

WHAT I WISH I HAD KNOWN

2. OTHER LESSONS YOU LEARNED IN YOUR 20s

I've lived my whole life following people and taking their choices as mine. I will dream a new dream, a dream that's totally my own, and I will work hard to get it.

Ever since her acceptance letter to study abroad arrived at her inbox, nothing in Marcella Purnama's life has gone according to plan. Instead of choosing Science, like her two older sisters did before her, she steered path to study Arts—a degree so alien to both her families and friends. But as she traveled thousands miles away, struggled with English, had her first byline and went back home to apply for her first job, Marcella realized that plans are meant to be changed. Full of relatable tales of horrific group work, falling in love, first job interview and quarter-life crisis, this illuminating account follows how a young adult grapples with life's small and big questions, and the lessons learned along the way.

Marcella Purnama

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& OTHER LESSONS YOU
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who have done more than right.

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PROLOGUE

My father always says that in order to achieve success, you need to do two things: to work hard and to dream. To achieve something, anything, you should be willing to work hard for it. That's why he has stayed at one company all through his adult life, for twenty-eight years to be exact, and he's still there. That's why he climbs up the corporate ladder, from being a low-ranked employee to a director. That's why I am here.

And dare to dream. Papi would say these philosophical things randomly, like in a car ride to the shopping mall on a fine Saturday afternoon. "La, remember, you have to have a dream. You have to dream big. I can be where I am now because I have a dream that one day I will be successful. I will send my children to university. Have a dream, and work hard for it."

Papi would then ask about what we should have for lunch, as if he hasn't talked about such a serious topic before. I would be sitting there in the back seat of our family's prized car, thinking about the dreams I had as a child.

I had no childhood dream.

My dream consists of other people's. When my sister Jessica was in primary school, she wanted to become a teacher. A couple of years later, she chose to become a doctor. She was twelve when our grandfather from Mami's side died of lung cancer, old enough to understand the complexity of sickness and health. So she wrote in her university application, "I want to be able to help people who are like my grandfather." She was accepted rather easily with her stunning grades and brilliant mind, it was not even a question. She's graduated high school with a near perfect score. So I grew up wanting to be a teacher too. And a doctor. And I know that I suck at both.

My oldest sister Christina has forged the same brilliant path. She has gotten a scholarship in Singapore to do PhD in Bioscience. My parents, who only have high school diplomas, succeed in raising us with the ideals of getting higher and higher education. We would get the highest education they can afford we would not be reliant on others, not even on our future husbands, you know, just in case the rainy season comes. They want to equip us with everything they never have a chance to have: knowledge. Money can run out, but knowledge will enable us to make money again.

So one morning in January I sit down at our dining table. It's a round, glass table, capable of hosting ten people. I

lean back, drinking my hot green tea as I do every day. I look through the sliding glass door beside the table to our side garden. *What should I choose?* I wonder. I am my sisters' sibling after all, and I have graduated with a good score. While it is not as perfect as my sister Jess's, it's close enough. I have only applied to one university the University of Melbourne where Jess is studying medicine, and I have been accepted as easily as I send in my application.

Marcella Purnama, a going-to-be Bachelor of Biomedicine student. I haven't decided which major to take, but the news that I'm accepted is enough to make my mother thrilled. I am also thrilled. We go out to have lunch at a local restaurant and over a bowl of *bakmi kangkung*, I say, "I hope you'll be proud that your youngest will graduate with a biomedicine title. It's prestigious. It's hard to get in."

Mami gives a small laugh and says, "Yes, yes, I'm proud." Then she puts more chilli powder into her noodles, a twinkle of her smile never leaving her eyes.

I feel proud for not letting my parents down, but I feel like a fraud because I genuinely hate science. I do well in Chemistry, but I only do so because I've copied a brilliant friend's exercise. He has been diligently solving every problem in class while I play *Tap Tap Dance* on another friend's tablet. Somehow, I am able to memorize the lessons blindly in time for exams and get the better mark. I do well in Maths because I like problem solving I don't like to be defeated by logic and a series of numbers. In Physics, my teacher always says, "The key words. Remember the key words!" So I do just that.

I have a knack at Biology report, because my essay writing is better than average. But excelling at subjects, I realize, is not the same as having a passion for them.

So I sit there at the table, thinking about my options. My sister Christina sits on my left, holding a scrap paper and a pen. She writes, “Biomedicine”, “Commerce” and “Communications” on the left side of the paper, and “pros” and “cons” on the right side. Papi joins in and sits on my right, both talking about the decision I should take next.

“I think if you study Biomed it will be more prestigious,” my sister says. “Then you can become a researcher, or even a doctor if you want to.”

I nod, rather unwillingly, but I understand what she tries to imply.

“Commerce,” she underlines the word, “is important because everything needs business skills now. If you end up wanting to open a business or work in big companies and make big money, it’s good to study commerce.”

Can’t say that I disagree, but I’m looking forward to hearing where she’s heading with our last option.

“I don’t know much about Communications,” she admits. “And I don’t know what you’ll study, but it’s equally good to get practical skills that can be transferred to the workplace. It just has less prestige. And,” Christina takes a second pause before saying, “less money.”

She hands me the paper and the pen, gesturing me to write more pros and cons. Of course studying Communications has less prestige – the entry level to get to an Arts degree is lower than Biomedicine.

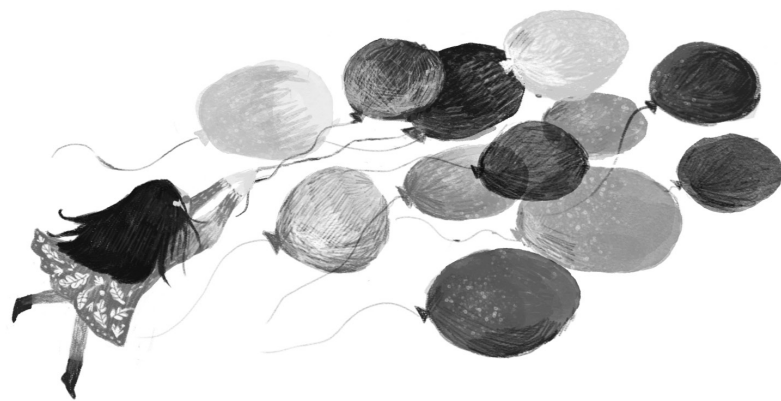
I frown. Papi looks at the paper. He sips his own cup of green tea, and asks, “You don’t like science, no?”

I shake my head.

“Then it’s easy,” Papi smiles. “Whatever you choose, we will support you.”

They leave the table. I’m staring at the paper, imagining the life I would live if I study science. Perhaps like what my Physics teacher envisions, I would become a biomedical engineer, doing magic on CT Scans, MRI, or even creating a new kind of prosthetic leg. Perhaps like what my Biology teacher predicts, I would follow my sister’s footsteps to become a doctor.

But I’ve lived my whole life following people and taking their choices as mine. I smile. I know what I will choose now. I will dream a new dream, a dream that’s totally my own, and I will work hard to get it.



PART 1

“A lot of people want a shortcut.
I find the best shortcut is the long way,
which is basically two words: work hard.”
Professor Randy Pausch, *The Last Lecture*



THE FALSE START

This story didn't start on orientation week. It didn't even start on the first day of school, with a confused girl holding a map of the university in one hand and GoogleMap opened on her smartphone in another. This story started on a plane, but not on one that was going to Melbourne.

It all started on a plane to Singapore.

My student visa had not yet been processed. I was about to leave in one week, and I was getting anxious. Partly, it was my fault: I was not yet eighteen, and in order to get my student visa, my sister Jess needed to become my guardian in Australia. She sent through her Victorian Police Check, only to find out two weeks later that she needed to send an Australian Police Check instead. Partly, it was her fault: she thought that Australian and Victorian police checks were the

same thing. So my visa had not arrived, and uni was going to start next week.

While my visa had some trouble processing, our family was shocked with this news: Ama, my grandmother from my father's side, had cancer, which had spread to her colon. "It was a stage three cancer," Papi said over the phone. That same day, Ama flew to Singapore accompanied by her husband my grandfather, Engkong and Papi. Mami and I followed two days later. I sat there on the plane thinking of a thousand things that could go wrong and how to make things right again.

It was a long flight. I looked out of the window, seeing the blue sky and the endless possibility of life overseas, feeling disappointed that I had to go to Singapore on such important time. I had been waiting to go to university for ages. There were those people who adored high school and swore that anything would not be as awesome as being seventeen and having a lot of friends and being popular and gossiping about the girl next door. While they were living their best years in high school, I was dreaming of freedom. Perhaps on my first day in Melbourne I would accidentally meet my ex-crush, and we would rekindle our relationship. I heard that he had gone to study in Melbourne a year before. A wishful thinking, I knew, but a girl could dream.

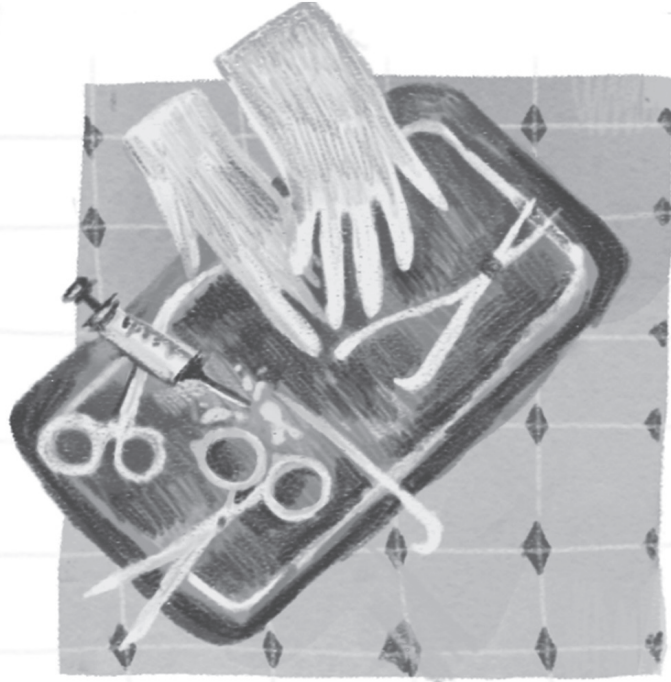
But instead of being on the plane and getting excited to go to Melbourne, I was on a plane to Singapore. I thought about having to extend my stay and thus postponing my

studies until June. *What would I do for six months? Enrolling in a baking class, perhaps.*

Mami and I touched down in Singapore, took a taxi to the hotel to drop our baggage and went straightaway to the hospital. The hospital was covered in white, and the smell of antiseptics filled the air. I saw old people in wheelchairs with IV stuck through their veins, behind them stood their adult children who took time off work. There were sick kids too. I couldn't imagine what brought seven-year-olds to the cancer section of the hospital at two in the afternoon. I didn't want to imagine.

