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Writing Sample

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Three stories. "Grave sin no. 14", "Edelweiss pays her condolences in Ciputata", and "The death of Anwar Sadar in Cempaka Putih".

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Yusi Avianto PAREANOM
Three stories

Grave Sin No. 14

THEY'VE made comic strips about blind boxers, they've made films about blind samurai, they've written poems about blind swimmers, and there was even a rock opera about a blind kid who was a whizz at pinball. Some of that stuff is quite good, some of it just does your head in. But there's something about blind people, or about blindness, that inspires us, that moves us, that astonishes us. It's kind of like encountering courage in the depths of darkness.

Manik couldn't go along with all the hype. At least not during the past week he couldn't. It was partly because he couldn't abide the over-romanticising of blindness. He couldn't help laughing at some of the cheesy sub-text, like 'it's better to be blind in one's eyes than blind in one's heart'. So cliched. The other reason, and probably the more significant one, was because of something that had happened years ago, which had suddenly re-surfaced and unsettled his equilibrium.

Once, when he was a little boy, he had hit a blind boy on the head. It was 30 years ago, and Manik would have completely forgotten about the incident if it hadn't been for that damned insurance salesperson.

THE INSURANCE AGENT

ONE night the previous week Manik had worked late and it was after midnight before he got to bed. He dreamed that he owned a black slave girl. Dispensing with formalities, she approached him as he lay on the couch. Smiling broadly, she removed the top part of her dress—a tassled affair the colour of butter.

"Master," she said sweetly.

Manik was instantly aroused by her come-hither smile and her sleek naked torso. He sat up and pulled her towards him. Dreaming still, he promised her he would set her free once they had finished. But they had barely got started when ...

Mein Herz Brennt! His cellphone rang. Shit, he cursed. He'd forgotten to set it to silent. The ringtone, which he'd deliberately set to full volume so he could scare the crap out of his friends, was a song by the industrial metal band Rammstein. Now it had sabotaged his own beautiful dream.

"Mr Lengkawamanik, good morning," said a female voice at the end of the phone.

If his brain had been functioning properly, Manik would have immediately hung up and gone back to sleep. But the combination of thwarted desire, throbbing heavy metal music and the sound of someone saying his full name – it had been ages since anyone had addressed him using it – had muddled his brain, and he replied, "Morning."

The woman introduced herself as a marketing agent for an insurance company and said that Manik had been identified as a potential client for an accident policy.

Again, because he was not fully awake, Manik mindlessly muttered, "What do you mean?"

A moment later it dawned on him what was going on, but it was too late. The insurance agent mentioned the name of Manik's friend who had provided the recommendation, and went on to rattle off all the benefits that would accrue should Manik die in an accident.

"It's a significant amount, sir, around 200 million rupiah."

"And what use would that be to me if I'm dead?"

"Well your family can use it."

"And what use would that be to my family if I'm dead?"

"Come on now, don't be so flippant."

Manik said nothing. For three seconds.

"And you don't have to die in order to receive the benefits," the agent went on. "We can guarantee a payout for disability."

"What do you mean?"

"For example if a client were to lose a limb or to go blind ..."

Manik realised that he wasn't going to win this debate. At this point we should give him credit. Instead of swearing from frustration or annoyance – which would have been the response of many people – he chose to apologise and asked the woman to email him the information so he could read the details. He gave a false address. His strategy worked and the woman hung up.

Manik turned off his phone and tried to go back to sleep. He hoped that his slave girl might still be waiting for him. No luck. Typical. He couldn't sleep. He was really pissed off at the friend who had casually dropped his name. He would take him to task next time he saw him. And, feeling irritable and cranky, he recalled the insurance agent's words "for example if a client were to lose a limb or to go blind", and he couldn't get them out of his head.

And suddenly, shit, like getting an electric shock, he remembered the sin he had committed.

SUPRIYONO

THE child's name was Supriyono, Supri for short. He lived in a well-known institute for the blind in Manik's home town of Semarang. The children there were taught to read Braille, and the older residents were taught massage.

At the time Supri hadn't been at the institute for very long. He was 11, the same age as Manik. He had attended primary school until grade two when his eyes had started to cause him trouble, and eventually he went completely blind. The question that the village kids would always ask the new kids in the institute - "Is it better to be blind or to be able to see?" - never raised a smile on Supri's lips. But they always asked it, after the preliminary question "When did you go blind? Or were you born that way?" Kids can be so insensitive. But they asked because they genuinely wanted to know.

After the introductions, which were always awkward – at least for the children who lived in the institute - all the children would usually play together, regardless of whether they were blind or not. The daily routine served to draw them together. Manik and his friends would guide the blind children to the morning and evening prayers, which were conducted in a prayer house about fifty metres down the road from the institute. The blind children were actually quite capable of walking there unaided, but they enjoyed the companionship.

The local kids would also often bring food to share, or they'd invite the children from the institute to watch TV in the village head's house. The institute kids would join in the cheers when, for example, Rusty's cavalry, along with the brave, clever dog Rin Tin Tin, succeeded in driving away a band of wild Indians—who, in their ignorance, the village kids referred to as 'Dayaks', alluding to the reputation of the Borneo tribe for savagery.

