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A

Short story: Painting Mania
Theodora Sarah Abigail

The Jakarta Post

Jakarta / Mon, October 7, 2019 / 08:40 am

He stood in the room of the art museum — the first of its kind in the city — and gazed at the paintings he'd spent his entire life writing about. The names of each painter were hastily scribbled onto a piece of paper beside each canvas, most likely by an underpaid intern or, worse, an unpaid volunteer. The text was illegible.

In person, the paintings were unassuming — boring, even. He was surprised by his dismay, and wondered how his professors would react if they knew he was entertaining such blasphemous thoughts. He had studied them for so long that they had ballooned in his imagination — he'd come to believe that they were giants, and revered their enormous and terrifying power. For years, those paintings had filled the crevices of his thoughts until there was no space left for daydreaming about good food, or snacks, or late-night trips to bars. There was no space left for books, either. He had not read a book in eight years.

The man glanced around the room. The guard was missing; he was alone in the hall. He leaned into the canvas and sniffed the painting. His nose brushed against the canvas, but it came away dry.

As he was eyeing the fine ridges and canyons of the paint, a woman — the woman — stepped into the room. She walked with purpose, heels clicking on the pristine, faux-wooden floor of the museum. Today, like every other day he had seen her, and touched her, and known her, she was beautiful.

He pretended not to see her. The sun offered him little consolation, and the wool coat he'd worn to impress no one in particular suddenly felt dry and scratchy. The air conditioner was broken, and so the fierce and full force of the monsoon summer forced him to reconsider all of the choices he'd made that led him to that exact point, standing in the near-empty room of an unpopular modern museum, waiting for something terrible to arrive.

*

People spoke of paintings and the way they consumed the white silence of a room as if they were earthquakes, capable of shifting the ground beneath a person and changing everything they believed about the world. Years of theoretical analysis about paintings had led him to believe, sincerely and without question, in their purity. But as he stood before the painting that he'd written his dissertation on, he felt nothing. Instead, he thought back to the street cart seller he'd bought the fried cassava from earlier that day.

“What do you do, boy?”

“I study art, uncle. Fine art.”

“Pfft.”

A few hours ago, he'd felt insulted. But now that he was standing in front of the paintings that he had paid too much money to see, he understood why no one appreciated his major or his dissertation, even though it had won fine awards abroad. Nothing he did intersected with the real world. He could not eat the dissertation. He could not eat the medals from the awards, which were raking dust alongside all of the other trinkets he stored inside his sister's half-broken cabinet. Unlike the woman standing across the room, he had not done anything useful.

“Your world is not mine,” she'd said once.

It was the morning after a heady night of touching and of unpeeling layers of clothing as if they were flimsy paper gift wraps. They had made love until 11 in the morning and checked out from the hotel 30

minutes after. Though they'd spent the night in one of the lounges of the finest hotels in the city, the luxury had not transformed their relationship. There was no new glamour or excitement — the night had simply served as a temporary end to their unreasonable desire.

"I cannot join you there. I could never be happy."

"Do you want to go get some breakfast?"

"I'll eat at home, but thank you."

"Well, all right then. I'll call you."

"You don't have to."

*

His essays about paintings had also won awards internationally.

"So beautiful," critics said. "The most wonderful essay I've ever read, about the most wonderful painting I've had the privilege of seeing."

He had been proud of seeing that particular essay in print, and even though no one he knew in real life recognized his work, he appreciated the accolades and listed them all on his personal website.

"Moving prose," one had written.

"If you are to read something today, then let this be it."

"The next great voice of our generation."

One night, after visiting the local fountain, they sat on plastic stools and ordered.

"Why do you spend time with me if you don't like my work?"

"I enjoy my time with you."

"But my work is a part of me."

“And that’s why I can never give you the love you need. I don’t understand your work. It confuses me. And because of that, I will never know you.”

“But can’t you even try?”

A rat ran past their feet and skittered into the gutter.

“That’s the problem. I already have.”

*

They’d met for the first time between mango trees. Not a single speck of orange was visible on the branches, but he imagined that one day, they would return to pluck the fruit. They would return on some distant sunny day to bite into a mango, the juice dribbling down onto their chins and they’d wipe the residue with a smile off each other’s faces.

She had been wearing a white dress that had looked more like a cooking apron. Her hair looked like a birds’ nest on top of her head, and he found it endearing.

After a week of living together he finally realized that she was not intentionally, poetically messy, but she simply never brushed her hair. He rummaged inside her backpack when she wasn’t looking — she had no purse for him to sneak through — and saw tiny bits of paper, and beautiful notes and pictures, but no hairbrush. Not even a pocket comb.

