

A Spinster in Molo

Che Husna Azhari

When Mukminah died, her sister Rokiah cried the loudest. She had died a spinster, thus leaving neither husband nor children, only siblings, and so Rokiah thought it was fitting that she, Rokiah should do the right thing by showing her grief, crying ostentatiously in the kitchen hall of Mukminah's house, amongst the women preparing to wash the deceased. Mukminah lay enshrouded in the middle of the hall. She wore her everyday clothes, a pale yellow *baju* Kedah and a batik sarong. Someone came to cover her with a blanket. She was only fifty, hale and hearty and didn't die from any particular disease. Two months before her death though, when I last saw her, she seemed particularly distressed. Today, she looked serene, her face composed, as if happy to go.

However, Mukminah had never been completely well. When a child, polio had given her severely deformed legs, gnarled like banyan tree trunks. Polio was a common childhood disease that afflicted rural children then. Family clinics administering polio vaccination drops were few and far between. There were village midwives who took care of expectant mothers, giving them powdered milk and multi vitamins, but postnatal care was slipshod then. Mothers too often could not remember all the vaccinations required for TB, whooping cough, polio and so on. The ravaging disease made her fingers stiff and bony, her eyes permanently watery, with a slight jaundiced tinge, thus sealing her fate forever: she would never be able to attract any suitor. Early in her teens, Mukminah resigned herself to her fate – that of a spinster. Even if she were to entertain hopes of having another kind of life, those around her ensured she never would.

Every morning for 25 years or so (before her mother died in 1970), I would see her walking with her ungainly gait from her house, next to Rokiah's, carrying two huge metal buckets to draw water from the well for her mother's ablutions. The well, surrounded by concrete rings called *kereks*, was a good 100 metres from the house. Her mother, old and senile, lived with her. Her siblings had designated Mukminah, the spinster, as the natural nurse. I would watch her walk halfway, and then waylay her;

“*Tok Su!*” I would call from afar, “Do you need help to draw water?”

“Yes *Adik*,” she would invariably reply, beaming weakly.

It was a feat for her to affect a smile. It was as if the disease of her childhood had ossified her features into a perpetual frown. I would draw water from the well firstly, because the *kereks* made stooping to look into the well almost impossible for Mukminah, and secondly, handling the rope attached to the bucket needed much skill: it tended to slip past *Tok Su*’s stiff and bony fingers and in an instant, would lie in a wet bundle on top of the well water, causing much exasperation as we had then to fish it out.

“Why are your fingers stiff and bony, *Tok Su*?” I remembered asking when I became conscious of the fact.

“Well,” said my *Tok Su*, looking at me straight in the eye, “When I was a very little girl, I was pounding *sambal* in a pestle and bowl and you would never guess what happened.”

“No, I would never,” I replied.

“I pounded my hands. Accidentally, of course,” was the explanation.

Well, of course. That was before I went to school and learnt about vaccinations and polio.

“And your legs, why are they so bony and withered?” I kept on.

“Aah, the cow.”

“What cow?” I quizzed.

“Well, I was wearing a red *baju* and I passed by an untethered bull. The bull (the mild cow had mutated into a bull) then rushed at me and trampled on my legs.”

I was horrified. “Did you not scream out? Did anyone not see you? Oh *Tok Su*, *Tok Su*.” I hugged her tightly.

“Come *Adik*, don’t fuss so,” she chided. “It happened such a long time ago in the sweltering heat of the afternoon and everyone was having an afternoon siesta and so no one heard me.”

“Then?”

“Then I limped home.”

“What happened to the red *baju*?”

“I threw it away, of course.”

I fingered the bony bones. “They are really good legs, though, *Tok Su*.”

"Oh yes," she readily agreed. "The best, *bonily* speaking, that is."

One day, when I was about ten or so, I helped her peel open mangosteens, a truly delicate operation. It was nearly 6.30 in the evening. I looked anxiously in the direction of my house.

"Why are you so anxious, behaving like a mother hen who's lost her chicks, *Adik*?" chided Tok Su.

"Not chicks, Tok Su," I explained, a little impatiently. "Only my father. I am looking out for my father to come home." Then lowering my tone conspiratorially, I said, "I have a secret to tell you."

"Hmm... go on," she teased, "tell your secret; it is safe with me."

