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Excerpt from the novel *The Outcast*

*For those who are banished because of their beliefs*

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The Outcast

January 2005

What does someone who has been cast out hope for upon returning home? An apology, an expression of longing, or tears of happiness?

For Maryam, it was none of those. She returned without any expectations. She did not know what she would find back home. She was not thinking about whether there would be anyone still waiting for her, or whether her return would inflame old wounds. She did not even know what she would do there. Would it just be a fleeting visit before she flew off elsewhere, or would she stay for good? She did not know... She just wanted to go home. That was all.

It had been five years since the last time she set foot on this island. When the flight attendant announced that the plane was about to land at Selaparang Airport, her heart skipped a beat. The closer the plane got to the ground, the more nervous she became. It was a sense of anxiety that could not be put into words. It was not fear or doubt, or even the heart-pounding joy of a homesick person. She just wanted to go home. That was all.

The sun had almost set by the time Maryam left the airport, got into a taxi and driven off. The sight of all the foreign tourists, the new buildings that were not there before —it all added to the nervousness she felt. Would she still be able to call this island her home?

The taxi continued heading south, winding along the hilly road through darkness. Maryam could not tell for sure where they were. She had given the taxi driver the name of a hotel that she had booked from Jakarta. She had deliberately chosen a hotel located in the island's southern region, on a beach that did not get too many visitors. It was also the closest place to where she wanted to go, the place that she had once called home. She planned to stay in the hotel tonight, before going to her village the next morning.

Inside the hotel room, her anxiety worsened. The faces of people she knew seemed to spring up on the walls, laughing at her scornfully. She had turned the volume on the television up, but it only added to her sense of being trapped. Maryam ran out of her room, following the dimly lit path through the hotel grounds. She went through the gate, crossed the deserted road and picked up speed when she felt the sand beneath her feet. She threw off her shoes. When her feet touched the water, she turned and ran along the shoreline, cutting through the darkness, embracing the silence.

Maryam burst out crying. Her crying grew louder and louder. Now she was really sobbing. It was the first time she had cried since the judge's gavel had finalized her divorce a week ago.

The marriage had lasted less than five years. It was Maryam who wanted out. It surprised her now that she had been able to stay that long, trying to build happiness out of suspicion and falseness. She had always thought that the most important thing was for Alam, her husband, to love her unconditionally. But who would have thought that the man she loved was full of lies?

So it was with full conviction that she had gone to the religious affairs court to seek a divorce. It did not take long, just two weeks, and her request was granted. Alam let her go without a fight, and her in-laws also helped facilitate the process by testifying that a divorce was the best thing for both of them.

Maryam left the house that same day. She moved from hotel to hotel while still working as usual. No one could guess what she had gone through. No one knew that each night she sat for hours on end in the hotel café, her mind wandering and confused. She would return to her room past midnight, restless, and force herself to sleep until the alarm on her mobile phone went off. Six thirty a.m. She would shower in a hurry, then go back to work. She would hide behind her computer screen, drown herself in tables of numbers, evaluating what others were worth before deciding whether their requests for a loan should be approved. She had been doing this job for eight years. It was a job that allowed her to live comfortably, and the one through which she first met her husband.

Eight years earlier, not long after Maryam began working at the bank, the two of them became acquainted in a meeting.

No gap

Maryam was only twenty-four at the time. She had just moved to Jakarta after graduating from university in Surabaya. She was beginning to enjoy the newfound independence that came with earning her own salary, which, at two million rupiah a month, was more than what her fellow graduates were making. She loved buying new clothes, putting on make-up every morning and going to the salon once a month. Having her own money made Maryam feel much more confident. She no longer needed to depend on her parents.

Her work kept her from returning home. She could only go on leave once a year, and even then, it was not her who decided the dates. It would not be worth going back to Lombok if it was only for two or three days. It was too expensive and not worth the effort. Her parents understood. So they came to Jakarta to visit Maryam.

It was October 1997. Her parents had been staying with Maryam at her rented house for the past five days. Saturdays for Maryam were for fun. Alam would pick her up and they would go out. They had been dating for five months. When he came over, she introduced him to her parents. He asked if they wanted to go out with them, but Maryam's father declined. Maybe the next day, he said. They were still feeling a bit tired.

That of course pleased Maryam. They had only just met, she thought. It would be awkward if they had tagged along. She and Alam did not stay out very long that day. They just had dinner together then quickly returned home. Maryam did not feel right leaving her parents for too long.