He smelled like cigarette smoke and sweat-soaked wool. When he first sat beside her that day under the trees, the breeze was soft and gentle, and he was sure that she, like all the women in his dreams, smelled of nectar and fragrance. The grass forgave their feet and somewhere in the air was hope that they could be both beautiful and everlasting, and that their affair could one day bloom into something called love.

It wasn't until they first slept together that he realized how strongly she smelled of armpit sweat and cheap Miniso perfume.

*

"You want me to be someone I cannot be," she said.

They'd spent the afternoon in his room, which was cluttered with broken keyboards, stacks of printed facsimiles of paintings and wrinkled delivery pamphlets that were stained from old take-out cartons.

"I adore you. I adore everything about you. I have never asked you to change."

He was never sure where she got her fanciful ideas from or why she was so convinced that he wanted her to become someone else. He simply wanted to be appreciated. Everyone else said that he was worthy and handsome and loyal — why couldn't she see it and love him as well?

"I love you," he continued.

She looked away. Her dark curls drooped in front of her face and he forced himself to remain still. He wanted to reach over to her and cradle her arms in his hands and push the strands of hair away from her eyes and cheeks.

She was not looking at him. She was looking at the window, where the darkness was brooding in silence.

Neither of them spoke.

He pushed one of his broken keyboards away with a socked foot and laid back down on the mattress, which sat directly on the floorboards. She sighed and leaned into him, and they touched each other with heartbreaking fervor. As she pressed a bite into his lips, he wished that her heart could be as loyal and passionate as her body.

By the time the balcony filled with morning light, she was gone. She'd left after their coupling and knew to slink out while he lay

catatonic in his stupor so that he could not beg her to stay, for just another hour or two.

She left no trace of herself except for the faint smell of the curry she'd made the afternoon before coming to his apartment and her signature odd scent. As always, she cleaned up impeccably. There was no forgotten notebook or beloved pen that he could use as his excuse to contact her again.

*

"I love you," she'd said once.

She was not interested in his newest essay, which had been published online in one of the finest publications on the planet. Instead, she was drawing the shop-house across the street.

He thought that, as an interior designer, she would appreciate the way he studied art and parsed each painter's thoughts, delved so deeply into their minds that his fans swore he was a reincarnated master.

But she never aspired to anything and had never even heard of the journal.

"Why did you study interior design?" he asked in response.

"I want to fill my house with beautiful things," she said.

"Will I be a part of the house?"

"Of course."

She did know how to humor him. But she did this sparingly and only when she wanted something from him.

That day, it was an impromptu trip to the used furniture store. The sofas were ugly and old, and their threads were coming apart. He couldn't understand why she enjoyed that store so much. But because she was willing to lie to him for the sake of their excursion, he acquiesced, and they got in the car.

*

His fingers were trembling as he pulled the small box out of his coat pocket. She knew the point he was trying to make before his knee hit the ground and turned away.

“We’re already married,” she said. “This is our marriage.”

“I want to go to the civil clerk and get it registered.”

“We don’t need to do that. We can live like this forever.”

“But I love you.”

“And I love you. Can you hear the morning prayers? They’re one of the most beautiful things about this country.”

“Why are you changing the topic?”

“Let’s just stay this way for the rest of the morning. Let’s stay in love like this forever and watch time float before us. This is already the best marriage I have ever known.”

He had hoped the ring would change her mind, but she remained petulant. She watched the children play on the jungle gym in the garden across the street. They were separated by the chain link fence, worn and rusty after years of guarding the station.

It was at that moment that she realized she would never have children with him. They would never walk their baby to the playground together. Her rejection was a gift — the only way to protect him from his dangerous, hapless obsession.

“We were made for each other,” he insisted. “You said eternity could be ours forever. I want that to be real.”

She looked over her shoulder at the train that was slowly chugging into the station, and the relief was clearly visible, a matted sheen on her dry cheeks.

“I can never be one of your paintings,” she said. “I was not made for you.”

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B

Short Story: The Secret of The Citrus Tree
Alya Hikmayuda
The Jakarta Post

Jakarta / Mon, October 21, 2019 / 08:43 am

Someday, if you see your dad walking out at night, don't ever follow him and never ask him anything. Just act like you don't see anything," Grandma said to me, years ago.

That's how I have been living my life all this time: pretending to be silent and acting as if I'm not curious. It's been five years since I discovered Dad's strange habit. Every twentieth night of the month, Dad will come out quietly carrying plates of a boiled chicken, fruits and other food. Then, he will return at 2:30 a.m.

I'm Alan, by the way. Alan Mandigula. I'm 11 years old. I live with my dad. My mom died when I was little. Our family owns a citrus plantation, which is also our source of livelihood. I always play there with my friend. But my dad always forbids me from playing in the southern part of the plantation. He said the place is dangerous.

