

**Asma NADIA**

A short story

Emak<sup>1</sup> Longs to Take the Hajj

The sound of tires screeching.

People shrieked. All eyes were drawn to one spot. A body sprawled on the sidewalk, rigid with pain, one of his hands tried hard to stay clenched. A puddle of rainwater cushioning his head, slowly turned red as his hand finally fell to the ground.

The earth stopped breathing.

But it was only for a moment. Then the normal clamor of the street returned – people shouting, cars honking. It started to rain – the raindrops thudding on the roofs like the sound of soldiers marching.

The wind blew a discarded newspaper roll down the street.

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Zein recognized that familiar feeling. There was a yearning in Emak's eyes every year when the season for the hajj came around. From her window she studied the luxurious mansion directly in front of her little home The abode of Juragan Haji.

“Is he going again this year?” asked Zein.

Emak nodded without taking her eyes off from the multi-storied mansion surrounded by an iron fence two meters high.

“With his wife. His in-laws are going, too.”

Zein did not respond. This was not news because almost every year their neighbor went on hajj. Often alone, sometimes accompanied by his wife, occasionally Juragan Haji would take his children. Sometimes he would even went on umroh<sup>2</sup> trips. Neighbors would gossip and say he once took twenty-two of his relatives on an umroh trip with some famous celebrities.

“He never runs out of money, does he.” Emak murmured softly. Zein did not respond, though he certainly agreed. Seeing how easy it was for Juragan Haji to go on the hajj every year, it was difficult for Zein to believe all the stories he had heard about the hajj – how the cost of the trip had risen so much it was difficult for ordinary people to go nowadays, how hundreds of pilgrims had to cancel their trips because of quota problems or because of dishonest travel agents who cheated their customers. But their rich neighbor never seemed to be touched by those problems.

Zein watched his mother move slowly away from the window where she dreamt daily.

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If he had known about this earlier, maybe he would not have postponed going on hajj. Now everyone was talking about the super-luxurious hajj trips.

“All the pilgrims are picked up at the Jeddah airport in limousines. You won't be cut off from the rest of the world, either. The tents at Mina are like five star hotels. Computers and Internet, the best food and drink. There is fax and telephone service. A television monitors the pilgrims and

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<sup>1</sup> Emak = mother . Generally used by working class Indonesians.

<sup>2</sup> Umroh = a pilgrimage to the Kaaba, similar to hajj, but performed outside the hajj season.

displays a guide to the city and the pilgrimage.” Mitha, the new secretary who always wore a mini-skirt, was a fountain of information.

The businessman, now well into his 50s, smiled at her and said, “And the cost?”

“It varies. But for you, sir, I would recommend only the best. Around \$20,000.”

“No problem.”

*The election was only six months away. This was the time to let his voice be heard, to polish his image. Even better if his wife, a new convert to the faith, came with him.*

“For sure I’m going this year. Make the arrangement.”

Mitha nodded. The sensual aroma of her perfume wafted over him as she leaned her voluptuous body forward to hand him a form to complete.

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His life felt as if it was going nowhere.

The noon day sun was shining brightly like a flashlight. Soon all the customers at the semi-permanent street market where Zein had his stall would be done with their business. It had been five hours and yet no single customer. Despite his offer of discounts, even special service.

“Installments is ok, Ma’am. Just make the down payment and pay off the rest in six months.”

But the group of ladies in stylish sweat suits with wide hats covering half of their faces only glanced casually at the sets of calligraphy display on Zein's stall as they passed by.

Zein’s hopes were raised when a couple stopped by. But, after asking a whole series of questions and carefully writing down the prices of several calligraphy pieces, they left without buying anything.

Zein’s throat was dry and his stomach was empty. That was why his hands felt so weak as he was packing up his goods.

The image of Emak was in his mind. The one thing she had longed for most of all.

He was forty years old now. *When will I be able to realize Emak's dream of going on hajj?*

God knows he had never stopped trying. But the tutoring center he had run with a friend went bankrupt due to harsh competition.

The shoe shop he had opened at the market had never taken off, leaving him with loan payments every month. He was reduced to selling off his inventory to his neighbors at ridiculously low prices.

Opening up Internet cafe? Tempting but it took a lot of capital.