Supri was different. He had been morose from day one. And he seemed to always have a new excuse for continuing to be morose. One day Manik, who found himself sitting beside Supri as they were all watching *Little House on the Prairie*, asked him, “How come you’re so sad all the time? Don’t you like being here with all your friends?”

“I miss home. I miss my brothers and sisters. I miss my mum. I miss my dad,” said Supri.

“That’s a lot of things to be missing.”

“I miss the stories my dad used to tell me,” Supri added.

“Well what about all the stories on TV?” Manik asked.

“I can’t see. I don’t understand them.”

“Is your father good at telling stories then?” asked Manik.

Supri said that his father, who was a *niyaga*, a performer in the local *gamelan* percussion orchestra, was an excellent storyteller. Nobody ever told him stories at the institute.

“I can tell you stories if you like,” said Manik.

“Shadow puppet stories?” asked Supri, his face lightening up.

“Comic book stories. Tarzan, Zorro, Gundala. I know some stories about Petruk and Gareng but they’re not from the shadow puppet stories, just regular clown stories. Oh, and I do know one shadow puppet story – Arjunasrabahu,” said Manik.

“Yes please, tell me a story.”

And so from that day on Manik would read stories from his comic collection. Not that it was a very big collection; he only had 18 comic books. But it was enough to entertain his new friend. He could read a comic over and over again. Supri’s favourite was the one in which Tarzan fought against creatures whose bodies were no more than a big round head with a hand sticking out of each side. They were champion swordfighters and they were very fierce.

“Could there really be creatures like that?” said Supri every time Manik read the story to him.

“Yes there are, Pri, the world is an amazing place.” Manik would always say the same thing, even though he really didn’t know what he was talking about.

BUDIMAN AND THE BLIND FOOTBALL GAME

IN Manik’s village there was a boy named Budiman. He was three years older than Manik. His parents had been somewhat optimistic in giving him the name Budiman, which means ‘wise man’ in Indonesian. Budiman completely failed to live up to his name.

The children thought he was bad to the bone: he never performed his prayers, he never fasted, he was a liar and a glutton—he would grab five snacks, but claim he only had one—and he would spy on the girls in the shower. And this was all before he had even been circumcised. The thing that really galled the other kids was his habit of turning up at people’s houses right on mealtime.

In Manik’s village, if you were eating and somebody happened to be close by, it was customary to acknowledge what you were doing and implicitly offer to share your food by announcing, “Time to eat, mate.” In response, it was enough for the person being addressed to simply nod and say “Please, go ahead.”

Budiman was different. Because he was stupid or ignorant or greedy, his response to such an announcement was to grab a plate and pile it high with food. He was known for eating his host out of house and home.

“I’ve heard that he even asks for seconds,” one of the children said.

“He’ll eat pork too if you offer it to him,” said another.

“Pork, dog, he’s not fussy. He just shovels it in. Have you seen his pot belly?” said another.

It wasn’t about the endless plates of rice or the dog meat, it was about his impudence. People were prepared to laugh it off once or twice. But when it kept happening, everyone got jack of it. It was Budiman who had eventually caused the rift between Manik and Supri. But something else happened first.

In Semarang, football games were held at the Diponegoro Stadium, which also had a surprisingly good cycling velodrome. Other events were held there too, and they proved as popular as the football and the cycling. Once there was a performance of a man eating live chickens. It was for real. They said the guy was from Kalimantan. Back in the 1970s an event like this was a real spectacle; people were prepared to buy tickets to see it, and the audiences were huge.

One day an events promoter organised a football game for the blind. Maybe his logic was that given the popularity of regular football, blind football would surely be a hit. So two teams were hastily put together, comprising players from two blind institutes in Semarang. They picked older players; if not adult they had to at least be in their late teens. But because their institute was short of players, Supri and one of his friends were told to play, on account of them being bigger and taller than the other kids their age.

As it turned out, the size of the audience didn’t quite live up to the promoter’s expectations. The big hit of the day was the players’ uniforms. One team wore loud green and red strips and their opponents wore equally loud yellow and black, accompanied by a kind of tasselled fez. Obviously the different uniforms were purely for the benefit of the spectators. From the looks on their faces, the players were excited and apprehensive in equal measure. The ball was filled with tiny bells. Guided by the sound of the bells, the players would chase the ball and endeavour to give it an almighty kick.

You couldn’t really call it a match. The players would often tackle their own players as they heard the ball approaching. This meant that they were often kicking each other’s legs rather than the ball, and scuffles kept breaking out, either among players on the same side or between opponents. The spectators found it hugely entertaining.

Behind each goal there stood a bell ringer whose job it was to ring the bell as a guide for the players when they were going for goal. But more often than not the ball would just roll randomly across the field. And if a player did happen to kick it in the general direction of the goal, the crowd would start jeering, “Get him off, he’s a fraud! He’s not blind at all!”

At the 29th minute the ball rolled towards Supri. Alerted by the sound of the bells, Supri showed that he still knew how to run. He pushed the ball forward and kicked it as hard as he could with his right foot. The spectators still declare that on that day they witnessed one of the best long kicks in the history of the game. Like Brazilian player Roberto Rivelino’s banana shot, only better. From a distance of 27 metres, the ball sped through the air into the right hand corner of the goal. Goal! Even if the keeper hadn’t been blind, it would have been an almost impossible save. The entire crowd erupted into thunderous applause. The players on the field still wore those excited-apprehensive expressions on their faces, not comprehending what had happened.