I often hear the villagers chattering about the queen in our village. Her name is Layang Sulih. She likes to capture beautiful women whom she would then turn into her slaves and no one would ever hear from them again. That's why many parents in this village will send their daughters to the city, before Layang Sulih takes them. But of course, it's just a myth.

I walk through this vast citrus plantation, hiding behind the tree when a worker passes by. Today is Friday. The workers are away to attend Friday prayers. And this is the right time to find out what my father has been hiding in the southern part of the plantation.

“what a wonderful place,” I whisper unconsciously. Somehow, I’ve been standing in the southern part of the plantation. The citrus trees that grow in these parts are very thick. The citrus fruits are large and thick. I pick one, then peel it off. It tastes very sweet. Different from other citrus fruits.

I become more curious and am surprised when I see a citrus tree standing right in front of me. This tree is different from the others. The stem is bigger, taller. The fruits also grow at the bottom of the trunk, whereas I’ve never seen citrus fruits grow in the lowest part of the tree.

Not only that, I also see a large stone shaped like a table under the tree.

“What are you doing here?!!” a familiar voice scolds me.

“Dad,” I am shocked, nervous mixed with fear. “umm...I’m sorry.” He doesn’t reply. And, instead, he pulls my hand and leads me away from there.

“What are you doing there? Didn’t I tell you not to go there? What if she sees you? Oh God, Alan.” Dad snaps at me as soon as we arrive at home.

“I’m sorry Dad. I promise I will never do it again. I’m just curious, why you wouldn’t let me go there.”

“Your curiosity is dangerous. Do not ever do that again. I hope this is the last time. You disappoint me, Son,” his voice trembles. I feel his voice choking with tears. Then he leaves me.

This is the first time my father has ever scolded me, as if I had committed a major sin. I hadn't intended to disappoint him. I didn't know my visiting that part of the plantation would be such a big deal.

Tonight, my father doesn't say a word to me. Maybe he is still angry. He simply checks on me from the doorway of my bedroom just to see whether I am asleep. Then he leaves the house, carrying the usual plates.

Curious, I follow my father and go about the same route I did earlier in the day. Before I know it, I have arrived in the southern part of the plantation. I step aside to avoid being seen and hide behind one of the trees. I catch my father place the plate of food on the boulder. Then he prostrates himself before the big tree and says,

"Please, return her to me. I can't live without her. Please [...]" My daddy shouts at the tree.

I always bring you your favorite food. Why won't you keep your promise? I need her. Please return her to us. Find someone else, please find someone else," he pleads, now hugging the big tree.

I wonder whether I am seeing what I'm seeing. Is my father losing his mind? Then I hear a voice coming from the tree, "I can't, Andi. It's been a long time since I wanted to let her go, but I can't. I haven't found a replacement. I'm sorry for not being able to fulfill my promise. Instead, enjoy the fertility of my citrus fruits."

"I don't need citrus fruits. I just want her back," my father is sobbing now. I am seeing a different side of my father. He is not the strong man I know. He is fragile and in pain.

"You must be Alan, right?" the voice approaches me. When I turn around, I find a woman standing behind me. I feel blood is draining away from my face. I nod my head slowly.

The woman is tall, her long hair is tied up like a horse's tail, and she is wearing a knee-length blue blouse. She looks beautiful.

“What are you doing here at midnight? Didn’t your father forbid you to come to this place?” she asks.

“Please don’t tell my Dad.”

“You are very similar to your father. Then, go home [...] before your father sees you,” says the woman again, rubbing my head.

“You won’t say anything to him right?” I ask. The woman just smiles and shakes her head. I run as fast as my legs allow me to. On my way back to the house, I realize I have seen that woman before. In a photo my father had taken long ago. The woman sat next to him with a huge smile on her face. She was pregnant. My heart is beating fast, steps away from the house now. I know who she is.

My legs are numb. I turn to look at the now dark plantation where the mystery of my mother’s disappearance will stay unresolved and unfathomable.

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C

Short Story: The Other Woman

Asmara Wreksono

The Jakarta Post

Jakarta / Mon, November 4, 2019 / 09:11 am

Norman never knew why he was so bothered by his wife's question. He paced the room, in his studio, unable to sleep. Lighting another cigarette, he glanced at the ashtray now full with cigarette butts, all standing upwards as if mocking him for his inability to calm down.

Just a few hours earlier, Norman and his wife, Dina, were having dinner in silence. Just the two of them. Their three cats slouched around the dining room, blissfully unaware of the tension.

"So, I hear that you have a secret down in your studio," Dina said, her voice tight and cold.

