

**Faisal ODDANG**  
**Two stories**

**In the Womb of the Tarra Tree**

In these graves within a tree, Mother Tarra, though so weak, has never refused to embrace us, her children. Here, within her body, we have nursed on her sap for many years. Drawing out our short lives. Slowly letting our bodies rot with time - becoming one with Mother's body, this tomb for babies who die in Toraja. Babies who have yet to grow teeth. Before we finally go to heaven.

A week ago, you died —who knows why. I saw your relatives hold up the *eran* on Mother's body for them to climb. I guessed that you must come from an aristocratic line, as your coffin was placed higher. Even though you, all of Mother's children, and I will one day be in the same heaven.

Early in the morning, you stand at the doorway to my room, knocking upon the woven fibers of my door that fall away, as they have not been replaced for years.

"May I come in?"

I nod, afraid that I might say the wrong thing and anger you. For a middle-class person like myself, there's nothing more humiliating than to say the wrong words to you.

"I'm sorry," you begin, "I have been here for a week but it still feels like I am a stranger."

"Mother's other children and I apologize, but as you know, we are only middle-class, and some of us are even from the lowest class. We do not wish to be presumptuous with an esteemed person like yourself."

You start to cry, tears falling drop after drop. What's wrong with me, or you, Runduma? Yes, I know your name from Mother. After you were entombed in her body, Mother told me all about you, although of course it was rather vague. You carry much pain from the world?

"Out there, I was your superior. But it's different here..." you hesitate, your expression increasingly anxious. Is there something troubling you? You cry even harder, tears rapidly flowing.

"Lola Toding?"

I am shocked. You know my name? Of course, Mother must have told you. You sit very still. A look of hesitation upon your face.

"Tell me!" I say, certain that you have something to tell.

"Don't let anyone else know. You can keep a secret, can't you?"

I nod to convince you. You smile briefly and begin your tale.

The house seemed dark that night. It was noisy. Faces full of perspiration. People busy talking. The situation grew tense when a middle-aged man grabbed the collar of a young man who looked confused.

"The confused young man was my father." You interrupt your tale.

I nod, signaling you to continue your story.

"My father was silent," you say. "He looked down wearily. His eyes were glassy as if he wanted to be angry but could not. The middle-aged man cried angrily, 'He has wronged our customs. He has committed adultery.'"

He was your grandfather, Runduma? You nod.

Your father and mother were lovers. They were found together in the bushes behind your mother's house before they were married. Fortunately, it was a relative of yours who found them so that the news was not spread to all corners of the village.

The morning is turning into afternoon. I know this from the white sap that no longer flows rapidly from Mother's body. You haven't finished your tale.

"I will continue tomorrow, Toding," you say.

"You promise?"

"Of course."

"Promise you won't call me Toding, that's a man's name, my father's name. Just Lola," I laugh.

You smile, you seem amused by my words.

August clouds gather in the Toraja sky. The wind sheds Mother's brownish hair. I sit at the edge of the room, looking as far out as I can. Soon, perhaps in a few days, Toraja will be very busy. I've heard that the family of Allo Dopang will be carrying out a funeral ceremony for their dead one who is still 'sick' in the traditional house. 'Sick' means the body has not been consecrated, although the person no longer breathes, that's our belief. I wish I could take you there. At the very least, we can relieve our longing for our families and relatives. Isn't it true that for us, Mother Tarra's children, the smiles of our relatives is a little piece of heaven? Or do you wish to meet your parents? Come with me, Runduma, I am sure the event will be lively. Many buffaloes will be sacrificed, and pigs too.

"Toding," you call, breaking into my daydream.

I turn and glare at you.

"Oh, sorry, I mean Lola," you add quickly.

"What is it? Do you wish to continue your story?"

"Do you have time?"

"Go on."

Your father, and your mother too no doubt, were from the upper class and their wedding in the traditional house had to be extravagant. It must be so. Otherwise, curses will follow. You said your death began there. Although it was not the main reason, it was your parents' extravagant wedding that caused your death before you had the chance to get to know the world. I didn't get a chance either. Neither did any of Mother's other children.

"Their marriage went smoothly, until I was born and my mother found out that my father was drowning in debt."

As a member of the aristocracy, it was compulsory for your father to give twelve adult buffaloes to marry your mother. So he began borrowing money right and left, surely with high interest rates. A year into their marriage, your father still had not settled his millions in debts. He often became angry. Beating and cursing your mother.

"When I was five months old, everything ended just like that." You sniff back tears, unable to continue your tale. Boys can break down too, I see. Without my realizing it, you have found your way into my embrace.

