, the original story goes as follows: Tanggang, a boy raised by a single mother resents his poverty and runs away from home. He finds work aboard a trading ship, works his way up, and eventually marries the daughter of the ship's rich owner (in some versions, he marries a princess). Eventually, his ship docks at the harbor near his home town and his mother, hearing of her son's return, goes down to the ship to welcome him. Upon seeing his mother, Tanggang, conscious of his wife and crew's disdain for the dirty, unkempt woman clamoring for his attention, claims to be unrelated to her. In a fit of grief and rage, the old woman curses her son and prays for justice from the heavens. Lightning struck and Tanggang, his ship, crew, and wife, all turned into stone. As with many folktales, this one comes with a rather clear lesson: abandoning one's parents is a big no-no. And the story makes its relevance obvious when we find out later how Nek Busu, whose past seems shrouded in tragedy, has to go and live with a son who had previously abandoned her for reasons that are unclear to Yah. There is also a scene that is meant to occur later on towards the end, that could not be included in the submission, that draws a parallel between the stone Tanggang turned into and the headstones that Yah's mother routinely visits that are all she has to remind her of two sons who had died as infants. Again, the links between the narrative of *Kemunting* and the tale of Tanggang is portrayed to signal its

significance, both to those who are familiar with the folklore and those who are not. Another parallel also undeveloped, but still apparent, is how Nek Busu's remaining son also abandoned her like Tanggang abandoned his. Of course, the circumstances differ and so too does Nek Busu's reaction.

Thus, the Malay language and literary tradition, in varying degrees throughout the novel, tries to enrich the narrative, similar to how current works of English literature owes much of its richness to the intertextuality that ties it to literary works of the past, such as, say, *The Lion King* as a retelling of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* or the way Neil Gaiman draws upon characters and figures from Greek mythology for his comic series *The Sandman*. It is also hoped that the anxieties of both Catharine Lim and Phillip Holden both are addressed to some extent. Language in Singapore remains somewhat regulated in the public sphere but here in this work, it is the personal that takes precedence.

Fruits: Where Seeds Wait

In the process of writing *Kemunting*, it quickly became very obvious that exploring Malay identity as a whole is not going to be remotely possible given the practical limitations of the creative project. What is possible though is to explore Yah's identity, as a young Malay girl, growing up in a rural village surrounded by family members who are haunted by past tragedies. Whether it functions as a counter to narratives propagated by the state remains to be seen as it depends largely on how well it is received by readers, which could only be measured after publication (should it be published). Which is simply not feasible. How one could measure such an effect would also be a fascinating research topic that, again, could not be squeezed into this thesis. The project was ambitious, perhaps too

ambitious, considering the myriad of themes encompassing multiple fields of study involved. However, while *Kemunting* cannot be said to have achieved its stated purpose of countering grand narratives espoused by the state and as an exploration of Malay identity, Singaporean or not, its strength lies in its detailed portrayal of one identity; that of Yah's. While it does not encapsulate the Malay experience of that time period as a whole, it succeeds in both presenting a Malay girl's experience—Yah's experience—while adding some much needed diversity to Singaporean literature that focuses on the 1950s and 1960s.

In the course of my research on other novels originally written in English by a Malay writer about the Malay experience of that time period, a rather startling fact emerged. A scan through Nanyang Technological University's Annotated Bibliography of Singapore Literature in English, compiled by Professor Koh Tai Ann of Nanyang Technological University, listed only three books written in English by Malay writers and none of the three explores the same time frame as *Kemunting* (Annotated Bibliography of Singapore Literature in English). Another search through *Singapore Malay/Muslim Community 1819-2015 A Bibliography*, compiled and edited by Hussin Mutalib, a senior academic from the National University of Singapore, along with National Library Board's Senior Librarians Rokiah Mentol and Sundusia Rosdi, yielded similar results, the closest being Hidayah Amin's *Gedung Kuning: Memories of a Malay Childhood*, an autobiographical work that chronicles the memories of the writer's experiences growing up in historic Kampong Glam, as well as that of her family's. Another of Hidayah Amin's works, a children's book illustrated by Idris Ali titled *The Mango Tree* based off *Gedung Kuning*, perhaps figures as the closest to what *Kemunting* is attempting, seeing as it ventures tentatively into fiction as opposed to *Gedung*

Kuning, which is categorized as a non-fictional biography in Mutalib's bibliography (Mutalib, 21). Keeping in mind that even if bibliographies and databases are not infallible and often incomplete despite the very best efforts of their editors, the sheer difficulty in finding comparable works of local fiction written by a Malay author highlights how *Kemunting* functions as an accidental but long overdue attempt to fill a hole that gapes silently in contemporary Singapore literature. To date, while biographies and autobiographies exist detailing the lives of important Malay figures such as Yusof Ishak and other historical Malay figures, few literary works engaging with the time period written in English by a Malay writer exists.