Norman knew this question was coming. He chewed calmly.

"Who hasn't got any?"

"Norman, I am asking you a question."

Norman swallowed, then reached out for his glass of wine.

“My only secret is why I’m terribly good at what I do, Dina. And even I don’t know what it is,” he said, looking at Dina’s inquiring eyes.

Dina abruptly got on her feet, swept her dinner plate and his off the table, and stormed off into the kitchen. She threw the plates into the sink. The loud thuds made their cats jump and immediately seek refuge under the dining table.

“Dina.”

She turned to him, a foreign look on her face — a look Norman had never seen in their almost 20 years of marriage.

“Tell me the truth, Norman. Who is she?” But it wasn’t really a question. She seemed certain there was somebody else.

Norman felt a trickle of sweat run down his spine. As long as I don’t sweat my forehead, my secret will be safe, he told himself. He stood up, took three steps to the left, where the breeze from the air conditioner blew at the back of his neck. Yes, this is good, he told himself, this won’t make me sweat.

“I am working on new sculptures, Dina. You know this. You’ve known this for years,” Norman tried to reason. Dina looked at the floor.

“Look, I’m not even away much, Dina. My studio is just a few meters away from here, in the same building, on the same floor. We even share the same electric bills. Don’t you think you’re a little bit [...]”

Dina set her eyes on his. As soon as he saw the fire in her gaze, he knew he had misspoken.

“A little bit what, Norman? Overreacting? How dare you?” she hissed.

Norman raised both hands in the air, calling for a truce.

“Look, OK, forgive me. I am a bit distant lately, and it’s all because of all this work. Give me two more weeks, I promise I will [...]” he let his voice trail off as he slowly approached Dina. He cupped her chin. She looked old and tired. But that was not what Norman saw.

“You know you’re the only one for me, right?”
Dina sighed.

“I don’t know anymore,” she said.

*

Cigarette smoke got into Norman’s eyes, bringing him into the present. He rubbed his eyes with his fingers, feeling someone’s warmth beside him. Althea. Norman knew she was there, beside him. He threw her a sideways glance, she smiled wryly. She stroked his back, gently, her soft fingers running up to his hair.

“What’s wrong?” she whispered.

“Dina knows about us,” Norman sighed. He took another drag and puffed lightly, turning his head away, avoiding Althea’s eyes.

Althea stroked Norman’s hair, inhaling his scent. She knew this day would come, and she had to let him go back where he belongs.

“How?”

Norman stood up, walked slowly across the studio, carefully putting on his apron. He wanted so much to get as far away as possible from her, but he couldn’t.

“I’ll be damned if I know, Althea. She just does, I would be surprised if she doesn’t. I spend my days and nights here with you, of course

she suspects something. Are you seriously asking me this?" he said, sounding impatient.

Althea shrugged. "I don't know, Norman. I'm not questioning her intelligence, but I think it's not that simple. I mean, look at us."

*

Althea remembered that day well: the day she had been longing for. After weeks of feeling his touch all over her body, she could feel Norman starting to shape the most important part of her. She desperately wanted to see what kind of man shaped her. Her chest almost burst out with joy when her left eye finally allowed her the gift of sight.

The sculptor.

Lean, dark-skinned, ruffled dark hair, Norman was not what she thought he'd look like. His piercing stare caught Althea's attention more than anything else. Norman has the kind of eyes that could kill anyone trying to stare back. She wondered how Norman's sculptor came up with such perfection. Is Norman as good a sculptor as the one who made him?

When Norman finally finished with her right eye, she could see him properly. She wanted him to give her a mouth, so she could thank him for the gift of sight. So she could thank him for his delicate touch.

And he did. He gave her a mouth, later that day after changing his mind several times. She could see him wince a few times before finally letting out a half sigh. Althea knew he was never really satisfied with the shape of her mouth, but she didn't care.

"Hey," she whispered.

Norman jumped back, knocking over his tools.

“Did you just whisper?”

Althea pointed to where her ears must be. He had yet to sculpt ears on her. The horror on Norman’s face was followed by a rushed job of sculpting her ear. Althea couldn’t hide her smile, Norman’s touch felt a bit rough this time.

“Can you hear me now?” Norman whispered with a shaky voice.

“Yes, I can hear you.”

Norman stared at her in amazement. “You’re alive, Althea. I cannot believe this.”

“Althea?”

Norman was sheepish for a minute. He’d been calling his new sculpture Althea, mostly under his breath, in his own head. He couldn’t believe he was talking to her.

*

Norman spent too much time in his studio with Althea. He could not tell time anymore. Sun rays never lit up his studio anymore, as the drapes were always closed. He was afraid Althea’s ability to move like a human being would be seen by others. Norman worked under the cold fluorescent light, day in and day out.