We went to Ama's room. Arriving there, we were told that she wanted the operation to be done the next day no question asked, no second opinion needed. The doctor nodded and assured with complete confidence that it would be successful, and said a series of procedures to do and not to do before.

My grandma, who was about one-hundred-and-sixty-centimeter tall and weighed about sixty kilos, wore her red high-heels with her head held high. She didn't look scared. Her face looked daring. Papi used to tell me that after the bankruptcy claimed Engkong and Ama's car showroom business, Ama was the one who was strong enough to get back on her feet to get back in the game and do other business with her relatives. They never reclaimed their former state of glory, but they lived comfortably, giving their three granddaughters big gifts every birthday and Christmas holiday. Cancer, it



seemed, was another problem she had to face, and she was determined to win.

The next morning, we waited at the open room that had two sofas and one coffee table. Engkong went to the toilet every twenty minutes and Papi was praying. Mami also prayed. I prayed silently. I was still thinking of my university, but now it seemed ridiculous to be thinking about studies when Ama was

lying on the operation table. My oldest sister Christina, who studied and lived in Singapore, brought us takeaway meal. I played with my phone. Listened to some music. Waited.

When the door was finally opened, the doctor smiled and gestured us to go to one of the smaller spaces beside the operation room. There was a nurse who brought a flat, rectangular silver tray and a blob of flesh the size of a small rabbit. “The operation was successful,” he said. He was wearing blue-green gloves, and he picked up the smelly flesh like a butcher picking up dead chicken at the market. The doctor pointed to the small circles that looked like oversized ulcers, which were inflamed and white in color, contrasting heavily with the deep red flesh.

“These were the cancer cells,” he said. “She would need to go through chemotherapy, of course, but we managed to get most of them out.”

That twenty-centimeter-long flesh was Ama’s colon. Mami put her right hand on her nose and mouth, and began to step backwards. I looked at the flesh intently but wondering inside: *Does every doctor show the patient’s families the torn flesh from inside the body?*

The doctor excused himself and skipped ahead with such a

I didn’t get the perfect first-day-of-school story that I wanted. But I have the story of being there when my family needs me. Perhaps that’s the story that counts.

good mood, and we all breathed in relief. Especially Papi.

That night, I finally received an email telling my visa was accepted and would be ready to be picked up the next day. I told Mami the news, but decided to stay for a few more days, even if it meant that, in addition to missing the entire orientation week, I would miss the first week of uni as well.

I didn't get the perfect first-day-of-school story that I wanted. I didn't meet anyone who would become my best friend in the entire world, nor did I meet my ex-crush randomly on the street and batted our eyelids with each other. But I have the story of being there when my family needs me.

Perhaps that's the story that counts.



THE LUNCH YOU EAT ALONE

It was one o'clock on a fine Tuesday afternoon and an Asian girl with long, black hair and small eyes fidgeted in her seat, looking down, making no eye contact. She sat on the nearest table to the door, ready to lift up her two bulky subject guides and notebooks and dash out of the class. *No eye contact*, she thought. *If I keep on looking down, she will not pick me.*

She listened to the tutor talking about culture, media and the notion of freedom of speech. A Caucasian girl with medium blonde hair at the far left of the room seemed unable to keep her mouth shut. She blabbered about the system and the failure of the media. You could see it in her eyes – she held such high idealism on what media should be like. She talked with a burning passion that a black-haired Asian still did not

understand. The only thing she knew was that the girl talked too much, and the tutor seemed unable to do anything about it. *Fifteen minutes more*, she said to herself, *just fifteen minutes more*.

The Asian girl glanced to her left and right, where three other Asians sat on the same table. She felt better, knowing that she was not the only one in the room with thick, black hair, but she was also wary. She knew the stereotype well – the Asians don't talk in class and sit together in one table, not wanting to assimilate with the locals. But how could she not do that, where the other sixteen students were Caucasians? *They look intimidating, plus, they seem to not be able to cease speaking, even though half of what's coming from their mouth is a no-nonsense*, she thought to herself.

“Okay, that's it,” the tutor finally said. “For next week, read through the readings and we'll discuss about media as the watchdog. Have a good week, everyone.”

The Asian girl collected her books and darted towards the door, because, frankly, the other two Asian-looking people who sat at the same table as her were not purely Asians. They were the ABCs – Australian Born Chinese – and that fact made her felt quite alone. She walked across the lawn, where the Eastern Resource Centre Library was, went to the second floor and found a secluded cubicle spot to sit down. She dropped all her books on the table, played a song, put on her earphones, opened up her meagre lunchbox containing leftovers from yesterday's dinner and began to eat in silence.

Back in high school, eating alone is one of the worst things that could happen to you. Imagine that it's lunchtime and everyone else has gone in groups to buy noodles, *batagor* or *siomay* to the canteen. Instead of walking with them, you sit alone in your seat – the second column from the left and the fourth row from the front. You take out your lunchbox that your mother has kindly prepared at five in the morning and eat it as fast as you can. But someone would always go back from the canteen early, and they would notice you sitting alone at your table. They would not make small talk, yet when they close the classroom door you could almost swear that the first thing they're gonna do is to tell their friends that they have just found you eating your lunch. Alone.

Asians don't eat alone. At the very least, Indonesians don't. The girls don't even go to the toilet alone.

I ate alone. I didn't really mind – I was used to having coffee at Starbucks by myself, doing my own stuff. But that was going out alone on purpose. This, if I was honest, was me not having anyone to ask to have lunch with. I sat there, always at the same cubicle, eating lunch and doing work, not wanting to acknowledge the fact that perhaps I was friendless. I missed the orientation week and it seemed that everyone had formed his or her own groups of friends. Talking with the locals was already hard enough, moreover becoming their friends. Other international students – the ones who went through foundation studies for one year before commencing uni – hung out like they had known each other since primary school, showing little interest in making new friends.

So I continued to eat alone. I wasn't feeling sorry for myself. I was studying at the best university in Australia. This wouldn't budge me, not even a little bit. Not at all.

Esther had a medium black hair that was not so straight but contained a little bit of wave on it. She dressed mostly in shirts and jeans, wearing sneakers to anticipate the long walk around the university and the city of Melbourne in general. Like me, Esther lived far away from the uni she needed to get on the train, bus and tram to reach here. She carried a backpack and made her own lunch. She was from Malaysia.

"Hi, I'm Esther," she said in a soothing voice. She reminded me of a mature, grown-up woman who knew exactly what she should do in life.

"Marcella," I said, smiling.

We had small talk in the Critical Thinking with Data class which we both took as an elective. She took it because she liked Maths and thought that the subject name was cool; I took it because I decided to do a double major in Communications and Psychology, so hopefully I would benefit from that extra "critical thinking" on statistics. We were both wrong. The subject sucked.

"You're from Indonesia?" she asked.

"Yes. Have you been there before? To Bali, perhaps?"

"Nah, I needed to save money," she smiled and laughed.

"I went to Malaysia when I was a child, some years back," I said in accented English. "Ehm, to Sunway Lagoon and Genting, was it? The *bak kut teh* was awesome."



Her face brightened. “Yes, the food’s awesome!”

The tutor ended the group discussion and asked us to present our findings to the class. Esther did, and she did it with confidence. She talked loudly. I envied Malaysians and Singaporeans, and to some extent the Filipinos. English is also their national language, no matter what their mother tongue is.

The class ended and we exchanged numbers. Esther said that she would tell me where the microwave spots in the university were, as the only one I knew was at the basement level of the Union House – the “food court” building of the university. The staff really didn’t think this through, as the students who packed their own lunch needed to enter a restaurant and walk fifteen meters towards the far end to use the microwave. Going there meant getting some look from the cashier lady as I wasn’t buying anything, and some more look from the students who saw me sitting down and eating a packed lunchbox by myself. So most of the times, I’d eat my lunch cold.

“Sure,” I said to Esther. “I’ll be waiting.”

I received a text some days later.

Care for lunch?

Esther was eating out with another friend and invited me to come along. I said yes. We met in front of the old Commerce building, and sat on a nearby bench. The other

girl, Lye, was also from Malaysia, but her English was not as good as Esther’s. Actually, hers might be similar to mine – the only difference was that she had a Chinese accent rather than an Indonesian one. We both paused at certain times to think about what we wanted to say, and when the words escaped us, we stammered to find easier words to tell our stories.

“Class was okay,” I said. “I think I like the Psychology classes better.”

“My Chemistry class was hard, but it was heaps of fun. I really don’t like our Crit Thinking, though. I’m not sure what they were teaching. How about you, Lye?”

“Yeah, it was okay,” Lye said. “Although it’s hard to understand the English when they talk fast.”

“You can do it, girl! Just keep on practicing.”

“By the way, Esther,” I said, “you mentioned last time that you work part time?”