That night was your last night on earth. You breathed your last in the arms of your parents. You were cursed that night, Runduma. You bounced out of your baby sling after your father could no longer control his anger and pushed your mother till she fell. Your mother winced. Your head hit the floor hard. For a moment all was silent. Then a sense of gloom and anxiety fell over the space. Your father went mad. Incoherent. Your mother took your body into her arms.

"I was in pain that night and found it difficult to breathe," you say as you move closer into my embrace.

"You remember everything?" I ask, curious.

"Not everything, but I can still recall several events before my death although they are not clear," you explain.

Your father panicked, and your mother even more so. She lost her strength upon seeing her hands that held your head become red with blood. She ran with you in her arms to the front of the house, shouting for help.

"Nobody heard. I expect everyone was sound asleep," you say regretfully.

"So your death was only witnessed by your father and mother?"

"Not really," you reply. "Just before God took my spirit, I saw Tanta Mori, my father's younger sister, crying for me already stiff in my mother's arms."

You end your tale with your arms pressed tightly around my body. You hold me for a long time. So long that I feel a strange feeling coursing through me. Is this love? I hope not.

"I have no one," you say in between your sobs.

I touch your shoulder lightly. "You have us and Mother. Don't talk like that."

The strange feeling intensifies and finally wears me down. I love you, Runduma.

Morning comes along with a mist that covers the rock cliffs and thick roots that trail from the trees on the hills of Toraja. It's very cold in our house today. As I am suckling on Mother's sap, all around our burial tree loud voices can be heard. Runduma, you come to me this morning with a look that holds many stories. Immediately you ask me to come back into my room and sit before me.

"Lola, do you know who is guiding the tourists down there?"

I shake my head, puzzled.

"Come here." You pull my arm, and together we raise the palm fibers that are the door to my room. "There, there..."

I spy crowds of people having their photographs taken in front of Mother.

"The one wearing glasses?"

"No."

"The one in brown clothes?"

"That's my father," you reply wearily. You look so sad today, Runduma, although by now you needn't carry so much longing in your heart.

We are quiet for a long time. Observing the visitors' antics and their laughter makes us both melancholic.

"My father works as a guide during tourist months, on normal days he works in the fields."

"Look, he knows a lot about Mother." I stare at your father, as he explains to the tourists about this burial tree.

"He has worked as a guide since before he got married."

"No wonder."

Dawn has not broken. Yet you are awoken by Mother, the whole tree is in an uproar. Mother is angry. Her children are frightened. Mother's hairs are falling. Withering one by one. Her sap flows out rapidly becoming tears.

"Where are you, Lola?"

Mother's quivering voice calls for me, as loud as a drum being beaten. I shiver to hear it. But I cannot respond.

"Where are you, Lola?" you ask, sobbing, Runduma. "Why did you go away? I love you." Your voice sends strange feelings coursing through me again. You love me, too, Runduma?

Mother is still angry. Her body almost collapses, she is so resentful. She has lost one of her children. Last night, while everyone including Mother was sound asleep, your father, Runduma, stole my corpse that was only a skeleton. He sold it for several million rupiah to the tourists he was with the other day. I screamed as loudly as I could, but you remained in my room that is now empty. From hereon, my spirit hangs in limbo between heaven and our burial tree. Because my body is no longer one with Mother.

I love you, Runduma. I believe you do not hear me.

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#### NOTES:

*Tarra*: a big tree with a diameter of up to three meters, used to bury babies in Toraja.

*Eran*: in Torajan mythology, the first human was given a special ladder to heaven to meet Puang Matua (God), also known as *eran to langi*, or the ladder of the heavenly man. Its shape is like a piece of bamboo that has holes in it with sticks inserted into it.

### Sawerigading Came from the Sea

His ark sank hundred years ago when he left Luwu, sailing to China. Now, he re-appears from the bottom of the ocean, hoping for a welcome as an expected saviour. To his surprise, nobody knows him and people consider him insane.

"I bring her hair, this is the hair of my twin sister, Tenriabeng", he said. "I will find a woman with similar hair like hers to be my wife. Help me, help me find her".

He claimed himself coming from the past and mentioned foreign names, sounding very strange and causing other people to laugh. Names of places, of people —and those names sound ridiculous to those asking about his origin.

He came to search for his future wife, as he already mentioned. He appeared out of nowhere with long hair hanging down to his shoulder, extremely untidy. His skin had the colour of barbecued fish. He appeared under the big tree in which dwelled an evil spirit called 'The Long-fingered,' or so were convinced the children in the neighborhood who used to steal mangoes from that big tree.