“Why are you doing this, not wanting me to be seen? I miss the sunlight, Norman.”

Norman touched her shoulders, he kissed her neck from behind, and she felt the warmth of his breath when he spoke, “Why would I want anyone to see you?”

Althea turned her head slowly, she could smell the intoxicating coconut scent in his hair.

“I thought you sculpted me for an exhibition. Wouldn’t I be seen by people then?”

He kissed her lips, slowly, just as he always did whenever he didn’t feel like answering her questions. Althea didn’t want it to end, but she wanted an explanation, so she pulled away. Norman looked annoyed.

“Althea, you’re not going to the exhibition. They will,” he pointed out to other lifeless sculptures around the studio.

“You told me I’m your masterpiece, Norman,” Althea walked over to the window, she peeked through the drapes.

“Don’t do that. You’re risking yourself to be seen, Althea,” Norman said, his voice stiff.

Althea turned to him, angry.

“What am I, then, really?”

Norman covered his face with his palms, “Here we go again. You know, Althea, if you were human, it would be easier. But you’re not. You’re a sculpture. I made you.”

“Yes, but I demand to be seen. I want people to see your work on me,” Althea said, her voice rising.

Norman shook his head. He already made up his mind weeks ago, when he discovered Althea was alive. He was consumed by her, he wanted to make her his, and his only. What if she fell in love with a curator? What if a collector bought her? No. She was his masterpiece and she should stay where she belonged. Here, inside his studio.

“Althea, I may sound crazy to everyone else, but I am deeply in love with you. And therefore I cannot let you be seen by collectors who may want to buy you. You’re mine.”

And at that moment, Althea understood. She'd been in love with Norman for far too long. From the first time she could feel, see and hear her sculptor. She didn't want to leave him, because she too would be miserable.

“(sigh) OK, Norman. I'll be your secret,” she said softly.

*

Norman looked at Althea. “So what do we do now?”

Althea shrugged — a new ability she learned from Norman just days earlier, “Tell her the truth?”

Norman stopped working on his new sculpture.

“Ah, that is a great idea. While we do that, why don't we hold a press conference as well and say world-renowned artist Norman Panjaitan is in love with his sculpture? You're insane, Althea. Come on, I thought we've been through this several times?”

Althea put her arms around Norman, “Forgive me, I didn't mean to upset you, Norman.”

They spent the night together, sprawled on a dirty mattress in his studio because Dina wanted Norman out of the house. Althea couldn't bear to see Norman miserable like this. He was still asleep when she sneaked into his cupboard of tools just at the back of the studio. She pulled out something Norman had always said for her not to play around with as it is very dangerous.

Norman woke up to Althea's soft nudge on his shoulder. He opened his eyes dreamily, and saw Althea at the end of the mattress.

“Althea put that down!” Norman was near hysterical. “I told you thousands of times never to touch that sledgehammer. What is wrong

with you?” he cried. Althea is a fragile clay sculpture. What was she thinking playing around with a sledgehammer like that? I have to get rid of that, Norman made a mental note.

“Do it, Norman. Destroy me. Do it. If this is what living is like, I don’t want to anymore,” Althea said in a quiet voice. She was ready to disappear.

Norman could feel blood rising to his face. How dare she make me choose, he thought angrily.

“Give. Me. The. Sledgehammer.”

Althea’s hand was shaky as she handed Norman the sledgehammer. She asked for one last kiss, but he refused. He stormed out of the studio, his fingers wrapped around the sledgehammer’s wooden handle.

Althea didn’t hear from him for the next two days.

*

Norman entered the studio that day with a strange look on his face, the sledgehammer still swinging lightly in his hand. Althea did not come up to him like she used to. She was afraid of what might happen. She still wanted that one last kiss, before he smashed her into a million pieces. She still wanted that human warmth next to her.

“Go on, Norman. I’m ready now,” she whispered, closing her eyes.

Norman sat beside her.

“I couldn’t do it to you,” his voice was soft. “Never to you.”

Althea opened her eyes, bewildered, “What do you mean?”

“I did it.”

D

Short Stories : A Hairy Tale

Beta Permata
The Jakarta Post

Jakarta / Mon, November 18, 2019 / 08:46 am

There is a strand of hair at the back of her right calf. She hunches down to take a closer look. It looks like it's waving at her and cheekily whispering, "Come, come, hold my hand and let's go see the sun together."

"Nasty little hair... I'm letting you go now. I'll be back in the clinic in a couple of days," Anjali reprimands that one annoying strand of hair as she looks at her otherwise smooth leg.