From that moment on Supri became a sort of local hero. The other kids and their parents were forever coming up to him and slapping him on the shoulder. One boy who would often ask Supri to play was Budiman. Apart from scabbing food from people's houses, Budiman's other annoying habit was ingratiating himself with people who were in the limelight for some reason.

As Budiman got closer to Supri, the other children began to distance themselves from him. And Budiman began to exert a sort of control over Supri. He would take him home without getting permission from the institute. He infuriated everyone, but just laughed it off. Supri was happy; he got to see his family. And then Budiman persuaded Supri to beg in the market. The carers at the institute were furious. Budiman responded with a sneer.

Although Manik and Supri were not really friends – Manik mostly hung out with his sighted friends and Supri tended to stick around the institute, Manik could not help missing Supri. He liked the feeling of being needed; he liked the idea that Supri was waiting for him, so he offered to tell stories to Supri. But every time he did, Supri knocked him back. "I'm waiting for Budiman," he would say.

One day Manik had had enough. "What has Budiman ever done for you? The best he can do is take you begging. It's degrading," said Manik.

"It's fun. I get money from doing it. It's cool. Not like your stories. They're not very exciting. They're boring. I've heard them all. I'm waiting for Budiman."

Tuak!

Manik's knuckle struck Supri on the head. It wasn't a heavy blow, but it took Supri by surprise and he began to cry. Manik too was shocked at what he had done. He fled.

For days afterwards Manik did not dare go near the institute. When he finally plucked up the courage a week later, Supri had gone. They said his family had picked him up. They said Supri's father was furious when he found out that Supri had been begging in the market. Mortified, Manik sobbed silently.

THE LIST OF SINS

MANIK was at his computer, going over and over the list he was compiling. After three hours, he reached his conclusion: striking Supri on the head ranked 14th on the list of sins he had committed in his life. He was agonising over how he could have so readily done such a thing. There was some compensation to be gained from the fact that he had only been a child when he did it. Furthermore – although Manik couldn't completely convince himself of this – Supri, regardless of the fact that he was blind, in some ways deserved a smack on the head for hanging out with an idiot like Budiman.

There was a story behind each of the other sins, too, but that's for another time.

Manik went to the kitchen and made himself a cup of coffee. As he was stirring it, he asked himself what had become of Budiman. Should he go home to Semarang and find Supri so he could ask his forgiveness? Maybe he would do that. Or not. Probably not. He didn't think he could do it.

He went back to his computer. So, Sin number 23 ...

EDELWEISS PAYS HER CONDOLENCES IN CIPUTAT

SUNDAY, 10-10-10. Some people chose to marry or give birth on this numerically auspicious day. It was the day Aya's body was found, cut up into ten pieces, stuffed into four large black plastic bags and left on the median strip on the main road in front of Ciputat Market in South Tangerang. For three days the bags were mistakenly assumed to be garbage.

EDELWEISS heard the shocking news ten hours later, in her home in Nitiprayan, Jogjakarta. At the time she was enjoying a leisurely dinner in front of the television after a full day painting in her studio. As she ate, she idly channel-surfed, the remote in her free hand, which still smelt of paint. In a news break on one of the channels, she heard Aya's name mentioned. She put the remote down.

According to the report, a suspect had been taken into custody. The suspect was a housewife who had been a good friend of Aya and who lived in the neighbourhood. Three days ago Aya had asked this friend to repay a loan of 10 million rupiah. According to the accused, when she asked for a bit more time Aya became enraged, and pushed her. The accused then instinctively defended herself. Aya sprawled backwards, striking her head on the marble table in the living room. The accused then chopped up Aya's body in the bathroom and hid the pieces in the kitchen. She waited till midnight, by which time her husband and children were asleep, and then she made two trips on her motorbike to take the bags to the market. She was banking on the bags being tossed into the garbage truck the next morning.

Edelweiss remained glued to the television, absent-mindedly shovelling food into her mouth. As the story progressed, she stopped chewing and by the time the report had finished, she was attempting to swallow the rendang without chewing it. Hastily she assisted the process with a few mouthfuls of tea, only to rush to the bathroom to throw the lot up.

She was in a fragile state when she came out of the bathroom. The first thing she asked herself was why Pandan hadn't contacted her. Pandan was Aya's husband. Five years ago he had been Edelweiss's husband.

"He's been at the police station all day. He said they're interrogating him," said Pandan's maid on the phone, adding that Pandan had reported Aya's disappearance to the police two days ago, but they had told him to wait.

Edelweiss went out to the front garden for a quick cigarette. And then she had another one. It occurred to her that Danae may have heard the news. Aged nine, Danae was her only child, and Pandan was Danae's father. Edelweiss and Danae lived alone in their big house.

Edelweiss knocked on her daughter's bedroom door and went in after Danae answered, to find her busy doing her maths homework. She tousled the girl's hair and peered over her shoulder at the maths problems that seemed to her to be much too difficult for a grade four student. Danae's demeanour suggested that she hadn't heard the news. Like Edelweiss, she wasn't that fond of watching television.

"I have to go to Jakarta to see your father."