"My father loves me very much," and I blushed, "because, well, because among my siblings, I am the cleverest."

"Well, of course, he would ... Any father would, especially yours," she enthusiastically agreed, which pleased me no end.

"Well, do you want to know my secret?" she asked in an equally conspiratorial tone.

"Oh yes, please!" I replied.

"Hmm, my late father loved me equally well." At the mention of her father, tears welled up in her yellow-tinged eyes.

"I don't think he did," I flashed indignantly. "He did not protect you from the mad bull, neither was he around to help you bandage your fingers when you pounded them! He was a negligent father."

"Hush, hush, don't be too harsh on my father." I could see that *Tok Su* was like me, too quick on the defence when it came to her father. I tried another line.

"Well, then, if he was not around much, where were your siblings? What were they doing?"

"My siblings ..." *Tok Su* chewed on these words as if they were some indigestible victual.

"You mean Rokiah, and Maimunah and Salleh? They are not really siblings for we had different fathers. Only our mother was the same one. I told you that once before."

With a twinkle in her eye, she teased, "I thought you said you are the cleverest among your siblings!"

"Of course, I am," I retorted crossly. I did not see her for a whole day and when we met the next day, she was waiting anxiously for me.

"*Adik*, what kept you?"

"It's too embarrassing to tell," I confessed

"Why so?"

"It's too embarrassing to tell," this time with more emphasis.

"What? You failed your lessons?" That did the trick.

"I did no such thing. I don't fail my lessons."

"Then what?" she provoked.

"I was punished."

"For what crime?"

"I boxed somebody." This was said in a low tone and I hung my head.

"What, you boxed somebody?! You've become gangster-like, *Adik*." She looked at me in a concerned manner.

"I boxed somebody for calling someone a crippled cow." And I sobbed my heart out. She stood there looking at me, not saying a word. Finally, after my sobs had subsided, she took me by the hand and whispered to me,

"That was violent, but just."

When I was overseas for eight years, I wrote constantly to her, but through my father, in Rumi Malay and I daresay my father read them out to her and made the necessary explanations. She never replied personally, but my father would on her behalf write to me about her. When I came back, it was as if I had never left the kampung, but had stayed with her, helping her to draw water from the well with the *kereks*. But by this time, the well was boarded up as there was a pump to divert water from the well to her house. However, she still walked in the mornings so that I would waylay her whenever I was home.

"When will you be the first woman Prime Minister of Malaysia?" She asked me.

"Who gave you that idea?" I laughed at her serious expression.

"I thought you are so clever, now that you are a *doctor*. I thought the Prime Minister is a doctor too. So what's the problem?"

"*Tok Su*, of course I am clever and all that jazz – recalling my boasting of yester-year – but it takes more than just a doctorate to be the first woman Prime Minister of Malaysia," I explained.

Tok Su felt a little disillusioned about the power of my PhD after this explanation.

The last time I spent time with her, was a few days during the fasting month and a few days after Eid. On my first day at home, I went to see her. She was asleep in the afternoon, which was unusual. She hated sloth and would be pottering about. When she saw me, she brightened and got up.

"Ah" she exclaimed excitedly, "You have come to break fast with me?"

I hesitated. My family would expect me to break fast with them. She saw me hesitate and so fell back on the mattress. Immediately, I felt bad for being insensitive.

"*Tok Su*, I will cook rice for you," I volunteered.

"Please don't," she replied huffily, "You are the worst cook in the whole of Kelantan; that is why nobody bothers to marry you." I laughed so hard she got up and laughed with me.

"Who's being nasty now?" I teased back. "Who's the one always telling me to take care of myself and now she is telling me to marry."

"Humph," she responded, "I should have married, too, you know, to that no-good gold digger; at least he would have run away with my money and given me the satisfaction of depriving those vultures of usurping my property."

I tread carefully, "What vultures and yes, what property?"

"The property, my father left me. He left me much property, thinking that I needed much wealth to take care of myself. And now those vultures can't think of anything except my wealth. Well then, they should be happy now *Adik*, they have got what they desire most in the world."

I could not make head or tail or what had caused so much ire in *Tok Su*. Perhaps that was why my father had practically shooed me to see *Tok Su* as soon as I got home.