Anjali quickly goes back to her coffee. She feels that other people in the café are not really minding their own business. Whatever, she thinks. She stares back at them. They turn their eyes away and laugh. They might actually not notice that she's around; it's her mind that is doing the usual trick.

Anjali takes out her iPhone and goes to check on her Path. One nasty one to go, she writes on her status update. It's one of the things she likes to do while trying to finish her writing.

*

It's the hottest time of the day; the sun is descending and yet still far away from reaching the horizon.

She sits at her usual place, where she can perfectly see the sun gradually go to sleep and the world go by. She likes the concept of writing in a public place, as it gives her constant inspiration. And this café on Marine Drive has a big French window facing the promenade, which is like a giant LCD TV that broadcasts the reality show of a tiny part of Mumbai to her: the busy main streets, people going for a jog under the blazing sun, domestic helpers walking the house toy dogs, a line of young lovers sitting along the promenade, an open place where they can get more privacy than at their own home. She calls that line 'the row of love poles'.

But today, her mind is not outside. Today, it ponders and observes others at the café. There's a skinny guy with a lot of hair, body hair, talking on the phone. And then there's this girl; a pretty one, her long hair is blowing in the breeze, gleaming with the reflection of the afternoon sun. She's wearing a sleeveless top and keeps raising her hand when she talks. Ugh, Anjali could see the stubs of hair popping out from her underarm pores, like a bed of grass's tip. Disgusting, she thinks. It should be a crime to wear sleeveless attire when one doesn't have smooth underarms. There's a woman with awfully thick unruly eyebrows that are connected to each other like a bridge; a unibrow.

She pans from left to right again and all she sees is body hair on people. Why is it that when one has something on one's mind, suddenly that's the only thing that pops up before one's eyes?

She caresses her smooth hairless hand. Her mind reminisces the very first time she had the hair removal treatment at the clinic.

*

“Ouch...” Anjali bit her lips and tried to swallow the pain.

“That’s some nasty coarse hair in there,” the therapist glided and swirled the laser device over Anjali’s skin.

She surrendered to the stinging sensation that felt like a fire ant biting her skin. Ah, so much for the anesthesia cream they applied hours prior to the treatment, she thought. And if the therapist said the sting would only occur when there’s coarse hair underneath the skin, it meant there was only coarse hair underneath her skin.

Ok, we’re done with the laser. Now we would clean the cooling gel and apply this cream to soothe your skin,” the therapist said as she scrapped the gel off her skin with a spatula. “Remember, don’t get the skin exposed to hot water for a day. Stay away from the sun. No scrubbing, rubbing or anything that creates frictions on the skin.”

The therapist helped Anjali put on the robe.

“How was your first treatment? It was not painful , isn’t it? In no time, your skin will be so luminous that it will light up the room, for there won’t be any more obstruction from the hair,” the clinic manager sweet-talked Anjali as soon as she came out of the treatment room.

It was not like the treatment was not painful. It was, but it was also bearable. And the thought of her not to have to go through the regular pain from waxing was what made her decide to go on with the program.

“We’ll see you on your next session,” the voice of the clinic manager faded out and turned into buzzing sound. The buzz was created by the noise of a bus passing by with thick smoke from its exhaust pipes that brought her back to the present reality at the café.

*

Anjali looks from the corner of her eyes. Her husband, Dev, is brushing his teeth with his annoying electric toothbrush. What's more annoying is his hairy body. She's been encouraging him to take a laser hair remover treatment, and each time he flatly rejects the idea. "It's an offense against nature. Never go against nature. Something really bad will come back to you. Bad karma," said Dev once. She wonders how could she cope all this time, not only with his hairy body but with his narrow-mindedness as well.

Dev is amused by his wife's new obsession. She has an addictive trait in her. It's something that actually attracted him to her in the first place.

"Can you see that? I feel as if there's something tickling from inside my nose," Dev leans closer to her and lifts up his nose."

"Gross!" Anjali pushes Dev away.

Dev snorts and kills himself laughing.

*

"I've noticed that my back hair has grown thicker," Anjali whispers to the therapist's ear, afraid that the wall in that cabin will tell the whole world about her darkest secret.

"Let me have a look," the therapist tends to Anjali's back. "It's not much, but we certainly can take care of it."

In just a few sittings, her then-reluctant patient has now converted into a glabrous. Her eyes sparkle at the thought of the commission she's going to get from all the fortune this lady is spending on packages the clinic has to offer. Ka-ching!

*

“Are you turning into a smoothie?” asks Dev while brushing his teeth. Dev is no longer amused by Anjali’s obsession. He spits out the watery paste from his mouth as if he’s spitting out his disgust.