There are, of course, writers writing about the same time period who have included Malay characters in their work, including Tan Twan Eng and Rex Shelley, among others. There are, of course, Malay works by Malay writers that explore similar themes in a similar setting. Yet if there is one written in English by a Malay writer for international readers, then it has not appeared during the course of my search. *Kemunting* thus succeeds as a remedy to the dearth of English literature representing the Malay experience of that particular time period, albeit unintentionally. The state of Singapore Malay Literature in English lies outside the scope of this thesis, however, and perhaps the emergence of new voices recently such as Nuraliah Norasid's would inspire more research into this field.

The absence of similar works with a focus on the Malay experience during the time period makes *Kemunting's* exploration of its own themes that much more urgent and significant. This section of the exegesis will focus on those of identity, family history, and the act of story-telling. The intersection between the

three will then be shown as a viable alternative to grand or national narratives that the Singaporean state readily offers, if not as a way to interrogate those narratives.

Kemunting's treatment of the theme of identity attempts to be as intersectional as possible. At times, gender comes to the fore, as it did when Yah reminisces how a younger Ani treated her before her older sister "started tying up her hair and nagging at them" (*Kemunting* 59); when Ani was expected to behave not just as an adult but an adult, unmarried woman living in the village. Earlier in the same chapter, Yah's own gender was emphasized when Mak dressed her in a selendang, a headdress worn by women for the purposes of modesty, before bringing her to the cemetery (*Kemunting* 45). But beyond just touching on the gender of the characters, how their gender is highlighted is deliberately meant to also emphasize their Malay ethnicity. Thus, the treatment of the female characters is not solely a result of them being female; it is the result of them being Malay, female and young. Moreover, the rural setting of the village also affects how they behave; productively and conservatively. Gender roles are clear: the men work the fields while the women tend to the home. Nek Busu is treated with respect in deference to her age yet Sa'at, Yah's father, is undeniably the head of the household. The three adults police the conduct and schedules of the children in different ways, with some overlap. While Yah may not remark or complain about it directly, there exists hints of what will be expected of her as she grows older, even in the very first chapter where Yah recalls that "Nek Busu once told her that no boy would ever catch her, the way she ran" (*Kemunting* 10), or in the third chapter in the following scene:

"I hate them! I hate boys! I will beat them all up one day!" Yah firmly declared, wrenching her hand from Mak's so that she could ball them up into a fist.

Then, recalling that she wasn't supposed to beat anyone, Yah looked up at Mak to see if she was angry.

(Kemunting 57)

Of course, Yah receives plenty of leeway due to her age but even someone as young as Yah is shown to have an awareness of things she was "supposed" to do or otherwise. This shows that though the characters may behave according to the dictates of their own personality, there are clear, perhaps even rigid, expectations informing them. *Kemunting* synthesizes all such forces with the individual characters in the novel and, as a result, we still see each character retaining distinct, if perhaps a little underdeveloped, personalities all living according to an unspoken rules understood by everyone. Identity, specifically Malay identity, is thus shown not as something that springs from within but as a social construct informed by social rules, expectations, and one's role within a strict family hierarchy.

The theme of identity in *Kemunting* is consequently closely intertwined with that of family, which in the novel puts special significance on family history and the way it is passed down. In fact, both Yah and Ani are introduced to the readers in the very first chapter while they were sending lunch to the men in the fields; as they were fulfilling the roles designated to them in their family by their family. Yah was also miserable because Nek Busu had killed Yah's favourite

chicken to feed the family and Yah resents her for it (Kemunting 3). From the first chapter, the family is portrayed as central to Yah's world, in turn causing her grief, anger, but also directing love and tenderness her way. Yah's future move to Singapore is precipitated by her parents' history and ties to the port city, though word count considerations prevented more from being revealed in the submission, while Nek's refusal to move with them is also clearly attributed to her own family's history with the village. In this treatment of family, *Kemunting* shows how the family functions as the medium through which identity and history is passed down to the next generation in a Malay family.