Danae's face brightened. "Can I come too; I miss my little sister."

Edelweiss shook her head and, choosing her words carefully, conveyed the bad news without alluding to murder, let alone mutilation. Danae wept.

EDELWEISS tried to get an early morning flight to Jakarta but there was nothing before ten. Danae pleaded to be able to go with her. Edelweiss refused and took Danae to stay with her cousin in Kaliurang Street.

During the journey, Edelweiss's most powerful memory of Aya was their last meeting at the Ciputat house. She had gone to collect Danae, who had spent the Lebaran holiday there. In truth, she hadn't been in the mood to go inside the house she'd once lived in but, as usual, Danae had to be dragged away because she didn't want to be separated from Zulaika. Danae's eighteen month old stepsister was very cute. It was only pride that prevented Edelweiss from throwing her arms around the child and smothering her in kisses.

"Danae, you still remember what I told you, don't you?" Aya had said as they were saying goodbye.

Danae nodded. Edelweiss was curious. "What did you tell her?"

"Just a story about how we should model our behaviour on that of the prophets," said Aya.

Edelweiss shrugged and took her leave with a smile.

In the taxi to the airport, Danae had begun to chatter. "Mama Aya told me that a statue is just like an idol, so it must be destroyed. That's what the Prophet Abraham did."

"So do you think the statues I make are idols?"

"No, as long as we don't worship them. That's a strange question."

Edelweiss took some comfort in her daughter's response. For a moment she had been about to ask the taxi driver to turn around and take them back to Ciputat. The impertinence of Aya – attacking her, and trying to manipulate Danae as well. But the next day was a school day for Danae, and she had also arranged to meet a tobacco merchant from Temanggung who wanted to buy some of her paintings.

But she wasn't about to let the incident go. She called Pandan from the airport. As she anticipated, her ex-husband first demanded a full account of what happened – just like a government bureaucrat engaging in stalling tactics when asked a simple question – and then he went on to steadfastly defend his new wife. He said that Aya had meant no harm, that in fact she was trying to do the right thing by strengthening Danae's faith.

Edelweiss's irritation turned to rage when Pandan said that it was not good for their daughter that she had statues in her house in Jogja, and that he would prefer that Danae not be drawn into the lifestyle that her mother led. In a hushed voice, not wanting Danae to hear and cause a scene in the departure lounge, Edelweiss told Pandan that if he didn't take back what he had said, she would not allow Danae to come back to Ciputat. Pandan was shocked by this and the tone of his voice changed. He became emotional as he apologised. Edelweiss's anger swiftly turned to heartbreak. It was so sad. This was the man that she had once adored, he had been her sunshine, he had been her best friend.

Another incident that Edelweiss had never forgotten had occurred six months previously, also when she was collecting Danae. On that occasion she hadn't minded sitting for some time on the terrace while Danae played with her little sister. And then she heard Aya singing to Zulaika.

"Jews are cursed by God, America is cursed by God ..."

Hearing the lyrics repeated over and over, Edelweiss could not contain herself.

"Why are you singing that song?"

"It's beautiful, don't you think?" said Aya.

"It's over the top."

"Children need to be taught from an early age about who the enemy is."

"For goodness sake, why do we have to have an enemy? And anyway who are the Jews you're referring to?"

"All of them."

"The nation or the religion?"

"All of it."

"Including prophets like Isaac, David, Solomon, Moses, John the Baptist, Jesus?" asked Edelweiss.

"Don't be cute, they're Muslims."

"Their religion may be Muslim, but their nation and their blood is Jewish."

"If they're Muslim, how can they be Jewish?"

"For pity's sake. OK, so you think that all Jews will be cursed, do you?"

"Yes."

"God is unjust then."

"They will always be opposed to Allah. So they deserve to be cursed. Americans as well."

Edelweiss knew that she could never win a debate with someone like Aya, but this didn't mean she should let it go, even if Danae could hear their conversation. But Edelweiss felt that if she were forced to hang around for a minute longer, she would burn the house down. So she hastily took her leave.

If it hadn't been for Danae whinging about missing her sister, Edelweiss would never have taken her daughter back to the house in Ciputat. One thing was for certain, since the conversation about the Jews, she had avoided talking to Aya, a bit like the way Hemingway studiously tried to avoid using adjectives, or a good chef consciously avoids using MSG.

The statue incident transformed Edelweiss's dislike of Aya into hatred, tinged with pity. She began to fantasise about how satisfying it would be if one day she heard that Aya had been captured by a tribe of cannibals, boiled over a small fire and eaten in a communal meal.

This wicked thought suddenly came back to her on her flight to Jakarta, making Edelweiss feel sick to her stomach.

THE forty five minute journey from Jogja to Jakarta seemed to sharpen and focus Edelweiss's memories of Aya. The more she tried to remember the good things about Aya, the more reasons she found to dislike her. It wasn't because Aya, fifteen years her junior, had married Pandan, or that she had stolen him from her. Aya and Pandan had married almost three years previously, two years after Pandan and Edelweiss had divorced.