"Your *Tok Su* is particularly distressed but she won't tell us the reason why," my father had informed me. "Perhaps she will tell you, *Nadi*."

"The vultures? The vultures? Can't you guess? Why the chief vulture is *Rokiah*, the vulture son is *Awang* and his offspring are baby vultures. They sit and roost in their houses, keeping an eye on my wealth, in case they miss an opportunity to seize anything of value."

She was getting agitated. I held her.

"Last month they came together and asked me if the rumour that I had wanted to transfer my land deeds was true. No, I said, it was not true. And even if it were, that was none of their business because my property had nothing to do with them. It was given to me by my father. It was not our mother's property. It was already in my name."

"Well," said Rokiah sweetly, "if you do want to transfer it to somebody, anybody at all, anyone you like, of course, we can help you. We can take you to the Pejabat Tanah in Kota Baru."

"Well thank you very much, Kiah, I can ask Nadimah to do it. She is a lawyer-doctor and very clever in these things."

"You don't need Nadimah for these simple things, Rokiah told me. And anyway, she is no blood relation. She won't know head or tail, who's what and why. Awang can help you. Awang has friends in the Pejabat Tanah."

"Oh Adik, they harassed me day and night, and finally last week, I could take it no more. I said, all right, all right I will transfer the deeds. That was not what I had in mind at all, ever. I had wanted it to be bequeathed as *waqf*. Really, it was almost public knowledge in the village how much I had wanted to build a *madrassa* or a *tadika*. I had even told the Imam so."

"Something for the Hereafter, I informed him."

"I thought to myself, if perhaps I could transfer the deeds to a third party I could trust, but within the family, someone who will keep them at bay. Later on, I could always tell this person what I had actually intended the lands for."

"I had Maimunah's children in mind, specifically her daughter, Tuan Maizam binti Tuan Lembut. Maimunah raised her children to be more trustworthy than that of those two. Those two raised incorrigible offspring in their own mould. I don't see Tuan Maizam as often as I see you, Adik, that is indeed true, but I know her to be upright and trustworthy. She is a lawyer too, like you."

I had to secretly smile, albeit a fleeting one, under the circumstances, at her absolute trust in people of my profession.

"I announced to both Awang and Rokiah I would only transfer the deeds to Tuan Maizam and no one else. They agreed and informed me that they would proceed with the paperwork and all I had to do was go to the Pejabat Tanah and sign some papers. That was all. I was then bundled into Awang's car with Rokiah. They took me to the Pejabat Tanah. I did not know they had filled in the transfer forms at the Pejabat Tanah in their names. The forms were in *Rumi*. They kept telling me, "*tepek tange, tepek tange.*" (put your thumbprint here, put your thumbprint here.)

When I was about to put down my thumbprint, the officer in charge asked me:

Mok Cik nok saling namo ko Awang bin Abdullah dan Rokiah binti Abdul Rahman ko? (Auntie, did you want to transfer the deed documents to Awang bin Abdullah and Rokiah binti Abdul Rahman ?)

That was when I discovered to my horror, their diabolical scheme. I withdrew my thumb and said, '*dok dok, buke demo ni, tapi ko Tuan Maizam binti Tuan Lembut.*' (no, no, not to them, but to Tuan Maizam binti Tuan Lembut.)

"And the officer told me, *tidok namo Tuan Maizam ni Mok Cik. Acu balik bice semula.*" (It's not Tuan Maizam's name here, Auntie. Perhaps you should go home and discuss things over again.)

"I got up, they followed me, bundled me into the car again and drove me around Kota Baru until I felt really sick. They told me they would not let me out of the car until I signed the forms. I remembered being driven around the Pasar Siti Khadijah ten times in the searing afternoon heat."

"I let myself be led into the Pejabat Tanah and I put my thumbprint down on the forms, although the very nice officer kept asking me to go home and think about it. I was crying and agitated and I could not imagine what stories Rokiah and Awang had told him. They had managed to convince him by telling him that I was senile and could not recall the name of my grandnieces and grandnephews."

"On the way home I warned Rokiah not to wash my body should I die and I called her *menate mung!* (You fiend!) When I got home, I was consumed with grief and shame. I wanted to tell your father what had happened to me, indeed what had come to pass of my life; but shame overcame me and I could not tell him. I am telling you now."