“Yes! I’m a tutor, and the kids are so cute! I teach mostly Chemistry and Maths. Tutoring gives you good pay, but you have shorter hours.”

I nodded. I’d like to be able to find a part-time job too.

“This is nice,” Esther said. “Let’s have lunch again! What days do you have class?”

“Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday.” I said, bringing a picture of my university timetable to my head.

We both paused at certain times to think about what we wanted to say, and when the words escaped us, we stammered to find easier words to tell our stories.

“Tuesday, Thursday, Friday,” Lye said.

“Okay then, let’s have lunch this Thursday? Meet up here at one?”

“Sure, see you!” I picked up my bag.

“See you, Marcie!”

The name Esther means “star” in Persian and there is one highly well-known Esther in the world: Queen Esther in the Bible. The Jewish Queen took the courage to ask the king for protection towards her people, and they escaped a massacre. I don’t know the Queen, but I know one other Esther.

Esther called me Marcie, asked me for lunch and cheered me up when I was stressing with assignments. She lived a busy life, juggling university studies and multiple part-time jobs as she was supporting herself. She has a big smile and a warm heart; she is one of the first people who listened to my imperfect English ramblings – instead of asking me again of what I was saying, she would paraphrase my story to me and ask if she’d understood what I meant. She sends me a postcard from overseas during the holiday.

Esther is a star.

THE ACCENTED ENGLISH SPEAKER

If there is one thing that I associate most with the Caucasians, it would be this: they love to ask, “How are you?” It is the same thing as saying *Apa kabar?* to each other. When asked by Indonesians, I could say a lot of meaningless things. Probably I would say that I have gained an extra kilo or two. Perhaps I would say that I was fine, only busy doing some schoolwork. I would say something general that reflected the state of my general life. But I would say that to people I already know.

Caucasians talk to strangers all the time. Every time I enter a shop, the assistant would ask, “Hi, how are you doing?” I’d say, “Fine, thanks,” and divert my eyes to the stack of colorful dresses on the side. But then another Caucasian comes in and she is asked the same question, “Hi, how are you today?”

She would answer, "I'm very good, thank you. My husband is having a day off and taking me shopping."

"Oh, that's lovely! Is the weather good outside? I haven't been out since morning."

"Yes, it's wonderful a perfect day to buy a good dress!"

"Just to let you know, the section over here," she gestures with her hand, "is currently forty per cent off. And if you buy more than two pieces from this side," she gestures to the stack of clothes on the table, "you get an extra twenty-five per cent off."

By that time, I would have finished looking around and walk out of the shop without a last looking-back glance.

My ability to speak English was limited to ordering food and saying, "I'm fine, thank you, and you?"

When I was about thirteen, my parents, my two sisters and I went for a holiday trip to Japan. Our tour guide was a woman in her thirties with medium, straight black hair that was split right in the middle. She was fair-skinned and skinny, wearing black most of the time black T-shirt with black jeans and black shoes, complete with black glasses. She spoke good English, enunciating every word slowly as she knew that her clients probably had limited understanding of the language. During the bus rides, she would tell various stories about Japanese monarchy. One of my favourites was the story of the prince who fell madly in love with his distant cousin. In Japan,

it was important for the royalties to marry someone from the family, but the cousin didn't want to be with him. After some persistence, she had agreed to marry him, but it seemed that their marriage was not a happy one. Ah, such heartache for the prince.

We were to visit the Disneyland Tokyo the next day and I was wondering whether the rides would get us wet. I asked my sisters and they said they didn't know, so they told me to ask the tour guide.

I walked straight to her and asked, "Ar der wah-ter at Dish-neh-land raids?"

She didn't understand. "Excuse me?" she asked.

"Go-ing Dish-neh-land to-mo-rrow for raids, bring extra clothes?"

She still didn't understand.

I abandoned the project and walked back to where my sisters were sitting. They looked at me, half-laughing, half-perplexed. It seemed that my English was not as good as I thought. And I went to an international school.

So the irony of learning to speak English well is that you have to speak English, no matter how bad your English is at the moment. I had troubles answering a simple question of "Where do you live?" I should have said, "I live in Bulleen,

So the irony of learning to speak English well is that you have to speak English, no matter how bad your English is at the moment.

and I took the bus, the train and the tram to get to university. I spent over an hour every day on the public transport! And when it was winter, waiting at the bus stop was agonizing, because it was really, really cold.”

Instead, I would just say, “Bulleen.” When they asked me where Bulleen was, I could only say, “It’s near the Westfield mall.” They would frown, as there were a lot of Westfield malls throughout the city, but they would stop at that. I would spend half of the conversation time translating my thoughts and their answers from Indonesian to English and vice versa. Even so, when I finally talked, it would be in broken English.

The hardest part was when your friends asked you to tell a story. “What did you do last weekend?” I would say, “Going to the cinema,” or “Just staying at home and relax. How about you?”

They would answer, “My weekend was great! I went to the music festival at St. Kilda and there were a lot of people. Some Fortune band was playing. We went to the beach and surfed a little bit too. Oh, I tried the Mamasita restaurant on Sunday the one with no reservation and had a long queue. It was so worth it. The corn on the cob was amazing!”

I would nod and listen enthusiastically. I wanted to tell them that the movie I just watched, one of those Marvel ones, was not as good as my expectation. It had predictable plot and I was so disappointed as I had been looking forward to watch that movie for weeks. Last Sunday, I actually cooked spaghetti Bolognese for the first time, and it ended up being

much better than expected. The secret was to put a lot of sauce bought from the supermarket.

But I didn’t say any of that. Instead, I merely listened to their stories, wondering when I could finally tell a whole story in English.

Here is another irony of my English skills: I had genuinely believed that mine was good. Back in high school, I had to submit two writing assignments: a fable and a short story. I was searching for inspiration on Google and stumbled on a tale of two frogs that fell into a pit. They kept on trying to hop to get out, but their friends said to them that it was pointless. The pit was too deep; they would never make it out. One of the frogs listened and accepted his fate, and died soon afterwards. The second frog kept on hopping while his friends kept on discouraging him, and he finally leapt out of the pit.

The friends asked, “How can you do it? We thought you’d never make it.” The frog was perplexed, and said, “I’m half-deaf. I thought you guys were cheering on me the whole time.”

So I adapted the story. This time, there were two birds, and they were flying against a storm. One bird gave up and died; the other bird survived. When asked by his friends, the bird said, “I couldn’t hear your voice through the storm, but I know you all are cheering on me.” The friends looked at each other, feeling ashamed.

Believe it or not, I’d gotten a 93.

I still had to think of what I would write for the second

assignment. I remembered that I had just finished reading *For One More Day* by Mitch Albom some days earlier. The book told the story of a man getting one more chance to meet his dead mother to make things right. So I decided to write about a man talking to his dead father in a dream, asking for forgiveness and a second chance.

I'd gotten 97 for this assignment.

Fast-forward three years, and I was sitting in my Psychology class, waiting for my name to be called by the tutor. The tutor was a woman in her late twenties who was getting her PhD. While other tutors expected us to assimilate with the language and culture straightaway, she was one of the nicer ones. She understood that it was really hard for us to move far away from home and speak a language that was not ours.

I had written my first Psychology essay about no man is an island, arguing that humans need each other to survive even those with the most extreme introversion character. She called my name and handed my paper, and I noticed the words scribbled in blue pen all over the place. My charming tutor had highlighted all the mistakes, but not about the essay. Instead, she showed me the wrong syntax. The inappropriate vocabularies. The wrong tense. I sat there, flicking through the pages and realizing with horror in my eyes: everything I learned and knew for sure in high school was wrong.

High school gave me good marks that I thought I deserved, but they did that because they wanted to encourage



creativity and not the perfect grammar. They focused on the argument instead of the nitty gritty process. It was okay, until you journeyed five-thousand-kilometer away from home and figured out that everything you knew about your English skill was wrong.

English, which had never been a problem to me, suddenly became one.

I started to read.

I wasn't a reader. I used to read to impress people, mainly because my sister Jess reads books and she is one of the

smartest people I know. I read Melina Marchetta's coming-of-age book as a part of the subject requirements. All throughout seventh grade, the English teacher asked us to hand in a book review assignment regularly. I pretended to borrow the three novels of *The Lord of the Rings* and summarized the movies instead.

Years later, when I finally read the books for real, I found out that the stories in the books differed greatly to the ones in the movies. And I'd received good marks for those reviews. Perhaps my teachers didn't read Tolkien, but they should have known. There is no way a second-language English speaker could read Tolkien's books when she was twelve. Even now, I couldn't finish the first book of the trilogy.

I started to force myself to go out with other international students. That way, if I wanted to talk, I had to talk in English, or else they wouldn't understand me. It took me a long time to formulate my words, but I kept on going. I used the wrong words sometimes and they would get confused, but thank God for Esther and my other friends who were patient with me—always listening and saying that my stories were great, even when they were short and dull.

I started to write. I created a blog and wrote rubbish on it. I wrote diary-type posts. I wrote reviews on books and movies I had read and watched that week. I wrote with exaggerated emoticons. The writing was horrendous, but I kept practicing.

It was a slow, agonizing process, but I got through it.

*

Two years later, I was on my first day of internship at the best hospital in Australia. My supervisor, a lovely Caucasian woman in her early thirties who was working at the hospital while doing her degree, took one look at my grades and accepted me.

On that first day, she showed me around. She walked with me to the aquarium with sharks inside and the garden where they kept the meerkats. We went to the cafeteria, the food court and the research centre that I would be working at. We made small talk. I was telling her the story of my life how I came from Indonesia at the age of seventeen to study Psychology and Media and Communications. She pushed the number two button on the elevator and asked, "Marcella, your English is wonderful! How do you learn to speak English that well?"

I smiled. "It took me years. When I first arrived in Melbourne, I couldn't even tell a story in English. I've been forcing myself ever since."