At first, Aya's demeanour towards Edelweiss was a mix of deference, subservience and currying favour. Edelweiss was sure that this was not because she was one of Indonesia's most well-known contemporary artists, whose work was in great demand among Indonesian and overseas collectors. None of this would have even entered Aya's consciousness; her attitude

was due to two simple facts – first, Edelweiss was Pandan’s ex-wife, and second, she was technically half-owner of the Ciputat house. Although Pandan had inherited the house, it was Edelweiss who had bought the land on either side and built an extension. When they separated, Edelweiss had not given a thought to the house; she simply took Danae and left.

Edelweiss just assumed that this would be the way things stayed, if not forever then at least for the foreseeable future. What she didn’t realise was that Aya was actually unceremoniously removing the artworks that she had left behind in the house, and dumping them in the shed.

Edelweiss didn’t want to rock the boat; she blamed herself for what Aya had done, and she organised for the works to be sent to Jogja. The thing that did upset her though was that Pandan had done nothing to stop Aya, whereas he had been the one who had always encouraged Edelweiss in her artistic endeavours, and had helped her refine her ideas. The works that she had left at Ciputat were very personal ones, pieces that she would never sell because she had made them for Pandan. Not that she’d ever explicitly told him that.

As she was packing up the artworks, Edelweiss asked herself what had happened to the funny, gregarious Pandan she used to know. She remembered how they could spend a whole night talking about some trifling matter that had tickled their fancy. Once they had talked about Bruce Lee all night. Pandan pointed out the comical errors in the ending of his film *Game of Death*. The scene begins with Bruce Lee entering the enemy’s pagoda at night, and then suddenly it is broad daylight when the martial artist, in his yellow outfit with black stripes, engages in combat with the NBA basketball star Kareem Abdul Jabbar. You can see that it’s daylight when Bruce Lee punches a hole in the wall and the sun beams in, blinding his opponent. And then when he comes out of the pagoda, it’s nighttime again.

“Pluk, what do you reckon: which would win a fight –the little dragon, or the the giant with the frizzy hair?” asked Pandan.

Pluk, or Cempluk, had been Pandan’s pet name for Edelweiss, and the little dragon is Lee’s nickname.

“Are you serious? I dunno. What do you think?”

“I don’t know either. But what I do know is that, of all Bruce Lee’s adversaries, Chuck Norris is the best. In a real fight, Chuck Norris would win, no doubt about it.”

“How come?”

“You don’t know? There are some magicians that can walk on water, but Chuck Norris can swim on land. He’s not just a champion; he’s got supernatural powers. They say his tears can cure cancer and other serious diseases.”

“Bullshit.”

“It’s true – but unfortunately Chuck Norris never cries.”

At that point in their relationship Edelweiss was convinced she would spend the rest of her life with Pandan, through thick and thin. She was not to know that her optimism was misplaced.

ONE year before they had separated, Pandan’s father in Semarang fell ill. He died soon after. Pandan had only been able to visit his father once during his illness, because he was very busy working on a consultancy for a company that was about to go public.

After his father's death, Pandan was so wracked by guilt that his work began to suffer, and eventually he resigned. Almost immediately he joined an Islamic prayer group of the same ideology that his father had followed.

At first, Edelweiss understood. Grief is an intensely personal thing, and Edelweiss rationalised to herself that if Pandan could derive some solace from this new activity, then that was a good thing. What she hadn't anticipated was the penchant this particular group had for banning things. And the things they banned seemed so random. They wouldn't allow the reading of the *Yaasin*, for example, the *surah* from the Koran that is usually read to the dying. Whenever Edelweiss objected to their weird prohibitions, Pandan's excuse would always be that his group was faithful to the holy book.

They never really fought in the sense of having a screaming match. They never said cruel things to each other. They never threw things at each other. And Pandan never demanded that Edelweiss follow the path he had chosen. But Edelweiss eventually felt suffocated by the tension that suffused the house. She felt unable to breathe; she also began to find it hard to distinguish colours. And she wasn't a bus driver who only needed three colours: red, yellow and green. She was no longer able to paint in her own house, and she was supposed to be preparing for an upcoming solo exhibition in Singapore.

The divorce was quick. Their friends and neighbours were devastated, even more so when Edelweiss left and took Danae with her. After she had left, every few months Edelweiss would bring Danae back to stay in Ciputat for a while. She did so not because Pandan didn't want to go to Jogja, but because she didn't want him there. Pandan had visited her once and it had been terribly awkward.

While Danae was staying at Ciputat, Edelweiss would spend her time in Jakarta visiting clients and friends, or just eating out at her favourite restaurants. In the early days she would call in on her old neighbours in Ciputat, but she got annoyed by their constant questions about the ownership of the house, and eventually she decided to avoid them as far as possible..

Edelweiss also found it hard to stay in the house for very long, because her heart would ache every time she saw Pandan. Her ex was in good physical shape, but his movements seemed to her to be somehow feeble. His eyes had lost the wicked sparkle she used to know. He no longer called her Cempluk; he addressed her formally as *Bunda Danae*, Danae's mother. The first time he used that term, something inside her died.

And so when Pandan told her he was going to marry Aya, a kindergarten teacher, Edelweiss, despite a twinge of jealousy, genuinely hoped that he would be able to find happiness again. Her hopes were dashed when she discovered that the marriage had been arranged by the leader of his prayer group – Aya worked in the kindergarten that the group ran.