Once back home, after Alam had left and the sound of his car had gradually receded into the distance, her parents spoke. "Who is he?" her father asked.

Maryam said his name was Alam Syah. He worked at a construction company. "Are you two going out?" her father asked.

Maryam did not answer directly, just giggled and nodded.

Then her father asked her more questions—how long had they known each other, what kind of person was he, what was he like, how about his family. Maryam told them what she knew. There was nothing out of the ordinary. She said she had not met Alam's family. "We're still getting to know each other better," she said.

Her mother joined in. "It's better not to get involved with outsiders. You might both regret it, you'll both get hurt. Best end it now."

Maryam was angry. She was extremely fed up. She had been patient for far too long. For years she had always tried to do as her parents said—go out with and marry someone from the same community, one of their own. But how could she tell her heart who to fall in love with? How could she resist if her heart chose to love someone else? Did they never want to see their daughter get married? Did they want to see their daughter get hurt because she couldn't marry the person she loved? That night Maryam gave vent to her fury. She poured out all the feelings that she had been suppressing for years.

Her father grew even angrier. He asked Maryam to return home with them. "There are many good men in our village!" he said. "Those who have been taught and raised the same way would respect and love you better than outsiders who believe they're always right."

The argument ended unresolved.

The next morning, when Alam came, Maryam's parents joined her in meeting him at the door. Her father immediately began talking. He started out with trivial questions to which he already knew the answers anyway. Alam was unwavering in his affirmation when asked whether he loved Maryam. He also did not hesitate to declare that he would soon propose to her and marry her.

Then in a soft voice Maryam's mother asked "Does that mean you're ready to become an Ahmadi?"

Alam was confused. Maryam, shocked, cried out at her mother. For a moment the room was completely silent, everyone holding their breath in suspense.

Alam, who did not really understand what was going on, tried to ease the tension by asking what Maryam's mother meant by becoming an Ahmadi. Maryam's parents appeared slightly relieved. They took Alam's question as a sign of his willingness to do as they asked.

The night before, after their argument with Maryam, her parents had spoken with each other. They realized that Maryam was no longer a child who could be forced to do as they bid. Maryam was an adult who did not need to depend on anyone. They could not make her marry some man they had chosen for her. The only thing they could do was to make sure the man that she chose understood and followed what they believed in. It was for their own future happiness as a couple.

Her father stood up, went to his room, and came out carrying five books. He handed them to Alam. "You can study these books first, Alam. That way you'll be prepared when you propose to Maryam," he said.

Alam, still confused, rifled through the pages. Then he nodded and promised to read the books thoroughly.

Maryam's parents went home a week later. They left behind a host of instructions and expectations. Maryam and Alam could only say yes. Things returned to the way they were before Maryam's parents had come. Neither of them wanted to bring up what Maryam's parents had said. The books were forgotten about. Both of them knew that talking about it would only damage their happiness.

Maryam's father called a month later. He asked whether Alam had understood. "Yes, he does," Maryam said quickly. She just wanted to give the easiest answer, so that her father would not ask any more questions. But her father kept pressing the issue. He told her to bring Alam back to the village so that he could fully convert to become an Ahmadi before they were married. Maryam did not answer. But the calls kept coming, always with the same questions. Maryam, tired and annoyed, began not answering the phone. Until one day, when a guilty conscience led her to pick up the phone, her father could no longer control his feelings. He told her to leave Alam. It was for her own good and happiness.

Her father told her of Ahmadi who had been determined to marry a person different from themselves. Their marriages had collapsed. All kinds of strife and trouble had befallen them. Maryam knew all this. Rohma, a girl from her Koran-study class, who was almost like a sister to her, had got divorced after just two years of marriage. At first, her husband had forbidden her from praying at the mosque where her family worshipped. And from then on the restrictions imposed upon her just got worse and worse. Rohma was not allowed to go to her parents' house, she was forbidden from seeing her family. Rohma fought back. She chose divorce as a way out. She returned to her parents' home. She later married again, to a man chosen by her family.

Another Ahmadi, Rifki, was humiliated at the time when he was formally proposing marriage. He had gone with his entire family to the girl's house to propose, after months of planning. But in the middle of the ceremony, the girl's father declared in a loud voice that he did not want his daughter marrying a heretic. His girl grew hysterical as she tried to plead with her father to stop. Her mother also burst into tears. Rifki was deeply offended. No matter how much he loved her, he would never allow his family to be humiliated like that. A huge argument ensued. Neither side would budge. Rifki lost his temper. He hit his prospective father-in-law in the face.