Anjali ignores him and goes on observing every inch of her body in the mirror.

“Why do we, of all people, have to be the ones with most hair?” she asks him, or maybe she actually asks herself. “Us, who live in the most humid and hot place on earth?”

“Don’t question God. There must be a reason, hence don’t go against nature.” Dev pulls Anjali closer. “But you do look great. Like a living La Naissance de Venus.” He starts kissing her bare back.

“Nah...not now.”

Dev drowns himself in her thick lustrous lock, the only hair she has left on her, aside from her eyebrow and eyelashes.

“I’ve just got it done.” Anjali pushes him away.

“What has just got done?” Dev is stubbornly pulling her closer.

Anjali’s eyes point downward. “Can’t have any frictions.”

“Oh, you and your hair. Be careful, babe, you can’t stop nature. It will find its way back, always,” mutters Dev as he storms out of the bathroom.

*

Dev is looking at her peaceful face. She always looks like a baby when sleeping with one cheek on the pillow. Even more so now that she has no hair on her body.

He caresses her skin, his hand glides smoothly from the cheek to the neck. She grunts. He stops. He starts again, gently, not wanting to wake her up. It’s been awhile he thinks. He’s a normal guy with a healthy sexual appetite. And it is with his wife he’s trying to do so.

He knows that he can't do it without her consent. But he can try to seduce her, right?

His fingers glide down to her full breast and to her soft belly, slowly making a circle around her navel.

He stops. He shivers. He touches her navel again to reassure himself. No, this can't be, he thinks. But what he thinks is true. He pulls down the duvet and his eyes roll out in disbelief seeing hair sprouting out of her navel. The shaft is fine and shiny. He can see each and every strand is growing and dancing happily, as if stretching their bodies after being tied down for far too long.

The hair has finally returned.

Beta Perwata grew up in a family of storytellers and educators. She is the founder of TABETA Creative Space.

E

Short Story: All the Magical Places

Feliciana

The Jakarta Post

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She couldn't remember how many times she had mopped the hardwood floors and how many times she had forgotten to fix the deep dents and scratches on this particular spot. Other than that particular spot, the floors were all shiny and clean, thanks to her dedication to her job. She wiped the chairs and tables with care and opened the windows to let the air in. Then she went outside and

placed a bowl of fresh milk and some food for Dara, a grey tabby cat which, after wandering into the library one evening, decided to make the space its private home. She stroked the cat lovingly while the cat enjoyed its breakfast with gusto.

Then she flipped the sign on the door to “Open” — after that, there was nothing else she needed to do except sit and enjoy a cup of coffee with a book on her desk while waiting. This was her favorite part of the day. It was dead quiet and empty and she was free with some private moments of her own before her colleagues and visitors started coming in.

She had always liked the quietness and the seriousness of the library patrons, who were deeply absorbed in their own worlds. Looking at them made her feel like she was listening to multitudes of worlds humming in a synchronized beat that flowed in a shared stream of consciousness.

Yet another reason to love her job.

She imagined herself as one of those gorgeous stewardesses with her hair all tied up, not a strand out of place, and a perpetual bright smile on her face. Welcoming every patron aboard, she would make sure they had all they needed to feel comfortable on their journey.

People of all kinds, books of all genres. It was a small public library, for sure, old and a bit outdated, the collection of books had not grown any larger since it first opened. But she still liked it here.

When was it again? It should be around twenty-one, no, twenty-three years ago. That sounds about right.

How many dreams had gone forgotten, how many chances were overlooked, just like all the times she had mopped the floor and kept forgetting about the dents and scratches on that spot.

She remembered a surging joy that welled up inside her when he proposed to her.

“I can give you all the world,” he said, arms around her shoulders. “And I’ll bring you to places you’ve never been before. I’ll buy you food you’ve never tasted in your life. See? Even the sun will send its light just for us.”

In her eyes, back then, he was her Zeus — her Romeo, her Don Juan.

Then, Emily was born. Her precious, lovely Emily. When the baby wrapped her small fingers around her thumb, her whole world shifted like a planet changing its orbit the moment it got hit by a giant asteroid.

But, of course, he didn’t give her all the world and the sun didn’t shine just for the two of them. Sometimes she even had the feeling the sun had ignored them completely. Money is a problem for someone who wishes to have the world. Meanwhile, her husband was becoming more of a distant star in a stranger’s universe and maybe that’s why she didn’t feel entirely unprepared when she came home one day and found him, in their shared bed, in the arms of another woman.

She didn’t scream at him, or throw a tantrum. Instead, she did what felt natural to her: she closed the door, packed her bags, and removed herself — and her daughter — out of the house.