I calmed her down and I sought my father's permission to break fast with her. After prayers we sat and talked. She was very reflective.

"You know our fathers fended for us in totally different ways. Mine gave me property. Yours gave you an education. My gift has become a curse because vultures covet property but not education. Nobody can take that education your father gifted you." I let her speak to her heart's desire.

"I will never see my dreams materialise now."

"When I told the Imam about my *waqf* wish, he counseled me: wait for Nadimah to come home for the Eid. She will know what to do. She is a lawyer-doctor. Now I tell Nadimah ... what? The lands are gone. I am too ashamed to tell the Tok Imam. He will think I have reneged on my promise."

At this juncture, the famous lawyer-doctor could only listen. The deed had been done. Suddenly she took my hand and exhorted me to bear witness against the

vultures on the Day of Judgment. I wanted her calm and well and so I promised. It was quite comical, come to think of it, but indeed I promised to bear witness in the hereafter. I can imagine the scene on the Day of Judgment. Amongst the multitudes in the scorching sun, a voice will boom out:

“Mukminah, daughter of Tok Mek Putih, you alleged that you have made *dhalim* on (oppressed) the world. Who will bear witness for you?”

I guess I will have to rise, walk up to the Throne, stand before the Balance and declare

“I, Nadimah, daughter of Sukaina will, my Lord!”

When she died, it was my father, the keeper of our many secrets, *Tok Su*'s and mine, who broke the news. I took the plane home immediately. I was no blood relation and the villagers thought it a little strange I took the trouble. But the keeper of our secrets knew that I was more than her blood relation for I was her soul mate. I had to be there and see her to her final resting place. When I arrived at her house, I did not go to see her immediately for I was no blood relation and must not be seen to be forward and presumptuous. But I later saw her twice, as she lay enshrouded and after. Before she was put on the bier for the *janaza* (funeral) prayers, I ventured to her for the last time. I waited till all her relatives had paid their last respects, and then edged near. Her ossified features seemed to me to assume a smile, a very personal smile. I fingered her bony fingers for the last time and reminded her:

“In the Hereafter, you will only draw water from the three Streams. Each in corresponding sweetness. Farewell my dearest friend, farewell.”

And a quick kiss on her forehead.

A few weeks passed. One day I had a call from one of Tok Su's grandnieces, Faizah.

“*Kak*, “she began, “can you come home to Kelantan immediately? It's very important.”

I felt a little annoyed at Faizah's commanding tone.

“Whatever for, Faizah?”

“I don't know how to actually break the news to you, *Kak*; *Tok Su* left you all her jewelry,” was Faizah's faltering reply.

I held back the welling sobs as they threatened to break the restraining wall of my chest and so I had to speak quickly:

“I am sure there is a terrible mistake, Faizah. I am no blood relation. I am not

entitled to *faraid*. There was never a moment ever in her life that Tok Su spoke of this." I did not relish the idea of getting entangled in *faraid* claims with Rokiah and her relatives.

"No mistake, Kak. *Tok Su* left the jewelry with the Imam long before she died with the explicit instructions to hand it to you upon her death. I was so told."

Faizah was quite adroit at being dramatic when the occasion demanded.

"I am told it constituted *hibah*." (gift)

A pause. "I don't mind having them, Kak, they're lovely pieces," followed by impish giggles.

"Then *you* have them," I replied.

"It's not that simple, Kak. It's not for you to decide. The family insists you come home and sort it out. The jewelry is with the Imam and he insists on handing it over to you." Then in a slightly sly tone she added, "*Tok Su* would have never left it to any of her siblings, Kak. You will never get to hear of them."

I had to take another plane home to my *kampung* to sort out *Tok Su*'s jewelry, my disputed inheritance. I arrived at around 11 am and immediately made my way to the Imam's abode. The Imam's sitting room was choc a bloc with contesting parties. I made out Rokiah, her siblings Maimunah (Mak Nah), Salleh (Tok Leh), Rokiah's son Awang, Awang's children including Faizah, and Salleh's eldest child Shafei, Maimunah's children, including Tuan Maizam, were conspicuously absent.

I quickly gathered that she must have given instructions for her siblings to stay away from the fray. I could see that only Rokiah's line had turned up in full force, to wrest away from me the usurper, her rightful inheritance. The thought gave me a brief light moment of respite.