The most significant part of the submission where the theme of family is concerned is Nek Busu's revelation of her family's fate to Yah in Chapter 5. Here we can examine how their physical positions reflect Yah's and Nek Busu's contrasting thoughts on their family; Nek Busu keeps looking out into the darkness of tragedy and history, towards the paddy fields in the direction of her old home. She looks to the past. Yah, on the other hand, shifts her awareness to the rest of the family sleeping in the house. She thinks about Nek Busu's family, sure, "in that other world" where Cik Yam her chicken is still alive and where she was not crying; a world that is imagined and, thus, does not exist. But because she has not felt the keen loss Nek Busu suffered, the present occupies much of her attention as well.

This scene, where one part of Yah's family history is unveiled to her after Nek Busu had, once again, told her the story of Tanggang, is also where the act of story-telling is most noticeable. Prior nods to the act of story-telling also begin in the very first chapter. That Cik Yam is a mere chicken slaughtered to be cooked is

made deliberately misleading in the first few lines to lend an ominous air to the story that later dissipates into a sort of pint-pot tragic-comedy of sorts once readers soon understand who, or what, Cik Yam actually was. This immediately draws attention to the childish nature of the character the novel closely follows throughout the narrative. The stories that Yah tells to herself are not to be trusted, and this is highlighted again when Pak asks Yah who "taught [her] to lie"; who taught her to tell a story that isn't true (Kemunting 8). Then, later in the same chapter, when the kancil makes its appearance, Angah excitedly exclaims that it's just "like in the stories" (Kemunting 19). Yet the nature and weight of stories and how they are told increasingly changes and evolves as the novel progresses, when we contrast the treatment of tales and stories in the earlier chapters with the scene where Nek Busu tells Yah her story. To readers, this scene paints how story-telling can also be a mournful, grave act, rather than just one of childish whimsy and fantasy. There are also stories that readers are not privy to because Yah is not privy to them, such as the story behind the "letter" and correspondence with "Nonya Ong" (Kemunting 38), which is apparently related to their impending move to Singapore. There is the story of the villagers' anger and disdain for Nek Busu, which is hinted at but not fully explained. All these stories, whether because they are historically true or because of their implications, would be parsed and distinguished from the ones Yah loves. However, in that scene, where Nek Busu shares her tragic past with Yah, it is also important to note that Yah interrupted her conversation with Nek Busu to ask for a story, where Nek Busu then retells the story of Tanggang. This is because to

Yah, both kinds of stories, be they a folktale or Nek Busu's history, are part of her and thus, both important.

Kemunting can therefore be seen as a patchwork of stories that are related to each other in some way and Yah is the medium through which readers can try to piece them together. That she is interested in some and not in others, as well as the varying success she has with finding them out, both drives the plot forwards and informs the thematic concerns of the novel.

As readers discover more about the stories crisscrossing in *Kemunting* alongside Yah, more dimensions of the thematic concerns of the novel will unfold, hopefully inviting readers to piece together for themselves a story they might find satisfaction in.

Conclusion

In *Roots*, we see the anxieties and conundrums that eventually helped to determine *Kemunting's* thematic concerns. While not all of the themes could be fully fleshed out, given the constraints of the submission format, all of the themes raised influenced in some way the writing of the novel. This, in turn, resulted in the language of the novel itself to flower as an accessory to both the themes as well as the plot of the novel, enriching the narrative with a twist of Malay subjectivity, simple and transparent the language used might seem. This is accompanied by some attempts at literary craft through the use of framing techniques, descriptive exposition, symbols and motifs, all of which served to bring to life a distinct, Malay world filled with Malay characters, all tempered somewhat by clear, uncomplicated English prose. After the flowers have

bloomed, the fruits grow and are plucked, and *Kemunting* can be picked out easily from among its contemporaries, as something not only unique but multilayered and necessary. And as the fruit is bitten into, it is hoped that the seed that is discovered in its center can be of some use to future generations of story-tellers and to those who seek them out.

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