Rohma and Rifki had been warned from the beginning by their families, who had tried in every way they could to end the relationship. But they resisted, to the point that the two families felt they had no choice. Rohma and Rifki got their way, but on one condition: that they would always hold on to what they had been taught since childhood. They promised to do this. But then... see what happened!

Those were just two of the incidents that Maryam knew of firsthand. There were many others involving close acquaintances – men and women with whom she had no blood ties but who were like family because of their shared faith.

Maryam had nurtured a fear in her heart since she was young. She did not want to go through what had happened to the others. She wanted to find a man from the same faith, someone with whom she would be guaranteed a trouble-free marriage. She did not want to enter a marriage that would only end in divorce. She did not want to bring shame and trouble to her family. More than anything, she did not want to get hurt.

As a result, Maryam graduated from high school without ever having had a boyfriend. She could tell who was of the same faith and who was not. Whenever she was approached by a man who was

different from her, she would withdraw. She became Maryam the sharp-tongued, Maryam the arrogant, Maryam who kept to herself. That was what all the men thought who tried to get close to her. But even when an Ahmadi man tried to approach her she would do the same. Ahmadi men just did not interest her.

After she graduated from high school in 1993, Maryam left for Surabaya, where she took an entrance exam for a place in a state university. She was accepted at Airlangga University, where she majored in accounting at the School of Economics. She lived with a family that was like her own, acquaintances of her parents. They were also Ahmadis. Mr. and Mrs. Zazuli, who Maryam called Mr. and Mrs. Zul, had two children, one in senior high school and the other in junior high school. They came from the same island as Maryam, but a different village. It was called Praya, about 20 kilometers north of where Maryam came from. Mr. Zul was a friend of Maryam's father. They had gone to junior high school together. After junior high school, Mr. Zul had gone to Surabaya, staying with an Ahmadi family who paid for his senior high school studies. Maryam's father received a similar offer, but he declined. He chose to remain in the village, with the fishing community. They both did well in their own way. Mr. Zul, who trained at a teacher training college, became an elementary school teacher in Surabaya. Maryam's father became a fish trader. He bought the fish straight from the fishermen and sold it at the sub-district market and to restaurants. The business allowed him to build a decent house, buy a pickup truck, and send his two children to school. It was also her parents who paid for Maryam to go to university. She only stayed with Mr. Zul for safety, as well as because of the close bonds between the families.

Mr. and Mrs. Zul treated Maryam well, like one of their own children. She became a sister to the two younger children.

She helped them with their homework. She also did her share of the household chores. Everyone had a job to do, from sweeping the yard to doing the dishes.

There were often prayer group meetings held at the house, just for Ahmadis. They took place at least twice a month, on Friday evenings. If there was no meeting at the Zazuli house, that meant it was being held at the house of another Ahmadi. Maryam and the children would go along to those meetings. They would start at five in the evening and end at eight at night. The prayer group meetings were something that could not be missed. As a guest, Maryam understood this and had no objections to joining. Besides, she was used to prayer group meetings back home. The Zazuli children also treated it as an obligation, having been taught since they were young to pray five times a day. A girl and a boy, they had grown up in a big city with all its attendant conveniences, but they never flagged in practicing their faith. It was part of their subconscious being. Prayers and prayer group meetings were not just a habit and an obligation for them, but also a need.

Maryam felt the same. Living in the big city had shored up her faith. She studied and hung out with her friends every day. But when she got home, the rest of her day was dedicated to prayer and discussions on faith with Mr. and Mrs. Zul, as well as the weekly prayer group meetings.

There were 20 families that attended the meetings. There were a lot of young people of Maryam's age or younger, all of them the children of the families who regularly took part. The meetings always ended with a meal, where the young people would chat and joke. They usually kept out of the discussions of their parents, and would go out to the front porch with their plates to talk about anything and everything. Some families would even bring very young children to these gatherings, holding the little ones snugly in their laps during the recital. When it came to mealtime, the children would run around, gather with the other children and play in the yard. Everyone knew one another and they were close. They treated one another like family.

Often as the evenings drew to an end, the parents would tease the older young people about setting them up with a partner. They would say that these two would be right for each other, or those two would go well together. For some, it was just friendly banter, while others really did go on to get married. Mr. and Mrs. Zul were the best example of the latter. They had met at Ahmadi prayer meetings such as these and were paired off by their elders. And the union had lasted.