"Really? It must've been hard for you to learn a new language entirely," she smiled.

"Yes," I looked at the ceiling, reminiscing the hard months. "It was really hard."



HOW IMPORTANT ARE GRADES TO YOU?

In talking about grades, there would be no end. The piece of paper that you received at the end of your university career was still a piece of paper, albeit a very expensive one. I'd like to say that grades don't matter, that your character and determination are better predictors of success. Grades are important, but not that important.

I wish I could tell you that I believe what I just wrote.

Since high school, I had developed a love-hate relationship with grades. All through junior high I had lived in the shadows of the great J-Pur, Jessica Purnama, my sister, my brilliant, brilliant sister with whom every teacher was and is still in love. She was the model student of the model student: she was kind, smart and diligent, always listening to the teachers and helping other friends who needed a hand.

For history exams, she memorized every sentence, even the fullstops. She knew all the key words to get the perfect score in Physics. She was the "Most Likely to Succeed" student with a medical degree stamped to her forehead.

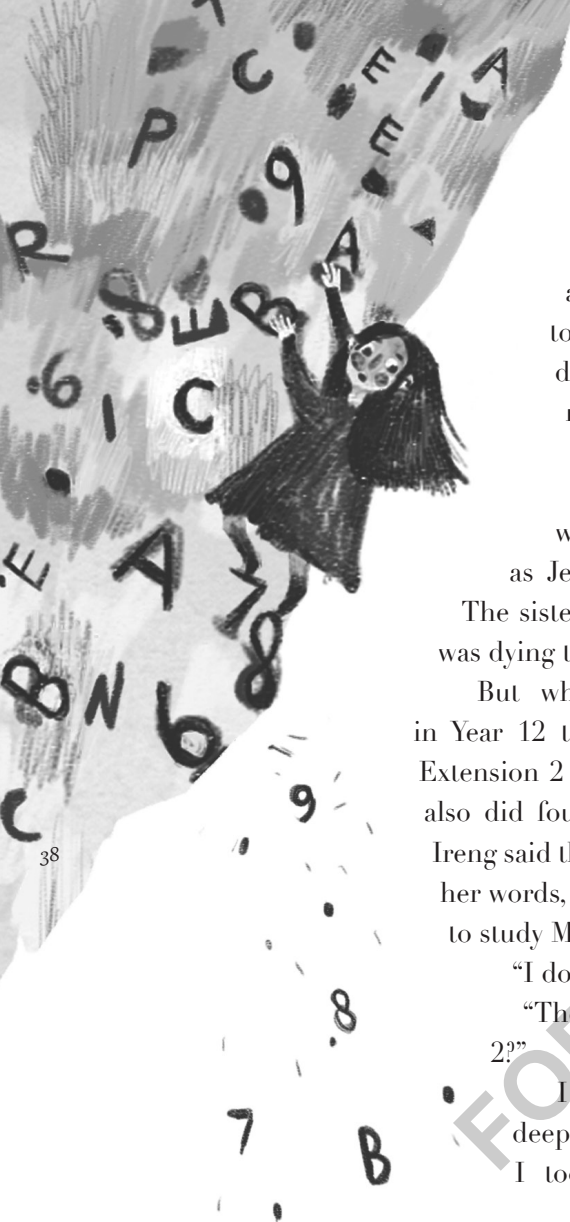
She is perfect.

I had always wondered whether going to the same high school as her was a mistake. Back home, I was the most rebellious among the three daughters, playing PlayStation until late at night only to wake up in the morning to play again. I skipped lunch and dinner, always to my mother's yelling. But I still performed well in school. And Mami knew that she didn't have any leverage to take away my games nor my pleasure time.

But Jess never needed to be told to study for the test she had the next day for sure, she had been studying for that test for over a week. When she played games, it was *Roller Coaster Tycoon* or *The Sims*, building parks and houses and neighborhood, and she would only play for a short time. The teachers adored her. All my classmates knew her name, despite her being four years older than us. The name J-Pur was a legend in our school.

So here came her younger sister. She had so much to live up to.

I excelled and worked on my grades, although I never did achieve her perfection. My Biology teacher, Mrs. Ireng, always told me that I was a real "Purnama", probably without me really wanting to. Having taught Jess as well, Mrs. Ireng was one of the few teachers who understood the dynamics of the



Purnama sisters
the friendly competition that didn't seem to be there, but never really went away. It was mostly due to my desire to be looked differently, to make a name and an identity of my own, apart from the shadows of my sister. I was always, always known as Jess's sister. J-Pur's sister. The sister of a great name. And I was dying to get away.

But when I dropped Biology in Year 12 to take the Mathematics Extension 2 subject, which my sister also did four years before me, Mrs. Ireng said this with a bit of venom in her words, "You said you don't want to study Medicine."

"I don't," I said.

"Then why do you take Ex-2?"

I smiled sheepishly, but deep inside I knew the answer: I took it because I could.

Because I was good enough. But I was also the top Biology student in Year 11, and I was pretty sure that she hated to see me leave only to study something that I didn't really want to study. Taking Ex-2 would boost my grades to the top. It was the hardest subject in school. It meant prestige. Only seven students out of the whole cohort were good enough to take the subject. And you needed an invitation to be enrolled in that subject: you had to be good enough, to be smart enough. But taking Ex-2 meant dropping another subject, and between Chemistry, Biology and Physics, I thought Biology would help me the least.

When I graduated high school with four Top Achieving Student awards, Mrs. Ireng congratulated me for my grades, but her smile implied something else. Probably she was thinking, *This girl is doomed to grow up exactly like her sister. She couldn't have the opportunity to make her own path.* But I would like to think that she was wrong, because against all odds, I chose Arts. When she heard the news that I wanted to study Communications, she said, "So why are you taking Ex-2 again?" I knew she loved me, but she couldn't get over the pain that I had dropped her subject for another. That being said, I did choose Arts with the mindset of performing well.

When I got to university, every ideal I knew about grades was shattered.

Some deem high school hard. When we were in high school, our heads were full of the next exam and the next assignment and the next shopping mall we would go to on the weekend. The tests were hard, sure, but wait, wait until you get to university. It is a different game altogether.

Being a top student in high school means that you carry the ultimate pride baggage: you would expect yourself to perform similarly in university. The harsh truth is everyone in university is smart. You are no longer special; you are no longer the best in your cohort. Heck, not even close. You have to settle for being mediocre, and for months, I struggled with the idea.

My grades varied from getting the high distinctions to credit, but most of the time I would get some grades in between performing well but not well enough, performing okay but not that bad. They say grades are easier to get in Business and Science, as everything was more black and white. In Arts, in Communications, your grades depend on your tutor whether you have a good working relationship with them and whether your essay argument suits their taste. Assignments are marked subjectively no matter how hard the tutors try to be objective. It is understandable, as almost all assignments were essays and creative work, and it is hard to be black and white on creative pieces. How could you mark this poem sixty and the other eighty? The former poem talks about a child being left behind by her father on Christmas time, while the latter talks about exclamation mark. Logic doesn't play a part. It seems to be about taste.

I wouldn't speak for my tutors, but studying a double major in Psychology and Media and Communications had proven my hypothesis. My Psychology marks were consistently better than my Comms marks. It was easier to perform in

Psychology as it was still based in science. The tutors had a stronger foundation to mark our tests, essays and reports. In Comms, much inspiration was left for the tutor to decide.

In Psychology, there is something called the Regulatory Focus Theory. Basically, the theory states that there are two ways humans cope with successes and failures: promotion-focus or prevention-focus.

Let me explain.

Promotion-focus people love to set their expectations higher and higher. This kind of people strives for a goal to attain a positive outcome. So when you have exams, you would think, *I want to get good grades for my exams. I will get good grades. I will study hard.* Most of the Western people have this way of thinking.

Prevention-focus people, on the other hand, strive for a goal to prevent a negative outcome. So when you have exams, you would think, *I don't want to fail in the test, so I will study hard.* Most Asians, including me, think of things this way.

Those with promotion-focus mindset are the ones who take bigger risks. They experience greater happiness, but if they fall, they fall further. Others who act to prevent failures mostly want to stay in the comfort zone, improving their condition little by little the risk-free way. Think about being an entrepreneur versus getting a paycheck at the end of every month.

Promotion-focus people take it hard if they aren't able to do something positive. They can't stand to not working towards achieving greater things. Prevention-focus people take it hard if they are making mistakes. They are scared of moving towards the unknown, of failing.

I would walk into class with dread, knowing that an assignment would be given back soon. I would try to lower my expectation. *Just a decent*

*mark, I thought. I just need a decent mark. Don't expect to get H1. H2B is good enough. No, I've worked hard for this assignment, probably I'd get H1. No, you idiot, don't raise your expectation!*¹

The assignments were always given back at the end of the class, and I would wait impatiently. I wanted to be put out of my misery. Not knowing was agony. Knowing, even when you had gotten a bad mark, at least quenched your curiosity.

"Marcella," the tutor would say. I would raise my right hand half-heartedly and the tutor would walk to my desk. She would ask, "Is it Mar-chel-la or Mar-khel-la?"

"Oh, it's actually pronounced Mar-sel-la," I gulped.

She would smile and give me my paper.

Grades are still important, but they are not the most important things. As clichéd as it is, the things you learn outside class is more important than the textbooks you blindly memorize in time for exams.

I would flick through the first page and the last page, trying to see the mark. It would be either a relief or a consolation.

Over time, I tried to learn not to sweat the small stuff. Grades are still important, but they are not the most important things. As clichéd as it is, the things you learn outside class is more important than the textbooks you blindly memorize in time for exams. But every time an assignment was handed back, I would need another reminder that grades do not set my future in stone.

Every. Single. Time.

1. The grading system in the University of Melbourne goes like this: N (0-49%, Fail), P (50-64%, Pass), H3 (65-69%, Third Class Honours), H2B (70-74%, Second Class Honours Division B), H2A (75-79%, Second Class Honours Division A) and H1 (80-100%, First Class Honours).