Aware that Pandan was still unemployed and living off his savings, Edelweiss suggested that he build a small student boarding house on the fairly extensive piece of land on the western side of the Ciputat house. Pandan agreed, and the newly built housing meant that he was bringing in a reasonable income. It was a big enough income that Aya was able to lend money to the friend who then cut up her body into ten pieces.

AYA had already been buried by the time Edelweiss arrived at the Ciputat house at noon. As soon as the body was released from the hospital, Pandan had chosen to bury her immediately rather than bring her home for the mourning period. Edelweiss regarded that as appropriate.

When she arrived, after a momentary awkwardness, Edelweiss hugged Pandan. He wept on Edelweiss's shoulder for what was probably a minute but to Edelweiss felt like hours. A number of the neighbours were also in tears. Some of the members of his prayer group looked enquiringly at them but no-one said anything. Edelweiss greeted Aya's parents, but she was unable to say a word.

The mourners continued to arrive until the evening. Some of Aya's friends were visibly uncomfortable because both the victim and the perpetrator were part of their community. In the late afternoon Edelweiss retreated to the back garden. She picked a custard apple from the tree she had planted. It was so sweet. This was where she had cuddled Zulaika for the first time.

The prayer class ended at nine. Edelweiss joined in for a while, hoping to hear something enlightening. She was disappointed; it was uninspiring.

Exhausted, Edelweiss rested in Danae's room, which until now had only ever been used when Danae came to stay. She had no idea of how long she had been asleep when she woke to see Pandan sitting in a chair by the bed. Despite his fatigue he tried to smile. Edelweiss got up and embraced him. Pandan wept again. A few moments later, driven by an emotion that neither of them understood, they undressed and made love. Edelweiss was aware of Pandan's tears on her shoulder. When it was over, Pandan fell asleep.

Edelweiss looked at her watch; it was one in the morning. She got dressed and washed her face in the bathroom. She couldn't fathom what had just happened. Was it just sympathy sex? She tidied herself up and left the room. There was nobody in the hallway. She picked up her bag and walked out of the house. In the front yard she lit up a cigarette. She walked to the main road to find a taxi.

THE DEATH OF ANWAR SADAT IN CEMPAKA PUTIH

ANWAR Sadat died the day on the very day he arrived in Jakarta from Semarang. He was 28.

His father had named Anwar after Egyptian President Muhammad Anwar El Sadat. His father had his reasons for choosing that name and not Gamal Abdul Nasser or Husni Mubarak. A week before the birth of Anwar from Semarang, Sadat the president had been assassinated by one of his own soldiers. According to the news reports, the death could have been avoided if Anwar Sadat had agreed to wear a bulletproof vest, as recommended by his advisors. He refused, saying that bulletproof vests were for pussies.

“He was a brave man, that’s for sure,” said Anwar from Semarang’s father admiringly.

And so when the baby was born he honoured the Egyptian president by naming his son Anwar Sadat. He decided against the names that he’d been contemplating in the preceding weeks: Franz, Johan, Mario, and Diego Armando. Those names were too posh for a humble villager, anyway.

Despite his father’s hopes, Anwar Sadat from Semarang did not develop into quite the hero that his tragic namesake had been. He was of a delicate disposition, which incurred the mirth of his friends. He was always on the margins of whatever game they happened to be playing.

When he was ten, his mother and father took Anwar to Surabaya by train. He was as white as a sheet throughout the entire journey. His parents assumed it was because he had skipped a meal. In actual fact, it was because every time they crossed a bridge, Anwar felt as if his soul was leaving his body. When it was time to go home Anwar pleaded with them to take the bus.

Anwar suffered from a sort of *gephyrphobia* – the fear of bridges based on the belief that they would collapse. Ordinary bridges didn’t bother him, but railway bridges scared the bejeezus out of him. Neither Anwar nor his parents knew that there was a name for this condition; all they knew was that Anwar would get into a state whenever he saw a bridge. Anwar’s suffering was intensified because he was also plagued by a number of other fears, from the common ones such as fear of blood or hemophobia, fear of doctors or iatrophobia, and fear of confined spaces or claustrophobia to the rarer ones such as fear of raindrops or ombrophobia. At least, although it was a small consolation, Anwar didn’t suffer from optophobia, the fear of opening one’s eyes, a condition that can lead to the sufferer clawing his own eyes out, with his own hands, a nail or a fork.

It was no doubt because of his various phobias that Anwar was happy to ensconce himself at home, and rarely left town. He was perfectly content just looking after his father’s humble grocery shop.

A few weeks before Anwar died, a relative in Jakarta phoned his father to say that he knew of a young woman, aged 24, widowed but childless, who would be a good match for the unattached Anwar Sadat. “She’s a good girl, fair-skinned, quiet, thrifty, likes gardening, likes knitting, good cook, knows the *Yaasiin* chapter of the Koran off by heart,” reported the relative.

This was a pleasing turn of events for Anwar’s mother and father. They suggested he go to Jakarta. He and the woman could get to know each other first, and if they got on well, maybe a relationship would follow. If not, well at least they would have established a friendship.

Ever the obedient son, Anwar set off for Jakarta. He was terrified, but he didn't want them to think he was a wuss. And the idea of maybe meeting his future wife did have its appeal. Overcome by a mixture of anxiety and excitement, he couldn't sleep the night before he left. So when he boarded the bus very early the next morning, he was so tired he could barely keep his eyes open. But he was afraid to go to sleep for fear of what might happen during the journey.