There was one young man who the elders were always saying would be a good match for Maryam. His name was Gamal and he was four years older than her. He was in his final year at ITS, studying mechanical engineering. He was good-looking. He had fair skin, much fairer than Maryam's light tan. They had got on well since they first met. All the teasing from the others did not change that.

Maryam had no objection to being paired off in this way. She even secretly wished for it. She yearned to have a boyfriend. The desire had got even stronger since she had come to Surabaya. It was not just that she was getting to the stage where she had started thinking about getting married, but also because she wanted to know what it was like to have a boyfriend. Gamal also seemed to enjoy the matchmaking banter. And there was no reason why any man would not be attracted to Maryam. She had the exotic beauty of women from the eastern part of the country. Her brown skin was clear and fresh. Her eyes were round and sharp, her eyebrows thick and her lips full and red. She let her hair, silky and jet black, fall loose down her back. Beyond her physical charms, Maryam was also intelligent and friendly. What more could a man ask for, especially if they shared the same faith?

From meeting only at the weekly prayer meetings, Maryam and Gamal began finding excuses to see each other more often. Gamal would go over to Mr. Zul's house on a Sunday. Mr. and Mrs. Zul would welcome him with delight. They would all have lunch together, then Gamal and Maryam would chat together on the front porch. Mrs. Zul often tried to come up with a reason for the two of them to go out together. Once she asked them to buy rice at the market; another time she sent them out for cooking oil.

Gamal sometimes picked Maryam up from university. They would go home together and Mrs. Zul would greet them happily. She would insist that Gamal stay over for dinner. They became like a family.

Everyone in the prayer group knew that Gamal and Maryam were seeing each other. They took even more pleasure in teasing the young couple about it. Gamal's parents were just as enthusiastic. They joked that they were just waiting for Gamal to propose. They were ready to go to Lombok if that happened. The others laughed on hearing Gamal's mother say that. Mrs. Zul was not to be outdone. She said Maryam's father had sent a letter saying that he trusted fully in Mr. and Mrs. Zul's decision in choosing a husband for Maryam.

Maryam and Gamal, sitting on the porch, pretended not to hear all the talk. But they both blushed. They had never actually talked about going out together, let alone about getting married. Both were comfortable with the way things were now. Besides, Maryam did not want to get married before getting her degree. It was the same with Gamal, who had just begun his final-year paper. Once that was done, he still had to look for a job, and only then would he be in a position to propose. Their parents understood this. They were just happy to see that Gamal and Maryam enjoyed a special relationship. It was just a matter of time before they would be married for life, raising a new Ahmadi family together.

Anyone can nurture hope, and anyone can plan a relationship, but who can control how things turn out?

It was toward the end of 1995. Gamal was working on the final part of his dissertation. There was only a small part left for his supervisor to approve, and then the exam, before he would get his degree. His degree in engineering.

Maryam sensed there was something different about Gamal. He had changed since coming back from Banten, where he had visited a steel mill to gather data for his dissertation. He had not gone alone. There were three others with him from his faculty who were working on the same subject area. They lived together for a month in a rented house not far from the mill.

During their month apart, Maryam and Gamal sent each other a letter once. Small talk, the kind of things said by those in love. Admissions of missing one another and stories about the little things that had been happening from day to day. There was nothing particularly noteworthy in the letters. Gamal seemed the same as ever. Until he came back and met Maryam again.

He had grown quieter since his return. He did not say much, nor did he seem to want to talk. It was as though he had something serious on his mind. Maryam asked him about it once, but he said he was preoccupied with finishing his final-year paper on time. She did not bring it up again. After all, there could not have been anything else on his mind. Maryam did not want to add to his worries. She tried to understand that he had a lot on his mind and could not chat like they used to. So she did not think anything of it when he did not come to Mr. Zul's house the next Sunday. They would meet at the next prayer group meeting anyway, she thought. But he did not come then either. His mother said he was not feeling well. When he did not show up again the following Sunday, his mother said he was busy preparing for his exam. And he was not there at the next meeting, which was held at Mr. and Mrs. Zul's house. He had missed three prayer group meetings in a row and not seen Maryam for almost a month.