US VS THEM

Roseanne squealed and put her hands in front of her ellipse glasses. It was the start of a new semester, and she and I were enjoying our first lecture in Mind, Brain and Behaviour, a core Psychology subject that we took together. She was from Singapore, and a year younger than I was.

“Oh, the horror,” she said. Her head tilted towards the left, where a group of men and women stormed into our lecture theatre. They looked like they were in their twenties – most of them having brown hair and blue eyes.

And they were naked.

The one hundred-something crowd erupted in laughter, probably having seen this scene a couple of times before. Some girls whispered giddily to their friends. Others laughed

while looking down, as if not wanting to get caught in seeing the obscenity. And to an eighteen-year-old Asian who had just started seeing people in their bikinis, it was indeed obscene.

The naked people cheered and raised their hands to the air, half-walking, half-jumping to the stage. The professor in his forties laughed and retreated towards the back, allowing the group to stand in the center.

The group cheered again, but I noticed some women trying to cover their private parts. Others acted like it was no big deal. One tall man walked towards the lectern and said, “Welcome to Prosh week!” He talked about various clubs in university, inviting us to join his, and yelled in excitement, followed by the group. They ran towards the exit, still shouting and raising their hands.

I raised my eyebrows. “Prosh week?” I asked Roseanne.

“Just a bunch of idiots,” she said. “I have been warned.”

I nodded.

The professor continued the lesson as if nothing happened. I scribbled on my notebook, “Prosh”, wanting to Google the word on my way home. Throughout the whole lecture, the image of people’s butts kept on haunting my mind.

Before I went to study in Australia, I had dreamed of having a local as my best friend. If I was honest, probably I fancied getting a *bule* as a partner too. But after living here for real, I noticed something: we are different. And most of the times, I just couldn’t bridge the gap.



The incident of seeing naked people in class was one of my first experiences in facing cultural difference. Of course, it wasn't the last.

I was sitting in a Media class that talked about the need to support local bookshops in the midst of increasing competition from online stores. It was my turn to give a presentation on the topic, and I spoke about the change in preference: consumers would pay the cheapest price. They don't care much about where the stuff came from, as long as it is cheaper. Yes, I know that the local bookshops need to be supported. Yet we have witnessed the giant bookstore Borders closed its doors throughout Australia. And the customers don't know the importance of supporting the local bookshops. If they could save ten dollars on a book by buying online, they would do it in a heartbeat.

One girl interrupted me. She had short, blonde hair that fell just above her shoulders. She had a sharp chin and big, blue eyes. She wore big, rectangular glasses with black frame and a piercing on her nose. She looked angry.

"I work at a local bookshop and people should've bought from us," she said. "Buying online replaces the physical space and the connection between sellers and customers. We can help people find and search for books, and even recommend good reads depending on their own taste. Online stores can't do that."

"I agree," I said to her, "but most people would buy online if a book's price is cheaper. And there are some books that are

published overseas, say in the US, they will not come out in Australia until several months later. This will make people to order online instead.”

“But the local bookshop can do it for you,” she straightened her sitting position. “All you need to do is tell us what book you want to get and we will get the newly released book to be sent to our store earlier, so that we can sell it to you.”

I was surprised. “But not a lot of people know about that. Well, I don’t know that. And I still think most customers would not care if they can find a cheaper price.”

“No, that’s wrong. If we educate our customers about our books and why it’s priced higher in bookshops, they would understand and spend twenty dollars on a book.”

Another girl with long, dark brown hair who used too much eyeliner said, “I’m a student and I’m poor. I’ll buy online if it’s cheaper.”

“Me too,” I heard others said.

At this stage, my tutor decided to jump in and let me continue with my presentation. The girl eyed me behind her solid-framed glasses and sulked, as if branding me a traitor to the industry.

I hadn’t even touched on the part where people download books illegally from the internet not because they are cheap; they are free.

When it was my turn to argue, however, I would usually not do it. If a student told the class that media watchdog was important because the act of delivering news kept the

government and the businesses in check from doing whatever they want, I would let it slide and not say that sometimes they were just PR stunts. I would not argue that globalization was important but way too overrated. Nothing really came out from arguing with strong-headed people as, to me, it was not a discussion.

But my decision not to talk in class, along with the decision of thousands of other international students, is often translated as not being competent enough. This happens especially in Arts, where the ratio of local versus international students is 4:1. Perhaps the ones in Business classes fare better, as there would be three locals for every seven internationals. But not in Arts. Never in Arts.

In my subjects, international students are seen as the second class. We are the silent ones—the ones who couldn’t speak English well. The irony is that international students are always encouraged to assimilate with the local culture, and

yet the locals are not met with the same demand. There are no campaigns that encourage the locals to learn different languages and cultures, or simply to befriend the outsiders. Always, the emphasis goes to us as the foreigners to blend in. And when your hair is visibly black and your eyes

International students do have things to say. We know the materials. We have opinions. We are competent. But we don’t speak up—be it because of choice or language deficiency—and it becomes our Achilles heel.

are visibly small, it's like asking a rock to turn into water.

International students do have things to say. We know the materials. We have opinions. We are competent. But we don't speak up – be it because of choice or language deficiency and it becomes our Achilles heel.

So despite coming five-thousand-kilometer away from home, I ended up sitting with the Asians. My friends, apart from the Indonesians, are exclusively Singaporeans and Malaysians. One was ABC. Another was Filipino. Two came from Brunei. The Asian-internationals took off as we could relate to a lot of things, for example language barrier, cultural difference and the general away-from-home experience. I did try to talk to the locals, but it was always the same conversation every week: how was your last weekend and what were you going to do this weekend. We couldn't seem to talk about anything else. It wasn't ideal, but hey, it could be worse.



BETRAYING THE KIN

I was talking with friends after church on a Sunday. We were standing at the foyer, laughing and joking about nothing in particular. From the corner of my eyes, I could see a “big sister”, whom I didn't really know that well, walked towards me.

“Hi Marcella, can I talk to you?” She gestured to pull me from the group to a quiet corner.

“Sure,” I said, feeling confused and uneasy. I followed her slowly, not wanting to know what she wanted to say.

“I've noticed that you haven't been going out with the others.” She extended her hand to my right shoulder. “Do you have friends here?”

I almost dropped my jaw. I wondered if I had heard correctly, and when I realized that I had indeed heard her



correctly, I didn't know what to say. I tried to breathe and open my mouth, but my lips quivered when I said, "I *have* friends."

I forced a smile. My heart was beating rapidly.

"It's just that you don't seem to join the others for lunch," she said sympathetically. "I also haven't seen you around during the Saturday hangouts with the others." There was a note of concern, but I also detected another tone. Sarcasm?

"I have other group of friends," I said, still smiling. Still trying to control my beating heart.

"Oh, I see," she said. "Next time hang out with us more often, okay?"

I smiled, not wanting to answer, and walked back to the group of friends that I left behind.

When I first arrived in Melbourne, I went to an Indonesian church, which provided me with the Indonesian community I needed. I talked in Indonesian, laughed in Indonesian, joked in Indonesian and ate Indonesian food. It was like home to most of us.

But over time, I found it suffocating.

You could always notice the Indonesians when coming to eat at a restaurant. They were the loud ones – the ones who sat at a long, rectangular table and yelled jokes from one end to the other. They talked about all sorts of random stuff, joking about the new couple in the group or making fun of the guy who had just said the stupidest thing. The Indonesians. My kin.

I knew that I didn't conform. While most other Indonesians joined the PPIA *Perhimpunan Pelajar Indonesia Australia*, Indonesian students association in Australia I decided purposely not to join the community. I went to an Indonesian church, but I made friends mostly with the other international students. I tried to find internships, part-time jobs and other communities where I could improve my English skills. *My parents have sent me here for me to learn something new*, I thought. *I want to make sure that I am, indeed, learning.*

But that meant I would not hang out with Indonesians all the time. And hanging out with the Indonesians overseas is demanding. You would go out from morning till late, wake up the next day and hang out with them from morning till late as well. Indonesians are so used to find other Indonesians to accompany them to go shopping, to buy groceries, to walk to the toilet, to have breakfast. And lunch. And dinner. They rarely want to do things alone.

So when I told them that I love my alone-time at the café, they were shocked.

"What *are* you doing, having coffee alone?" a friend asked.

"I love it," I said. "I can do my own journaling or read a book or do my assignment. It's awesome."

"That's sad. That's just so, so sad," he said. "I can't imagine going out for coffee alone. It just seems too lonely."

"Well," I shrugged, "not for me."

"That's the saddest thing I've ever heard."

I was about to tell him that if I really wanted to watch a

movie and couldn't be bothered to ask around for company, I'd go to the cinema alone. But I decided against it.

And when I told my friends that I couldn't join them for lunch that day, they saw me as a betrayer.

"Ah, not cool *lah!*" they said. "Why don't you join us for lunch?"

"Sorry, maybe next time?" I smiled.

"You're not *gaul ah*, never wanting to go out with us," they said, laughing. "*Payah.*" They called me pathetic.

I smiled, but I wasn't comfortable with those remarks. I knew they didn't mean anything by saying those things, but it seemed like there was an unwritten rule that Indonesians should stick with each other. Birds of a feather flock together. Indonesians should go out with other Indonesians all the time.

And honestly, I hated that.

Some months later, I was having dinner with my Indonesian friends at a Malaysian restaurant. We were chatting and laughing while suddenly one friend asked me, "What are you up to now, La?"

"I'm currently working as a barista at a café," I said. "And I've just gotten a good research internship position!" The news was fresh, and every friend with whom I had shared the news was very excited for me.

"Oh," she said, smiling. "You're so busy, be careful of drifting away." And she began to talk with other friends.