When all were seated, the Imam produced a handwritten note in Jawi script and proceeded to read it.

Adapun amba (alif-mim-ba-alif) , Mukminah binti Deraman, nombu (nun-mim-ba-wau) kad pengenalan.....dengan disaksikan oleh Tok Imam kampung Molo, Hussain Che Wan Senik, nombu kad pengenalan... ..dengan rela hati amba menghadiahkan atau pun dengan lain perkataan menghibahkan perkakas mas amba (empat bentuk cincin berlian, nam bentuk gelang emas pintal, pat pasang subang,tiga butir loket berlian dan dua butir loket jamrud dan jelima, dan tiga set kancing baju ambo pada adik Nadimah binti Abdullah Munzir; beralamat asalnya Kg Molo, sebelah rumah amba, Kota Baru Kelantan. Adapun adik Nadimah ini besar dalam pagar amba dan amba kenal hati budi dia, seumur hidup dia. Amba

dengan sedar, waras dan ikhlas menyerah segala perkakas mas amba pada dia dalam masa hidup ambo lagi supaya tak dok timbul pesaka-faraid dan segala macam hal berkaitan. amba takut bagi ke dia sebab dia budak lagi dan hilang jadi amba serah perkakas mas ini ke Tok Imam biar dia taroh molek-molek bila amba tak ada dan adik Nadimah besar, insyaallah Tok Imam akan serah pada dia. Amba turun tepek tangan amba tanda betol hak amba buat ni.

It was dated 22nd July 1975, my 15th birthday.

It was written in archaic pre-Zaaba Malay, embellished with bits of Kelantan Malay but I was pleased and proud that my dear *Tok Su* could have written such a beautiful letter. In English, it would have read something like this:

I, Mukminah binte Deraman, identity card number ..., do hereby declare, witnessed by the Tok Imam of Kampung Molo, Hussain Che Wan Senik, identity card number ..., do without duress bequeath, or in other words, *hibah* my jewelry (four pieces of rose-cut diamond rings, six gold wrought bangles, four pairs of earrings, three rose-cut diamond lockets, two emerald and ruby lockets, and three sets of *kanching baju*) to *adik* Nadimah binte Abdullah Munzir, her original address next to my house, in Kampung Molo, Kota Baru Kelantan. And so it is that *adik* Nadimah grew up in my compound and I know her heart and her soul intimately all her life. With clear and lucid mind I bequeath my jewelry during my lifetime so that there will no issue of inheritance and *faraid* and some other things related. I fear to give (the jewelry) to her now because she is still a child and might lose them, and so I give these to the Tok Imam for safekeeping so that when I am gone and *adik* Nadimah grown, *insyaallah*, Tok Imam will dispense with them accordingly. I hereby lay down my thumbprint here to signify that indeed it is me who did this.

A hush prevailed. The Tok Imam seized upon the moment and opened a cloth fashioned into a pouch, the size of a *bawal tudung*. He arranged the disputed inheritance on the *bawal tudung* in front of everyone. It was quite a remarkable cache. I do not blame Rokiah for contesting

“That’s all?” Rokiah enquired

“That’s all.” The Imam agreed.

“It’s enormous,” Rokiah observed.

“It’s enormous,” her line echoed.

"It's enormous," the Imam agreed.

The gems were gorgeous. They twinkled under the light and when they caught the morning light threw a scattering of stars on to the wall and people's faces. I forgot the lights and scattering stars. All I could remember were the stories that will remain mine and hers, of the mad cow and the pestle and mortar, soaring vultures who drive people around Kota Baru until they get sick, and of shattered dreams.

Oh *Tok Su*. Why was your life broken so? And why was I as equally negligent and hopeless like your late father? The famous lawyer doctor with a fancy PhD and theft-proof gift, who could not protect you for toffee? I felt repulsed by the gifts, the treasure-trove glinting in the morning light in the Imam's sitting room. Why did she leave them to me? They were a torment, nothing else.

I broke from my private reverie to hear Rokiah's rasping voice, cutting through my memories. "Did my dear departed sister say to give all those pieces that you have arranged here to Nadimah?"

"She did indeed," was the Tok Imam's gentle answer.

"Seems a bit rash to me," piped up Rokiah's Awang.

"Is it permissible?" This again was Rokiah.