Anwar arrived at Pulogadung Terminal at two thirty in the afternoon. As he had been instructed to do, he caught a minibus to Senen. His relative's house was in Kramat. Once he was in the minibus his tiredness got the better of him. He woke with a start to find someone shaking him by the shoulder, saying "Come on mate, time to change buses." They were in Cempaka Putih.

Groggily Anwar got off. The shouting of a minibus conductor ten metres away put the wind up him. He'd only gone five metres when his sandal – Lily brand – slipped on some fine sand, and Anwar went flying. If only he'd let gravity do its thing, he would have been okay. But Anwar tried to resist the motion and as he awkwardly tried to regain his balance he collided with a woman coming out of a laneway between two minibuses.

Anwar's hand brushed the woman's breast. Both of them, equally taken aback, screamed. Still groggy, Anwar's hand slipped onto the woman's waist.

"Pickpocket!" shrieked the woman.

Anwar couldn't fathom what was happening; he just smiled.

"You bastard!" yelled one of the men who were hanging around on the street.

When a group of men approached him, Anwar burst into tears, suddenly overcome with longing for his mother's chicken soup and beef fritters, for his father's tall stories, and for the smile of his future wife, whom he had yet to lay eyes on.

LENA Mareta didn't see the first punch that struck Anwar on the head. She was already in a taxi by that time. Precisely three seconds after Anwar had collided with her, she had spied a taxi and immediately flagged it down. Understandably she was still extremely annoyed about the uninvited touch of a man's hand on her body. But there was something else, something even more troubling, that made her want to get out of there fast.

"Is it ok if I smoke?" asked Lena.

"Actually, it's not," said the driver, watching her in the rear vision mirror.

Lena opened the window and lit up a cigarette. *It would have been a pleasant evening if only that dumb pimply-faced kid hadn't stuffed it up for her!*

Lena had been looking forward to this evening. She'd even taken a day's leave. She'd had a bath when she got up, and another one after lunch. She never wore much make-up, but she did like to keep her nails painted. So, after the second bath she opened her box of nail polishes. There were four rows, with ten colours on each row. On the first row: pink, and nine shades of red - the red of a freshly slaughtered cow's heart, the red of an onion, the red of the Harajuku shopping complex in Tokyo, the red of the Mangga Besar night district, the red of cordial syrup, the red of a girl's first period, maroon red, the red of betelnut spittle and the red of the Joker's lipstick. On the second row: salted egg blue, samurai blue, the blue of an early winter sky, the blue of the Chelsea football team, the blue of a bruise on a thief who got nabbed, the blue of sex, greenish blue, the blue of lapis lazuli, the blue of a Pilot classic ballpoint and the blue of Cibaduyut stonewash jeans. On the third row:

sunflower yellow, durian yellow, the yellow of young rice plants, moss green, turmeric orange, citrus orange, coal brown, the brown of strong tea, the white of an egg sunny side up, and ivory white. On the fourth row: nine bottles of black like Joan Jett's hair and one bottle of clear polish. Lena chose the latter.

The previous evening Lena's boyfriend Jamal had returned home from a three week climbing expedition at Mount Elbrus in Russia. She'd not been able to meet him at the airport, so she'd been keen to go and see him that morning but held off because Jamal told her he'd probably still be asleep.

Lena and Jamal had been going out for four months. They had slept together nineteen times. By the second month Lena had become aware that they were incompatible on a number of grounds. It wasn't because of Jamal's age – at 21 he was six years younger than her – but rather because she found him uninspiring to talk to. Lena was of the view that youth did not give a person licence to prattle on about nothing. But the sex was always good. She wanted that to continue.

Once she was in his room, everything proceeded as Lena imagined it would. But her happiness was short-lived. As she was about to undo her bra, her hand stopped mid-air when she saw Jamal sitting naked on the bed, waving his hand over his genitals like a conductor in full flourish.

"Miss Lena, you've met these three before, but you've never been officially introduced. This is John, these are George and Ringo," laughed Jamal, pointing at his penis and both testicles.

"Where's Paul?" asked Lena, grinning.

"What do you mean?"

"How come he's been left out?"

"I've only got two balls, Len."

"Why isn't Paul the pillar?"

"Ha, he's the one that destroyed the band!"

They argued. Lena was angry. For her, there would have been no Beatles without Paul McCartney, no matter how brilliant John was. It was because of Paul that Lena had fallen in love with the Beatles. Her father died when she was quite young, and the slow Beatles songs – the ones that Paul had composed – were of great comfort to her. It wasn't that she didn't like John; she had a great deal of respect for him in fact. It was just that Paul was her first love. So she wouldn't countenance any criticism of Paul from Jamal. When Jamal realised that this was one argument he wasn't going to win, and tried to make amends by demonstrating how ready his own John was for a wrestle of a different kind, it was too late. Lena stormed out of the room in a big sulk.

It wasn't until after the second cigarette that Lena allowed herself a smile. *Why should I get so mad about this? Wouldn't it actually be an insult if that young punk were to name his thing after Paul?* She wanted to go back to him but her pride got in the way.