"I am afraid he is a prophet who has hidden", said the runny nose boy with a missing tooth. "My mother said, when a prophet appears, we will be saved," he added.

His friends were quiet. There were three boys tiptoeing to fetch the fallen mangoes from the tree after a strong wind, the rainfall, and after the man appeared. The two boys were quiet and the third is talkative when talking, his lips making a sound like the piercing needle of sewing machine.

"O, I was wrong. He is god", said the runny nose boy with a missing tooth to his pale and worried friends. I asked where God was before praying and my mother replied, He would ultimately appear one day when the time has come. Nobody responded to the boy when I shouted "The long-armed creature wants to capture those boys who stole mangoes"; before I finished my utterance the boys fle, the mangoes scattering from their grip.

"I bring sample of her hair", said the man after I asked him how he would identify his prospective bride. Aren't there any others? I said. Photograph, selfie ones would do, even your protruding lips or tongue would be much-much better than a single hair.

"Photograph? What is that?"

"Her picture?"

"Can it be so?"

I gave up for the sake of fulfilling his overpouring desire, a bit like a hallucination, and pointed at an old house with a very high chimney (that I dazzled into a tower and a storehouse) full of a pile of memories from the Dutch colonialisation era, and at a pretty girl who had been accused of insanity for admitting that she appeared from the fairy tales of Brothers Grimm. A lunatic should match a lunatic, I thought. "There you might find her", I said.

"Zelle was her name", I tried to convince him. "Over there," I pointed to the tall chimney of the old house, "she is expecting a prince to pick her up and maybe you are the one she is waiting for?" "But the name of my prospective wife is We Cudai" not Zelle, or Zella or other names.

However, I was firm and persistent just like a prophet snatching other people's belief by doing a foolish act like building an ark on a mountain. I told him it was possible that she changed her name to adapt to the present condition and sound cool.

"The name "We Cudai" is a blast from the past as you said, maybe Zelle is more sociable in her opinion, said I.

And he bought it. Is that so easy? Maybe in his time, people had not yet created lies, while they now are a merchandise without tax. A profitable business, I assumed. With extreme exhaustion, he finally strode to the place that I pointed, carrying a few things which he said to be a dowry.

My name is Sawerigading, he said when he first introduced himself, not long after the mango-stealing boys scattered after his sudden appearance. I couldn't help laughing, "You are

ridiculous," I said when I stopped. But he was quiet, looking like a pile of shit because he was silent and smelly too. He looked at me curiously, a look hiding a question: What's funny?

"So you are from that canon, *I La Galigo*?"

"He looked astonished and shocked, "I La Galigo, I La Galigo," he repeatedly uttered, nodding his head.

"In the book of divine pre-ordination, I will have a son in the future named I La Galigo. Where do you learn the supernatural power? Your prophecy is parallel to what god foretold.

"I heard it from a story told by a spiritual leader in the village; once or twice I read it but I've forgotten it."

And tears were in his eyes, moved by or admiring my ability.

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Zelle and my imagination are two things inseparable, like red traffic light and a car's horn. She and her mother once worked for my family. I was five years older than she. When I started primary school, she was still breastfed and cried about small matters, like taking a bath in the morning. Both her parents died when I was eighteen. My father also couldn't be helped in that accident, and mother died when I was twenty, exactly a year ago. But of course I did not tell this to Weri (I told him to change his name to sound cool and to prevent people from wondering and to call him insane although to me he was only not sane enough). In this messy love story, there was no use to explain why Zelle suddenly appeared on the top of the chimney because her room was smaller than the toilet of a prayer house, surrounded by iron bars, where she passed water, defecated and also ate.

One morning, she shouted and chased all men that she saw, but not me. My prince, my prince, you are the one that I've been waiting for to take to the palace. Those were her words, and they made the villagers disgusted. Since then the villagers called her crazy. I was unable to defend her, though I knew she did not deserve to be called so: she still served me dinner, brought water for my bath every morning, made the bed for me, did other things that I thought difficult to be done by a crazy person. But, she always chased after other men, trying to hold them and crying: my prince, my prince!

"I'm sorry that her parents died so soon."

"Her life burden is more than her money. What a shame!"

"That's why she is mad, what a pity! In fact she is still young, and pretty, too."

Many people pitied her, including me, her employer, who was the most responsible. I didn't have the money to take her to the sanatorium and I thought, and so did the villagers, including the spiritual teacher whose advice we trust. The wise decision was to put her on top of the chimney of the old house, the legacy of my parents. The house was at the edge of the village, which had long been deserted and nobody dared to live there even if I offered for free.