I still tried to smile, I really did, but I almost couldn't. I was labelled as the one who got away. But then I saw the reality of my friends. One of them was not offered a position because his interview was bad. He lacked English-speaking skills, probably because he rarely ventured outside his comfort zone. The other had not secured an internship, despite having studied here for years. Some others never had a part-time job.

I looked at myself, and couldn't take the sentiment.

I felt like I was being judged too much in the community. I had different ways of thinking. I didn't conform.

So before I drifted away, I made a conscious decision for myself: I withdrew.

I felt like I was being judged too much in the community. I had different ways of thinking. I didn't conform.

I now understand why at times others deem our little bubble impenetrable. It's because we build the walls ourselves by only mingling with our kin.



LOVE ACTUALLY

My sister Jess texted me at six in the evening, "Do you want to join us for dinner?" Her medical friend was acting as a matchmaker, introducing her to an Indonesian doctor, and this would be the third time she would meet him. They were going in a group, and after a long day at uni I was thinking between eating alone at home versus eating together with my sister and a bunch of strangers. I chose the latter.

"Okay," my sister said. "We'll pick you up in fifteen minutes."

Besides, I would really like to see the kind of guy my sister was being matchmade with.

A decade-old Mitsubishi Lancer pulled over nearby where I stood. Inside was Pohan, a medical doctor who was

five years older than Jess. I sat in the back seat and we went to eat at Ying Thai.

Some of his friends were already there. There was Bryan, the mutual friend who set them up, and two other boys. I smiled and nodded and introduced myself as Marcella, Jess's little sister, although they rarely paid attention to me. Just like my mission in this dinner was to see Pohan, their mission was to see my sister.

I sat at the left corner of the rectangular table. My sister sat beside me. I was cautious of what I was talking about, as these boys were ten years my senior.

About thirty minutes later, a guy came and sat on the far right of the table. He apologized that he was late and smiled. We shook hands. "Tjokro," he said.

"Marcella."

We couldn't talk at all as we sat three seats away from each other, but I noticed that I began to continuously look at him throughout dinner. Suddenly, Bryan asked me how old I was.

"Can you guess?" I answered.

"Twenty? Twenty-one?" he said.

I laughed. "Eighteen."

"*Wah...* so young, so young," he laughed and shook his head.

Tjok was one of the oldest in the group. I sulked silently inside, thinking that these boys would not see me as a woman. To them, I was just a little girl right out of high school.

*

As Pohan courted my sister, I was invited to even more group outings. We went to have dinner at Grecco once, and I was impressed because Tjok was the only one bringing an umbrella, just in case it was going to rain. I noticed that he was also the one who opened the restaurant door and waited for everyone to come inside. He would stay back and check the table before going out. *What a gentleman*, I thought. *Such a kind soul*. At home, I joked to my sister, "My Tjok!" He was very quiet in the group setting, and I could see that he was the shy type. It was cute, actually. And the act stole my heart.

Some months later, Bryan invited us all to celebrate his birthday. Tjok suddenly messaged me on Facebook, "Let's get Pohan to drive your sister there. I could pick you up and we could have coffee, and go to Bryan's dinner together." I stared at the computer screen for many seconds too long, not sure what to answer. But before I could process what it meant by going out for coffee, I said, "Sure, what time?"

It was nearly three in the evening when we sat down for coffee. I had chosen the place as I had always wanted to go there: The Market Lane café at Prahran Market. It was said to be one of the best coffee shops in Melbourne. I had just become a coffee snob, and I had to try it.

Tjok loved coffee too, so he agreed. We sat down at the corner of the communal table, and he insisted to pay. "Are you sure?" I said, holding out my wallet.

"Yeah, don't worry about it," he said, smiling. He put two sugars into his cup, and we began to talk.

“When I first came here, I didn’t like coffee,” I said. “Some years ago my sister went home for holiday to Jakarta and ordered mocha at Starbucks, you know, the one with chocolate. I didn’t like it. But then I came to Melbourne. I am so obsessed with good coffee now.”

“What kind of coffee do you drink?” he asked.

“Latte.”

“Any sugar?”

“No,” I smiled, “I can’t drink sweet stuff anymore. I can’t even drink mocha, although it was initially my favourite! I rarely have hot chocolate as well. I’m not sure why, I think my taste in drinks just changes.”

He smiled, listening to me blabbering about my work. I told him how the barista made coffee and the difference between latte, cappuccino and flat white. He kept on listening and I kept on talking. Probably I was embarrassing myself here.

We walked to the car and he drove to Bryan’s dinner. He sat beside me in the restaurant and once in a while, his shoulder brushed my side. An accident. Maybe. It must be.

Bryan took us all to go bowling after dinner. Tjok and I were on the same team; Pohan and my sister were on the other. I used to play bowling with Papi when I was young. I might not be a professional, but I could throw the ball with pride. Tjok rarely bowled before. He didn’t know the technique and looked a little bit embarrassed that I was the better player. But he smiled and laughed, and we had a good time. When he did



score a strike, he high-fived the others and then me. It was nothing. Probably.

The week after that we hung out more often. On Tuesday, he asked me whether I wanted to have lunch with him. I said yes. We went to an Indonesian restaurant, and I insisted that I paid for my own meal. I felt bad if he paid for me once more, and I didn't even know what this was. On Wednesday, we had coffee together. On Thursday, he sent me home in the evening and we had the famous kebab nearby my place. We ate and sat in the garden located inside my apartment. He told me shyly, "I am interested to get to know you better," he said. "I like you."

I blushed and bit my lip. *He is eleven years older than you*, I thought. *Eleven years!*

But then he asked, "What about you?"

I couldn't really hide my happiness. I smiled with my eyes looking down and nodded.

He sighed in relief.

"Can I touch your hand?" he said. I nodded again. His hand was soft but cold. He cupped my right hand with his and drew it close to his lips.

Later, he confessed that he had grown to like me over the group dinners we had together. But he thought, *Eleven years! I don't think this can happen*. But through each outing, coupled with a lot of teasing from the group of boys, he realized that he couldn't stop liking me, so he took a shot.

*

I wasn't permitted
to date and they said
they would wait.
Of course, in the
end, no one did.

When I was twelve, my parents told me that I could get a boyfriend when I was seventeen. "You're too young," Mami would say. When I was seventeen, they agreed that I could have a boyfriend when I got to university. When I was in university, they told me that I could date when I had turned twenty-one.

I was close to some boys, but I was never in a "relationship". I didn't even go backstreet. I had explained to each of the boys, saying that this was the situation: I wasn't permitted to date and they said they would wait.

Of course, in the end, no one did.

When I met Tjok, I told him the same thing. He said, "I'll wait." I smiled. I told my parents the story and they both felt strongly against it.

"Eleven years!" Mami screamed. "Why don't you find someone two or three years older?"

"Well, I can't choose whom I will meet?"

"I think he's too old for you," Mami said. "Think about it. He would be quite old when you get married and have children. He would die earlier than you too. Then you would spend long years alone during your old days."

"Mami, we haven't thought that much, okay? We have just started to get to know each other."

"Who is he again?"

“He’s Pohan’s friend. You know, the doctor who is chasing Mei Mei now.” Mei Mei is how we called my sister Jess.

“How close is he to Pohan?”

“Very close, they have known each other since high school. They are housemates.”

“What’s his work?”

“He’s a landscape architect.”

“What is a landscape architect?”

“I don’t know, he designs stuff? Like the neighbourhood or something. I’m not sure.”

“You sure you want to be with him?”

“Yeah....”

Then there was the conversation with Papi, who was more diplomatic and reasonable, but not exactly giving me the green light.

“We’ve said that you can date when you’re twenty-one,” he said. “Let’s see if he’s really that good. I think we need proof that this guy really likes you. To see that he’s serious.”

“He’s serious....” I’d trail off.

“Just be patient with Mami. She never dreamed to hear you say you’re with a guy who’s eleven years older.”

I rolled my eyes. Probably they were regretting their decision not to let me date when I was young, as now the first man I seriously wanted to be with was much older.

So when my friends were telling me the stories of chasing boys, getting their hearts broken, dating same-age guys or their first kiss, I was telling them stories of how my partner and I

fought for each other. Over the next year, my life consisted of constant reporting to my parents of where I was and where I was going to and where I had dinner and what time I got home. It would be to the movies, to have coffee, to lunch, to dinner. They knew I went out with him, just the two of us, for most of the times. They didn’t forbid me to go, but Mami would say, “Just friends. Remember, just friends.” When I went home for the holiday and met with my mother’s friends, they would ask me whether I had a boyfriend yet. Mami would smile and answer for me, “*Yah...* just friends, *lah.*” I would give a fake smile and nod.

But of course we were more than just friends. Mami would then say, “Are you sure you don’t want to see the others first? Wait until you go to work and your mindset would be very different then. What you want in a guy will change too. Don’t close yourself off. Be open to others.”

I’d say yes, but shaking my head over the phone.

Mami came to visit us in Melbourne once. We went out for dinner: Pohan and my sister, Tjok and I, and my mother. The boys were waiting outside our apartment. Pohan was in the car, but Tjok stood beside it. He greeted my mother, shook her hand and opened the car door for her. Even though Mami didn’t say anything, I could see that she was impressed. I was impressed too. We ate dinner together, and after that Mami talked about Tjok with less venom in the words. She didn’t ask again and again whether I was sure, or reminded me for the hundredth time that I was still young. She tried to be more

understanding, but she still told me once in a while to look around.

Slowly, Tjok became a part of my family. He went out for dinner and lunch and accompanied us to go shopping. He was kind and gentle, and the character showed through. Soon after, Papi agreed, although Mami was still wary. But through the months and eventually years, we were still together.