“It’s just you and me now, baby girl. Don’t you worry though, Mama’s going to give you the world.”

The baby cooed happily in response.

Then, one day, Emily fell ill. Pneumonia, the doctor said. Within a week, she was gone.

At the funeral, she stood in silence, watching closely as they lowered her baby into the ground. She remembered thinking how small the coffin looked, and she cursed herself for forgetting to pack Emily’s favorite pink stuffed bunny inside the coffin. Where had she left it? The kitchen counter? In Emily’s crib? Doesn’t matter. She’d just have to remember to bring it next time. Then, she caught herself mid-

thought. There wouldn't be a next time. Suddenly, she felt her entire body turn cold.

She didn't cry throughout the whole funeral, but anybody who saw her could tell she was not coping well with her grief. Her friends opened their arms and offered her a place to stay, at least for a little while, but she insisted that she was fine. All she needed was some time alone, she told them. So she went home, locked the door and sat beside the now empty crib for hours, until the sun came up.

The next day, as per usual, she showed up for work at the library at 8 a.m. The head librarian told her to go home — there was no hurry to come back to work, everything else could wait — and that she needed to take care of herself first before thinking about getting back to work. He also told her to mind her priorities. He was kind and she was grateful for it. But she didn't need to be home. She was fine, she told him, looking at the head librarian straight in the eyes. She tried to say it as politely as possible, but she also wanted him to know she was serious.

There was no getting through to her, really. The head librarian saw what everyone else saw — she was not fine; she was pale and without much spirit. When he looked at her, it was like looking at a shadow rather than a living, breathing human being. He couldn't put his finger on it, though. It just didn't feel right. There was an air of peculiar detachment about her, as if they didn't exist on the same plane of reality.

Somehow, the head librarian later thought, she no longer belonged to the same world he and everyone else were living in. But how could he explain this?

Still, he decided not to let her go. And years went by until she slowly morphed into a shadow behind tall bookshelves, tracing her hopes through the stories and the imaginary worlds she had once promised Emily.

She buried herself in books, a place she was most comfortable living in. She followed the journeys of many characters, from Padua to

Tokyo to New York — she wanted to show Emily all the different places she would never see; the stories she would never hear; the people she would never meet.

Then, one day, a grey tabby cat mysteriously waltzed into the library. It was weak and shivering from the cold. She took it in and that was how they became each other's companion.

So it was that she went through her days in silence, a resolute existence blurred by the intervals of consolation.

Enough time had gone by before the arrival of the letter. The library was to be shut down by the end of the month.

**

The day dragged along languidly. Around noon time, a girl with sleek hair and bright eyes stood in front of the library, her eyes were searching for something that wasn't there.

The girl went in and greeted her with a soft and joyful giggle. There was a hint of indescribable familiarity about the girl, a particular remembrance that was buried in a pile of old memories.

“Good afternoon,” said the girl.

“Good afternoon. What can I help you with?”

“I have a gift for you,” the girl whispered, her eyes gazing expectantly at her.

“A gift?”

“Yes, a gift for you. I bet this is the last time we'll see each other. Of course I'll miss you, but that's how life is. You can't just expect everyone to be together all the time. It just so happens that I need to go somewhere else, and maybe you'll stay, maybe you won't. Either way, I want to give you a parting gift.”

She stood there waiting, not sure how to respond to such a statement. But maybe this world is a strange one.

The girl took out a notebook that looked more like a leather journal.

“This is for me?”

“Yes, it’s yours. I collected them for you. Go ahead and take a look at it.”

She opened the journal and saw scribbles that seemed almost magical with a hint of childishness in the way they were written. She saw that they were notes of made-up stories she used to tell herself when she was all alone... with the sleeping cat on her lap.

She looked at the girl with a new understanding: “I see. So I guess you won’t stay then?”

The girl smiled and shook her head. “Thanks for all the care. You know, it’s really time for you to just up and go to those magical places that you’ve been dreaming of going to, since, like, forever.”

“I see.”

“Goodbye.”

The girl nodded at her for the last time before she turned away and slipped out through the door. After the girl was gone, she flipped through the pages. She realized how all those magical places wouldn’t wait forever. It was really a matter of believing or not believing. And much the same way that she believed, she would make them come true now.

When the evening finally came and the last of the lights were switched off, she threw one last glance at the place that had been a part of her life for as long as she could remember... and smiled.

Now she would go to bigger, bolder and more magical places.

Feliciana is an Indonesian writer. This is her first short story for The Jakarta Post.



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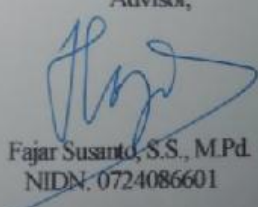
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