Gamal's parents had a hard time answering everyone's questions. They appeared pale, and the skin beneath their eyes was dark and puffy. They were exhausted. Mercifully the prayer meeting got underway and the questions about Gamal ceased. But the respite was temporary. When the meeting was over, the questions resumed. Maryam, helping Mrs. Zul prepare the food in the kitchen, could hear it all clearly.

She could not wait to hear what Gamal's mother would say. Where was the man that she missed so badly? He was alright, wasn't he? He was probably just busy in front of his computer, finishing off his paper. Or so Maryam thought. The noise from the living room grew louder. But still Gamal's parents were not giving any straight answers. All of a sudden there was the sound of someone crying. Mrs. Zul dropped what she was doing and went out to the living room, Maryam following closely.

Gamal's mother was crying. Her husband was seated next to her, trying to calm her down. He was not crying, but his eyes were red. The others sat in stunned silence. No one knew what to do or say. They did not even know why Gamal's mother had suddenly burst out crying. Maryam sat behind Mrs. Zul, trying to hide her face. She was scared, but she did not know why.

Gamal's mother finally spoke up, her words punctuated by sobs as she wiped her eyes and nose. Gamal's father had given up trying to hold back his tears and was crying quietly.

They were crying for their son, for Gamal. Gamal who no longer wanted to go to the prayer group meetings, who had become angry and bullheaded. Gamal who spent more time away from home, often spending the night out and coming home only to bathe and change his clothes. His parents lost patience with him. When he returned early one morning, they were waiting for him at the front door and asked to speak with him in the living room. At first he refused. He got angry and said he

was in a hurry to meet a lecturer on campus. His father, usually so reserved, raised his voice that day and told him not to argue any more. His mother got emotional, saying Gamal had disowned them as his parents. When his mother burst into tears, Gamal softened. He sat in the living room, facing his parents. His father began by asking where he had been, where he had stayed every night. Gamal answered without hesitation. He said he had been staying with a friend. He needed someone to help him finish his paper. His parents could not fault him for that. But then his mother got angry again and asked why he did not go to the prayer group meetings anymore. Gamal, who until then had been polite, became furious. Raising his voice he blamed his parents. He condemned all that they believed in as heresy. His mother cried even harder. His father remained composed. He asked Gamal what had come over him. Hadn't they been through a lot together over the years? Didn't he realize how ironic that word, heretic, sounded coming from him? It was something that he had heard in elementary school, and then in junior high school and in senior high school. Gamal knew who he was and who his family were. His parents' guidance and the recitals that he had attended since he was young had allowed him to keep his faith through it all. So why had he suddenly become like this?

But Gamal refused to answer his father's questions. He kept condemning what they believed in. He told his parents to be decent people and to follow what everyone else believed in. He pointed accusingly at the picture of a man framed on the wall of the living room. His father grew angry. He shouted at Gamal, accusing him of being possessed by a demon. But Gamal could no longer control himself. He went up to the picture, tore it from the wall, then ripped it to shreds. His mother screamed. His father rushed over to Gamal, his firstborn, his only son, and slapped him on the cheek. Hard. Gamal cried out in pain. He left home that very day and had not been back since. That was ten days ago.

Everyone at the prayer group meeting fell silent upon hearing what had happened. Some of them were crying. Behind Mrs. Zul, Maryam was also shedding tears. She ran off to her room and buried her face in her pillow to stifle her sobs. Maryam had lost all hope. She had lost the man she loved. And she did not know what to do. She just wanted to cry.

Gamal never came back. His parents gave up looking for him. They had gone to his university, spoken with his lecturers and fellow students. No one knew where he was. Most of the students in his class were rarely on campus anyway. They were all busy working on their final-year papers, and some had already graduated. Gamal's parents had also looked up his old senior high school and junior high school friends, anyone he was acquainted with. But no one knew anything.

Mr. and Mrs. Zul often visited Gamal's parents after that. So did the other members of the prayer group. They wanted to make sure that Gamal's parents were fine, that they were in good health and spirits. They all wanted to show that they cared, to strengthen Gamal's parents' heart with love.

Once in a while Mrs. Zul would come into Maryam's room, stroking her back and talking gently to her. She said Maryam should let Gamal go. She told her not to be sad or broken-hearted for too long, and not to be angry at God. This was just a test of faith, she said. Maryam's eyes would fill up with tears upon hearing that. But she would quickly wipe them away, turn away and hold back her sobs so that Mrs. Zul would not hear.