"Normally an old house would be spooky," the spiritual teacher said, "what is more, the Dutch heritage pressed upon the indigenous locals, who later bled to death," he added. But a lunatic person will only be scared when called crazy, so Zelle didn't mind."

Because of being a diligent person when it came to prayers and always coming to the mosque, every one was eager to trust the spiritual leader to make the decision and I reluctantly took her to that old house.

"Your prince will come, just wait here," I kissed her eyebrow, "just wait".

She stayed still. I rushed to leave when I found that something wet had fallen on her cheek and something felt warm in my eyes.

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I couldn't comprehend how Weri could recognize someone he had not seen before just by looking at her single hair alone. His belief was only as thick as the dirt on his body, very thick for dirt or anything could stick to someone's body.

“Its color is brown due to sea water or maybe the heat of the sun,” he said, and I was still unable to understand, so continued to observe the single hair he gave me to examine, so as to convince me.

“Zelle’s hair was exactly like this, like gold.

Then his smile grew like newly cooked rice. I did carve a small hole, like a window, so Zelle did not feel stuffy in that hole, into which she always inserted her hair, which she had let grow since she was a child. My prince would come, surely he would. While waiting, she was sure someone would climb the chimney using her hair— from day to day the hair grew, was roasted by the sun, changed color to goldish brown. Day after day the hope increased, she kept on waiting, and then the time had come when Weri arrived.

“Hi, my future bride, I am the one that you are waiting for”, he shouted with hoarseness voice from below down the chimney. “I am a prince from Luwu, my servants will bring you presents within three months continuously, please accept my proposal.”

“Reach for my hair, my prince, take me to your palace.”

“It is useless, her hair was unreachable. The chimney is still too high for Zelle’s hair to be thrown down.

“ Wait, my prince, tomorrow my hair will be longer, much longer.”

“Not just tomorrow, but many years ahead I will wait for you, I will visit the future for you.”

“We will be living happily ever after, is that right, my prince?”

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Seven months Weri waited. Zelle’s hair was still unreachable. Even though he could meet his bride-to be without climbing the chimney, as I did when I saw her clean her place, her body, and feed herself. But Zelle refused now; to her, the prince is the one who is able to touch her hair.

“You have to believe, my prince will only come through the strands of my hair, and you have to believe also that was what happened in the story that I read when I was a kid.”

If it wasn’t me who heard it, she would be considered crazy. but I understood her better than anyone else, more than she understood herself. My eyes started to get warm.

I was curious to know how long that man had to wait. And it was clear that I was made curious when I searched the internet and found that hair only grows by one millimeter every three days. If the hair growth cycle was normal for twenty meters hair, as high as the chimney— subtracted from her current hair which I assumed to be four meters, how long would Weri have to wait? That was what made me puzzled; I always failed in math. I tried hard not to think while waiting for Weri to be bored of waiting and would go away to find another hair owner, but was afraid Zelle would be broken-hearted.

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Shrill voice from the top of the chimney surprised me that morning when I took some food to her. That was not her soft voice calling Weri who was waiting patiently. I guessed something went on and I hurried down to call the villagers, and of course the unskippable, the spiritual teacher. We rushed to climb the stairs and there were more than ten people and they were in shock.

“She met her prince,” said the spiritual teacher, shaking his head and praising the greatness of Allah.

People dragged Weri to the chimney. Not long after you could hear a simultaneous clamorously cry ‘*sah*,’ meaning legal.

“Allah is the greatest,” said the spiritual teacher after he wiped both palms of his hands on his face. “ Good woman for good man. That was Allah’s promise in the surah Annur article 26 of the Holy Qoraan,” he said.

“An insane woman for an insane man, an insane man for an insane woman,” said one of the community members followed by long laughter by those who witnessed the event, including the spiritual teacher.

My eyeballs got warm. I remembered the night before dawn when Zelle assumed every man was her prince. My tears fell. I remembered each time I brought her food and washed her and kissed her eyebrows and all her body and whispered: your prince will come, honey.

My tears overflowed when the cry of the baby became louder.

“ I name this baby I La Galigo,” Weri shouted in happiness.

Everyone was laughing but me. I could not resist my tears. That was my son, Weri! But I was unable to say it. (\*)

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*Translated from Bahasa Indonesia by Raden S M Assagaf*

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Note: Sawerigading is mythological character from *La Galigo*, an ancient manuscript and the longest poem in the world from Bugis, Indonesia.

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