"To Ragunan, to the zoo," she said finally. At first she'd just said "Drive" to the driver.

"It's late Miss."

Lena didn't reply and the driver wasn't game to say any more.

Apart from Paul's songs, the other thing that had always comforted Lena was watching the animals at the zoo. Her favourite used to be the tapir because it was such a difficult

creature to classify. Her mother couldn't tell her what species of animal it was, and none of her family was any help either. Another thing that intrigued Lena about the tapir was its torpor. Once she'd grown up it was easy enough for her to find out about the tapir for herself, and it ceased to be of interest to her. These days it was the giraffe that captivated her, for one reason alone: the giraffe had no vocal cords *A neck that long, but condemned to silence.*

THE driver had not been mistaken in reminding Lena that it was late; the ticket seller at Ragunan told her the same thing. It was only forty minutes until closing time. That didn't bother Lena; she just wanted to look at the giraffe, and its enclosure wasn't far from the entrance.

Because of low cloud it was darker than usual. After ten minutes Lena had had enough. As she was about to move away, a woman – who Lena estimated to be in her seventies – caught her attention. The woman was repeatedly looking up at the sky and then looking at the shrubbery in front of her.

What Lena didn't know was that the woman was testing herself on meteorological botanomancy, which is the science of predicting weather conditions based on the movement of plants. It's a difficult science, even for a woman who is practised in fructomancy or divining by the shape, movement and response of fruit, dendromancy or interpreting trees, phyllomancy or interpreting leaves, and xylomancy or interpreting the trunks and branches of trees.

Lena kept staring at the woman, trying to recall who she reminded her of, until finally she felt confident enough to approach her.

“Are you Ibu Reni?”

The old woman smiled. “No, I'm Esti. Reni is my twin.”

Lena approached the woman and kissed her hand. This was totally unexpected: meeting the twin of the woman who had been so important to her family. Twenty years ago, after Lena's mother had suffered a serious stroke, it was Ibu Reni who had cured her, using herbal medicine and massage.

“There are so many coincidences in your stories, teach!”

The man they were addressing laughed. I was sitting beside him; I laughed too. There were five or six students in front of us. I say 'five or six' because the teacher had told me that, of the six students who were learning creative writing from him, one had officially enrolled but only turned up at one of the twelve sessions. Another was not enrolled and came along because his friend had brought him; from the second week of classes he'd taken advantage of the teacher's good nature to get himself free tuition.

“Didn't I hear you say that coincidences really do happen in real life?” said the teacher, as the laughter died down.

During the journey to get here, the six of them had been talking at length – or gossiping to be more precise – about a young guy, a singer in a punk band, who one of them had once been in a relationship with. Their talk ranged from the songs he'd liked and played to the colour of his skin – clear and pale when he was in a relationship and dark when he was not. They couldn't remember how they had got on to this topic of conversation. But what happened next came as a complete surprise to them. When they were stopped at the traffic

lights, a motorbike pulled up alongside them. One of them casually glanced out the window and yelled out in surprise because the motorcyclist was none other than the guy they'd just been talking about.

The incident had actually been a bit more convoluted than that, but they wanted to use the key points in the stories they were writing. The teacher smiled and told them he would make up a story with the odd coincidence here and there, and get them to judge how effective it was. He asked the students to give him a couple of hours. They were happy to comply, and went off to watch *Inception*. I went with them. While we were away he composed the story about Anwar Sadat and Lena Mareta.

They listened as he related the story and then one asked, 'So what happened next, teach?'

"Well I was actually hoping that you would each have a go at telling the rest of the story."

All six of them grumbled but did as they were told. Three of them were working on laptops; the others were scribbling on paper napkins that were almost as thick as writing paper. After twenty minutes, one of them handed his napkin over to the teacher. I read over his shoulder.

Here's how his story went.

"ANWAR, come on, get ready!"

Anwar Sadat was trembling. This ditch on the side of the highway was the last place he wanted to be. But his friends were pressuring him. One of them held out a slingshot to him; another was busy making bullets from clay. The village kids loved being part of this new game – firing clay bullets at passing cars from their slingshots. The kids got such a kick out of seeing the startled looks on the faces of the drivers or passengers. And it was even better if the driver actually got out of the car and chased them.

Anwar had joined in because Tamsi, the boy who had suggested he come and hide in the ditch, had promised he would protect Anwar at school. In grades one and two, Anwar had been bullied constantly on account of his obesity. So the promise of the tall slender Tamsi was enough to persuade him to grab the slingshot.

In less than three minutes they were all ready and armed. When an Impala sedan approached from the north, Tamsi tapped Anwar on the shoulder – code for 'your turn'.

Anwar shut his eyes and fired. The clay bullet struck the right wing of the driver's glasses. It didn't injure him, but he got the shock of his life. Two passengers, a woman and a girl, screamed when the driver suddenly swerved and slammed into a tree. They could hear a loud noise, but it wasn't coming from inside the car. After being rooted to the spot for about ten seconds, the other kids fled. Anwar remained transfixed; Tamsi grabbed his hand.

The driver was covered in blood; his head was smashed in. The woman passed out; the girl looked around and began to cry. Her name was Lena Mareta.

Translated from Bahasa Indonesia by Pam Allen