The day I turned twenty-one, he flew to visit me in Jakarta. He wore a dark grey shirt and black glasses, and gelled his hair to stay in place. He dressed well. When Mami was getting ready to go out for lunch together, Papi pulled me and him aside to the living room, the place where Anton, my brother-in-law, first asked my parents for their blessings to marry my sister Christina. Tjok hadn't even spoken a word and Papi blurted out, "I give you permission to date my daughter." Tjok was squeezing my hand. "Om talked to Tante and we both agreed on this. Besides, I already consider you my own son. One thing that I always say to the men who date my daughters is that the relationship should be pure. It is for your own good."

Papi blabbered on. "Remember, Tjok, in this life you need to have four things. First, you have to have a dream. Dream big. When I was young and had no money, I dreamed of getting my children to study overseas and to buy a fancy car. Throughout the years, I hang on to these dreams." Papi leaned back on the white sofa and put his hands on his knees.

"The second thing," he said, "is to always be positive. Be optimistic! Think from the positive side. Don't think that people do one thing or another because they want to harm you. Just be positive, believe that everything is for the better.

"The third thing," Papi put out three fingers on his right hand, "is to be patient. When Om and Tante were having quarrels, Om always tried to be patient. But I wasn't like that at first. We would fight and quarrel and yell at each other. It was not good. If you can, just give in. Admit that you're wrong. Say you're sorry. Life will be much better and happier.

"The last thing," Papi leaned forward, "is to always to fear the Lord. In the old days Om had done very bad things, and Tante was always the one who prayed for Om. If I am able to sit here and talk to you like this, it's a miracle. Never let go of God."

Papi paused for a bit, and Tjok squeezed my hand even harder. He said in a slightly shaking voice, "Om, thank you for the permission and for the lessons. I would do my best to take care of her." I looked at him and laughed. It was as if he was asking for the permission to marry me instead.

Mami walked down the stairs. From the look in her eyes, she knew that Papi had talked to Tjok. She smiled. We all went to have lunch together, and from that day on every time Mami's friends asked me whether I had a boyfriend, I could finally say, "Yes."



THE INTERN

My friend Steven texted me one fine day in October.

I've found a place for us to do internship. I'm meeting the founder next week. Her name is Karen, and she runs Meld Magazine, a news website for international students. Care to join?

He was very enthusiastic in getting work experience. I was also keen, of course, but I wasn't looking as hard as him. Besides, I was still in my second semester. Shouldn't I be playing around instead of finding internships? But there was sincerity in his text that got me to reply.

Sure, would love to join the convo.
Where and when we meet?

He told me that Karen would meet us for coffee next week, not too far from the university. Steven also asked me to send Karen some of portfolio containing my published writing. I had none.

So I sent my diary/review/mixed-stuff writing on my blog instead.

Steven, Karen and I sat at the coffee shop. Karen was a Singaporean in her late twenties with black hair and small, narrow eyes. She didn't have a Singaporean accent that I associated with Singaporeans. In fact, she spoke perfect English. She told us that she had been a journalist before she founded the magazine, and she hoped to be able to help international students studying Communications and Journalism to get work experience in Melbourne.

She didn't seem to mind what our backgrounds were. Looking at my CV and blog posts, I wouldn't have accepted myself. Karen did, and soon I was working on my first assignment.

The office was located at the tenth level of a student apartment in the city. It was a spacious floor with grey desks put all over the place. On top of the desks was what you would imagine from an office: PCs, stack of books, personal photos and more.

I sat beside Karen, and she told me what I would do for my first task: writing a news piece on a fire that had just happened on Collins Place building earlier that day. She told me to Google the story and to see what had been written in the media at large.

“And call the fire department,” she said. “They have a media spokesperson who answers questions from the journos.” I nodded. I looked confident, but I was so frightened at the task. *You want me to call the fire department? For my first task? Are you frikkin’ sure?* I thought I would do what first-time interns seemed to be doing: making coffee, clearing desks, doing meaningless, menial jobs that no one else wanted to do. Okay, perhaps probably it was not that bad, but I didn’t think I would have gotten a byline by the end of the day.

I moved to an empty room. Karen handed me a voice recorder, and I put my phone on speaker.

I asked the man on the phone about the Collins Place fire.

The man answered in a thick, country-style Australian accent, “The fire was extinguished quickly and the workers are already evacuated because it is still unknown it is only a small fire nothing major and was held under control as soon as we got there.”

“Sorry did you say that the cause of fire is still unknown?”

“Yes that’s correct.”

“Hello?”

“The building has been evacuated but the cause of the fire is still under investigation.”

“Ehm, thank you, ehm, how about the evacuation process?”

“Evacuation was held quickly and all workers were calm there’s no injury or casualty in this incident.”

“Oh, okay. Ehm, thank you.”

“No problem.” *Click.*

I was not sure if I could work out even one sentence.

I played the recording of the phone call at least twenty times before I had one sentence right. I wrote a very short news update, something along the line of: Collins Place building was on fire earlier today. Fire was put out quickly. No one was injured. The cause of the fire was still under investigation.

Twenty minutes later I showed Karen my piece. She pulled a chair next to her and made me sit there, watching her every move while she moved paragraphs, edited words, introduced other words and deleted sentences.

“Okay, what’s your angle?” she said in a cheerful voice.

“My what?”

“The angle of your story. This is okay, but other news has done similar things when they break the news, but we are not breaking the news now as this has happened some hours back.”

“Oh, okay.”

“Let’s see... oh, this. The spokesperson said that they are still investigating the cause of the fire?”

“Yes, they still don’t know what’s causing the fire.”

“Good. That’s your angle. So we move this paragraph,” she dragged the mouse and highlighted the last paragraph, “all the way to the top.”

She then edited the piece again. Or perhaps, the right word was that she butchered the piece. By the time it was

ready to be published, only fifteen per cent of the article contained my original sentences.

“And... published! Congratulations,” Karen turned to face me, “you’ve just gotten your first byline.”

I smiled.

Later that day, I saw the article attached to my name. It was titled, “Collins Place Fire, Workers Evacuated” by Marcella Purnama, filed under “News”. It went like this:

FIREFIGHTERS are still trying to work out the cause of the blaze that broke out in an office building on the corner of Exhibition St. and Flinders Lane this morning.

Spokesman for the Metropolitan Fire Brigade, John Rees, said the MFB received a call at 10.43 am. Six fire trucks were dispatched and office workers were evacuated from the Collins Place building immediately, Mr. Rees said.

An employee from Ernst & Young, Devon Vong, said he witnessed the blaze from his office building next door. “Collins Place is surrounded by a couple of office buildings, and we could see everyone in the surrounding buildings was looking out the window as well,” Mr. Vong said. He said the fire was put out pretty quickly and workers affected appeared calm in the situation.

Mr. Rees said no one was injured in the incident, but the extent of the damage was not yet known. “It’s only a small fire and was held under control as soon as we get there,” he said. Mr Rees said he expected the situation to return to normal pretty quickly.



I had no reason to be proud. But I sent the link to my sister and posted it on Facebook, captioning it “My first byline”. It was a symbol, I hoped, for greater things yet to come.

The paradox of getting an unpaid internship is you’re giving them your time (and money) in a hope to get work experience something that you could place proudly in your resume and get you full-time jobs in the future. Internship is our first step as university students to put our feet on the other side of the door. But some places exploit interns, getting them to work for free instead of having a mutual relationship.

I had heard a lot of horror stories regarding internships. I knew a friend of a friend who had been a business intern for over a year, hoping to get a full-time employment by the time

he graduated, while what he had been doing was working for free. I knew an acquaintance who was asked to do admin jobs: typing notes, sending mails, tidying up survey results. Yes, getting internship and work experience was like winning a lottery: you got picked up among a lot of other inexperienced applicants. You got lucky. But then you clocked in the hours and you felt exploited to the core.

Thus compared to theirs, my internship was too good to be true.

I had been an intern at *Meld* for six months and my portfolio had grown considerably. I had written various news and lifestyle pieces, from the best places to study during exams to movie reviews. I didn't need to take five deep breaths before calling someone anymore. I found it easier to approach a stranger and ask him or her for a quick interview. I had been learning stuff, albeit slowly, and while I wasn't good enough, I was better.

But I had not been doing well in university. My grades were okay, but they were just that okay although I felt like I had been doing everything I could to get good marks. Sadly, I realized that in university everyone was smart, so it was not enough to just be smart. I had to be diligent. I had to be persistent. I had to have a never-give-up attitude. I had to be able to accept setbacks and bounce back. And when all else failed, I had to learn to remember the difference between getting grades and knowledge.

I was about to go home when I had the idea to pitch this story to Karen.

"An opinion piece about grades and university," I said. "It would talk about the need to perform, and why do students blindly pursue good grades as the ideal outcome."

"Sure," Karen said. "It sounds good!"

A few days later, I sent the piece to her. Karen published the writing, and it went viral.

In one day, it garnered over two hundred likes on Facebook and a lot of comments. A teacher told me that she would print my article and distribute it to her students. I received various thank-you emails.

I was stunned.

I posted it on my blog and it became the WordPress Featured post. It had over 140 comments. People began to ask me to guest post on their blogs. Some wanted to republish my writing. Others gave me the Versatile Blogger award, the award circulating in the WordPress community.

I had fame.

To be honest, I had no intention to stay in *Meld* for long, yet I continued writing for them until I graduated from my bachelor's degree. During this time, I had the opportunity to meet the infamous Indonesian band Trio Lestari, to cover

It is said that we learn best by being taught and mentored by people who are slightly older than us—individuals who have been there and done that but are not our “teachers”

YouTube artist David Choi's concert, to meet interesting people who told me about their lives and to get free tickets to movie screenings. During this time, I discovered and learned about the practice of good writing.