Over time, things slowly returned to normal. Gamal's parents had resumed their old routine. They worked every day and attended the recitals once a week. But they had become more protective of their two daughters, Gamal's younger sisters, placing more restrictions on them and limiting their freedom. They instated more rules, kept closer watch over them. Their failure to educate Gamal properly, they told others, would not be repeated with the other children. All the other families took

Gamal's case as a warning. They began fretting over their children more, using all means to keep an eye on them. They tried to involve them more in religious matters, There were more restrictions, more times when people simply said "No, don't do that" Everyone secretly prayed that Gamal would return and see the light. He had gone astray, testing his faith here and there, interacting with different people but one day he would realize that the truth lay here, in the hearts of his loved ones.

Maryam still missed Gamal but had begun to doubt her feelings. She did not know whether she should still keep feeling so strongly about him now that he had gone away. She did not know if her sense of missing him was real or just something that came over her in moments of loneliness. Did she have the right to keep nurturing feelings of love for him even after he had blatantly renounced his faith? There were no answers for the doubts that nagged Maryam, nor any way she could stop herself from missing Gamal. His specter haunted her. Her nights were filled with dreams about him, and her days with visions of him returning. In her prayers she besought his redemption. Maryam did not know how she could ever feel the same about any other man. She wanted to, but she could not.

Mr. and Mrs. Zul began introducing her to other young men, Ahmadi from out of town. Two of them even came over to the house to get acquainted with her. But Maryam didn't want to pretend. She told Mr. Zul that she was not interested in them. At the weekly prayer group meetings, people began trying to fix her up with a man like before, the same way they had done with her and Gamal. Even Gamal's parents gave their blessing. They said Maryam should open up her heart and find someone to replace Gamal. But it was as though Maryam had lost the key to her own heart. All she could do was lament and plead for someone to open it for her, because she had no more strength left to do it by herself. Maryam did not want to lie to anyone. She did not want to pretend that she was interested in others, when Gamal was still the one she longed for.

By early 1997, Maryam had managed to graduate from university. She had done all that was required of her, while continuing to nurse a deep sense of dejection. Gamal's shadow still hung over her. It remained even after she succeeded in getting a job at a big bank in Jakarta. It was only later, when Alam came along, that Maryam began experiencing once again the feelings that she had first had when getting to know Gamal. She found herself comparing the two of them. They looked alike, and they had similar characters and personalities. Even their names had the same ring: Gamal and Alam. Maryam fell in love. All she could think about was holding on tight this time and not letting go. She did not want to go through the soul-destroying desolation that she experienced after losing Gamal. With Alam, she wanted nothing more than to be with him forever.

Alam's arrival in her life came as a salvation from the loneliness that she felt in this city that was much bigger than Surabaya. She had no one in Jakarta. There were no Ahmadi families she knew, and no prayer group meetings. There were actually some Ahmadi families who were acquaintances of Mr. and Mrs. Zul. They had offered to take her in when she first arrived in Jakarta. But they lived far from Maryam's downtown office. They lived just beyond the city's western limits, in the suburb of Tangerang. There was a Betawi village there inhabited by a large number of Ahmadi families. It was called Kampung Gondrong. Maryam had been there once. She was welcomed with delight. They urged her to stop renting a room and to come and stay with them. Maryam declined, saying that it was too far to travel to her office. It was true. Just that one visit had been so tiring that Maryam was reluctant to go back. Besides, she had a tiring job working from morning until night five days a week, so her weekends were precious to her.

Away from fellow Ahmadi and steeped in loneliness, Maryam had no hesitation about Alam when he came along. She even forgot that she was an Ahmadi. Sometimes she felt that she was only an

Ahmadi when she was at one of the Ahmadi recitals. Beyond that, she was no different from anyone else.

Alam's arrival ushered in a sense of comfort and love, but also a fear of loss and a certainty that she would never get a chance like this again, which made Maryam determined to do everything she could for him. She did not care what her parents had said. She ignored their request that she bring him over. She did not want to answer the phone or reply to the long letters that her father and mother sent. Mr. and Mrs. Zul also sent letters, reminding Maryam not to get carried away by a love which was wrong for her. In soft and flowery words, they called on Maryam to leave Alam. The writing touched her. It saddened her to think of her family and all the other Ahmadis. But then she thought of Alam and she was determined she would stay with him. Besides, she thought, why make such a big deal about faith? Wouldn't it be best if she could just live happily with Alam while maintaining her ties to her family in Lombok and all the other Ahmadis?

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