"It is indeed," replied the Imam, "as we have explained."

Imams always speak in the plural. It was deemed to be polite to do so. "It was her right, Kiah. Can't you leave her alone for once in death? When will your conniving stop?" It was Maimunah.

"It's not her right," Rokiah retorted acidly, "would you say a no-blood relation has more rights to her property than us, her blood relations? Islam has no *dhalim* laws, surely?" That last was directed at the Imam.

"No indeed. We are the first to agree. And that is why we stand by her right to gift her possessions as she saw fit long before she died." The Imam was the epitome of gentle level-headedness.

"She had a proper will, albeit written in Jawi. What does it matter? Nadimah did not connive to get it from you like you did her land!" Maimunah shouted angrily.

I made a mental note to ask Maimunah how she knew about the connived lands.

"I did not connive to get it from her! We went to the Pejabat Tanah and she gave it willingly to me. You can ask the land officer in charge. Why would we cheat her? She is our sister, we have the same mother. For heaven's sake, Munah, watch

your mouth”, warned Rokiah.

“Ho-ho!” mocked Maimunah, “I suppose I am then? How come there are three siblings and you and your son got all her land?”

“Because, she loved me most,” retorted Rokiah triumphantly.

Maimunah laughed so hard or maybe she feigned it so hard, her shoulders shook. “She...she loved you? She hated you more than the disease that afflicted her. The whole village knows that. Even the no-blood relation knows that! Don’t you Nadimah?”

Fast becoming embroiled in the hate match between the siblings, I was getting very affected.

“Maimunah called me a conniver. What would you people call Nadimah? Do you think because she had a fancy education and speaks in polite tones, she does not connive? Why would my dearest sister, so dear to me, whom I cared for dearly, for she was a spinster and nobody married her and cared for her, give a total stranger so much inheritance? Does it make sense? And this person will receive the treasure-trove – she is a lawyer-doctor, is she not? It makes you think, doesn’t it?”

I had to intervene at this juncture. “Tok Imam, I began, “I think my *Tok Su* would have been happier if she could achieve her dreams. I understand she wanted to make a *waqf* from her lands to make a *madrassa* or a *tadika*. I am thinking that we should do that. Which is more suitable and needed? A *madrassa* or a *tadika*?”

The Tok Imam looked at me for some time before replying. “A *madrassa* for younger children to learn the *quran*.”

“A *madrassa* it is. Or perhaps a small library. There is enough from this treasure trove to build a small library. We can call it the Mukminah Kutub Khaneh”

Maimunah stopped her duel with Rokiah to smile at me approvingly.

I did not think Rokiah believed that I would dispense with the beautiful treasures so willingly. It was too goody-two shoes. Indeed she was right. I was no goody two shoes. Indeed I am only a lawyer-doctor. I know better when treasure belongs to me and when I had to hold them for safekeeping.

“I hand everything over to Tok Imam for the *madrassa* and the *kutub khaneh*, but I will keep one piece, just one piece, if I may, Tok Imam – that rose-cut diamond *kancing baju*.”

Tok Imam nodded.

“You see, she used to put it on with her *baju kebaya* whenever she wanted to go out.”

My thoughts flew back to that time...

"Ah, you're a real dandy, *Tok Su*."

She would be dressed in a *baju kebaya*, a *batek sarong* and that rose-cut diamond *kancing baju*.

"You look like a bride," I would egg her on.

"Come on then, *Adik*, you and I will sing that Piromlis song ...

Pakai baju kancinglah suasa

Pakaian baba nyonyalah Melaka ...

I would sing and I would twirl around, holding up my skirt as if it were a train. On my birthday, I put on a *baju kebaya* and a *batek sarong* and pin on *Tok Su*'s rose-cut diamond *kancing baju*. I look at myself in the mirror and I hum the Piromlis song,

Pakai baju kancing lah suasa

Pakaian baba nyonya lah Melaka.

So I hold up my sarong and twirl myself in front of the mirror and I say to myself,

"You look like real dandy, today Nadimah."

"And you look like a bride."

If by chance some smart aleck little girl ventures up to me to ask, "Why are your legs bony and spindly, Auntie?" I could not get away with a mad cow story like Mukminah did. The little girl would look disbelievingly at me and say, "I think it's from the polio, Auntie."