In Psychology, there's this theory called the Zone of Proximal Development. It is said that we learn best by being taught and mentored by people who are slightly older than us—individuals who have been there and done that but are not our “teachers”. And Karen was the best mentor. She taught me to write, to structure my writing properly and to improve my grammar. She sat beside me while editing my piece, telling me how I could write the articles better next time. When the organization grew and she no longer could spare the time to do one-on-one editing lessons with me, she still took the time to give me feedback. One year after I became a journalist at *Meld*, I wrote a profile story on an Indonesian art student who was exhibiting her work at a museum. After sending in my piece, Karen wrote me a long email, saying that the writing had improved a lot compared to my earlier stories. “The copy is very clean,” she wrote. That was one of the best compliments I had ever gotten as a writer.

Karen allowed me to explore the things I was passionate to write. She didn't just give students the opportunity to learn; she invested in them. And to that, I owed her my writing career.



SOMETHING RIGHT

After raising me up my whole life, I think my parents were still surprised on the decisions I made. The first time I surprised my parents was when I decided to choose Arts instead of Biomedicine. They supported me, but probably deep inside they were still thinking that it was a mistake.

I had finished university and was wondering what I would do next. Some of my Psychology friends decided to apply for Honors, so I decided to do the same thing. The one-year postgraduate degree was only offered to seventy students. There were eight hundred students studying Psychology that year alone, not including the number of applicants from other universities. The University of Melbourne's Psychology department was ranked #8 in the world.

And I got in! I was offered a place among those seventy students. My grades in Psychology were a lot better than what I got in Communications, though.

But in the end, I decided to decline the offer.

It was one of those times when I surprised my mother fully. “You. Do. What?” she said. She stared at me in disbelief. As long as she could remember, I had talked and talked about being a Psychologist, but I always ended my talk with saying, “It was too hard to get into that Honors degree.” But that was a year ago. The year 2012 was a good year for me in terms of writing, and it had cemented my belief that I wanted to pursue it. I loved Psychology with all my heart, but I didn’t want to become a scientist. I didn’t want to dedicate my life in a research lab, writing reports and talking to other researchers about the significance of a certain experiment. I didn’t want to spend the rest of my life “studying”.

So I declined the offer. Papi received the news coolly, as if he already saw it coming. “Whatever you choose, we will support you,” he said. Mami supported my decision half-heartedly, for she still thought that it was stupid to decline that Honors year.

“Just a year more,” she said. “It doesn’t matter if you need it in the end or not. It’s just one year of studying. You’ve gotten in. And just in case you need the degree it’s already there in the future.”

But a year of studying Psychology, I decided, would not bring me closer to my goal.

Visa regulations in Australia didn’t allow me to stay to look for jobs. So it was either doing Honors or going back home. So I declined the offer to come back home to Jakarta, Indonesia, to my hometown, where I had been offered to do an unpaid internship at a well-known media giant. Mami thought that I was having a phase, but she laughed it off because she was happy that I was coming home. I attended my graduation with my head held high, surrounded by my good friends. I was happy. I was proud. I had my degree. Now I had to show that it was worth it.

“After three years of studying in university, what was the pinnacle of your university career?”

I sat down and thought long and hard about that question. Over the years of living in Australia, I got to become a journalist

Learning to manage both time and people, I realized, was much more valuable skill to have than knowing how to write the perfect essay

and columnist at *Meld*. I had the opportunity to become a research intern at the Royal Children’s Hospital, the best hospital in Australia, seeing how doctors interact with the patients and how clinical psychologists work in the medical setting. I had part-time jobs at various cafés. I had been published in several websites. My grades were

good, albeit I no longer was the top achieving student. I had forged good friendship. I fell in love for real. I had made a name for myself, away from my parents and sisters.

The things I learned in university went beyond the theories. Learning to manage both time and people, I realized, was much more valuable skill to have than knowing how to write the perfect essay. Eventually, I learned how to discuss a certain subject in a professional manner, not only giving my subjective opinions but also backing them up with facts. In

the past three years, I'd like to think that I had become more mature. And like every other fresh graduate out there, I couldn't wait to see what the workforce had in place for me.

The pinnacle of my university career? I decided it would be this. My friend Diane attended Master of Journalism course at Monash University. Her tutor was my tutor in Introduction for Media Writing subject. We were having dinner one day when Diane said, "You know, you're famous."

She then continued, "One day Chris walked

into the tutorial room, and said, 'There is a girl in Melbourne University's bachelor's degree who has pitched her writings, been published in magazines, and written regularly in her blog. You are Master of Journalism students, what have you done?'"

I didn't realize that my tutor remembered me, moreover remembered me enough to talk about me to a new cohort of students at another university. I was beyond pleased. I must have done something right.



love when that time came, so that their children would once again be together at one place.

I've gotten my master's degree. And I still don't know what I would do next. I still don't know how to become an adult. But I know for sure that my parents would be proud of me, proud of their three daughters, no matter what path we choose. And it doesn't matter if we get lost or choose the wrong path, because what matters is choosing to get back up once again.

There's a quote that has been said too many times by too many people: I must have done something right to deserve you in my life. Perhaps despite all our wrong doings and mistakes, despite all our failures and imperfections, we have done something right, for something good still happens in life.

Mami and Papi, I believe you have done more than right.



LUCK (AN EPILOGUE OF SORTS)

“Luck,” I remember Professor Randy Pausch said, “is where preparation meets opportunity.” Randy Pausch was a Computer Science professor at Carnegie Mellon University, and he had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer at the prime age of forty-six with only three to six months to live. He gave his last lecture to the university with the topic *Really Achieving Your Childhood Dreams*. I stumbled upon his book when looking around at a local bookstore and proceeded to watch the one-hour long lecture on YouTube. Since then, I watch his lecture twice a year.

I am lucky and blessed. I have won the parent lottery they've taught me almost everything I knew and they supported me through everything. I have two sisters who care for me. I have close friends on whom I can depend on when things get

hard, with whom I can go out and celebrate when things are great.

I am lucky enough to have known Steven, who introduces me to Karen, who provides me with the opportunity and the platform to discover what kind of writer I am. I am lucky to be headhunted via LinkedIn by my manager, who believes in my potential long before he interviews me. I am lucky to be able to go back to study master's, to have my parents to support my decision no matter how alien the profession is to them. I'm lucky for a lot of other opportunities.

I have been working on a book. I've had this idea of writing my experience as an international student and a first-time employee for some months. I thought about writing on quarter-life crisis, and how my experiences can shed some light to others, showing them that they're not alone. You're not alone. It's hard to navigate the uncharted water from being a child to being an adult. Our generation might be looked as being pampered and selfish, but we still need to get out of this in one piece. So I write some chapter titles. I write a book plan.

Then I forget all about it.

It's been a fine Wednesday afternoon and I am having coffee with my sister Jess. She has just gotten married and moved out of the apartment that we have lived together for several years. She talks about her new interest in creating bonbonnière and head pieces using artificial flowers. I talk about my latest cooking adventure. Then my phone rings. A

notification. An email. It is from a well-known publisher in Jakarta, and it goes like this:

Hi Marcella, I have received a recommendation from a friend who has followed your blog since 2012. Thus, we would like to ask you to work with us to write a nonfiction book about life in university and beyond.

I read the email twice. And then three times. I show it to my sister. I take a print screen of the email and show it to Tjok. I send the picture to my family. It seems surreal, for I've been having the idea to write this book at the back of my head. And when I least expect it, a publisher contacts me about writing the exact same book.

Luck, I believe, is where preparation meets opportunity.



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A huge thank-you goes to Mami and Papi, who have supported me through thick and thin, believing in your daughter who has chosen a weird, unheard profession. I know that all of my friends went to study engineering and science and commerce. I am alone in my choice, and yet you support me. To my two sisters, who read my writings in between and share many of them to your friends, thank you. You accept my eccentricities and love me, and make sure that you impart enough life wisdom so that your youngest sister can grow up well. I love you all to the full moon and back.

Special thanks to my editor, Anida, who gives an aspiring writer a chance even when she has no manuscript on the table. You emailed me one day out of a suggestion from a friend, and

believe that I would actually write the book. Another special thanks to my illustrator, Nabila, who makes the words alive in pictures. They're even more beautiful than what I imagine in my wildest dream. Thank you to you both. So much.

To the anonymous reader of my blog who mentioned me to my editor, words can't describe how thankful I am to you. I am yet to know who you are, but if you're reading this I want you to know that you're the brightest star. Thank you for reading, and most of all, for believing that what you're reading is good enough to turn into a book.

To my friends, who often became the subject and object of my writings, thank you. I know I'm friendless by the world's standards, but you still find me good enough to hang around with after all these years. Ah, you know who you are. Thank you for making my days sweeter.

Thank you to all my readers who have been reading my blog since my humble beginning nine years ago. I read every comment and email ever written for me. You are the reason I keep on writing when I feel like giving up. And to you, dear readers who have come to the last page of this book, thank you for reading my words. I hope that you can laugh alongside my experience, as well as learn from them.

And to Tjok, my #1 fan, thank you for reading all my writings and giving the first comment on everything. I promise I'll write a book for you.

My deepest thanks goes to God for giving me all the lucks I've ever encountered. May this book become a blessing towards everyone who reads it.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Marcella Purnama grew up in Jakarta as a fourth-generation Chinese Indonesian. After realizing her dream of studying in Melbourne, she returned to her home country to work as a content writer. Eighteen months later, she threw in the towel to study publishing. Over the years, Marcella has been published in various print and online publications, including *The Jakarta Globe*, *Indonesia Mengglobal*, *Perspektif Magazine*, *Meld Magazine* and *The Conversation*. *What I Wish I Had Known* is her first book. Visit her blog at www.marcellapurnama.com.

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Born in Jakarta and studied in Bandung, Nabila Adani briefly worked in Tokyo and Jakarta before marrying her best friend and accompanying him move across two oceans. She is now a mom (which she just realized is another full-time job) and continues to draw here and there. She tries to escape the Mid-Atlantic winter and fly to the tropics every time she got the chance. Meet her at <http://nabilaadani.wixsite.com/illustration>.