Instead of owning an Internet café, he once had been the night clerk for one. It was open 24 hours, but he had to quit because the long hours day and night caused his lung problems to act up again, and left him with a long sheet of doctor bill he could not afford.

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*Of all the bad luck!*

The good-looking woman took off her sunglasses. Her countenance was calm, despite the fact that a heavy turmoil just tore her apart.

In contrast, the middle aged man, her husband, sitting across from her seemed uneasy and awkward. Beads of cold sweat were resting on his forehead. Several time he cleared his throat.

“The hajj season is coming, dear wife.”

*Indeed, even as a mualaf she was aware of this.*

“Please help me,” he said.

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Yesterday his mother had asked him, “How long does it take on foot, Zein?”

*On foot from here to Mecca?*

Sri, Juragan Haji’s daughter, once talked about how the Afghan and Pakistani hajj pilgrims did not stay in hotels but would bed down around washrooms in mosques or anywhere else they could find. Well, after all, even the Prophet did not stay at five star hotels. If a place to stay were not such a problem he would gladly carry his mother on his back to Mecca. But from Indonesia...

“Nowadays it’s impossible, Mak.”

His mother nodded, her eyes lingered over the faded batik house dress that she wore. But soon her face brightened again.

“The mosque there must be beautiful, right Son? Lots of lights.” She chuckled. “So how much does it cost now?”

“Regular or first class?”

His mother laughed. The gaps in her mouth from her missing teeth were clearly visible. “Nothing fancy. I don’t get this first class and stuff.”

“If I am not mistaken, the regular trip would be thirty-five hundred.”

“That is cheap!”

This time it was Zein who chuckled. “That’s in dollars, Mak. In Rupiah it’s 35 million.”

His mother’s cheerful voice became subdued. “We used to own a piece of land. But we sold it when Bapak<sup>3</sup> fell very ill.”

For a few moments Emak just sighed deeply. Her voice then sounded like a whisper, “I want to take the hajj, Zein. I really want to.”

There. It was out.

His heart was cut deep. His mother had never asked him for anything – not a radio or a TV, not a thicker mattress to replace the old thin one she slept on, not even a stitch of new clothing.

He had failed, he said to himself in remorse. *I’m her only son and I can’t make her happy.*

His dejected reverie was broken by a greeting from the front door. Sri, Juragan Haji’s second daughter walked in. “Can you help me tomorrow?”

Zein nodded without speaking. Sri was preparing for Ratiban, just as she always did at the commencement of the hajj season. Almost every year at this time he would help that sweet, dark skinned woman go shopping. Following the event, Juragan Haji would usually give all the guests gift baskets – a bottle of syrup, cookies, vegetable oil, a bag of sugar. And as he passed on the gift baskets he would whisper to each of them, “Pray for me so I can take the hajj again next year, please.”

And every time Emak entered the door of Juragan Haji’s house her eyes would be fixed on a huge painting of the most holy site in Islam - the Kaaba hung in the living room. And each time Zein could see tears swelled in the eyes of the old woman.

His mother had been waiting too long. Zein knew he did not have much time left. But what else was there to do to earn money?

*Perhaps only by robbing and killing.*

Zein was nervous. But the thoughts he was having woke him up earlier than usual the next morning. When he got up, he went over to the window and stood next to his mother, who was already watching Juragan Haji’s house.

“What does the Zam-zam holy water from Mecca taste like, Zein?”

Zein shrugged. His eyes were red from not sleeping the whole night, passionately scaling every inch of the mansion.

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<sup>3</sup> Bapak = father

“Sometimes I want to ask Juragan Haji to give me some of the holy water, but it’s too embarrassing. Besides, he has a big family that need that, too.”

Zein was silent. But his heart ached.

*The fence was high, alright. Not that it couldn’t be climbed.*

“When... oh when, Zein?” his mother whispered.

*Allah, please show me the way,* he whispered, his hands covering his face. When at last he lowered his hands and raised his head, the first thing he saw was that luxurious house.

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2:00 a.m.

A sickle and a machete. A length of rope. A few plastic bags. And finally, a handkerchief folded into a triangle to conceal his face.

*If I can do anything to make Emak closer to Allah, even if it means going to jail, I will gladly do it.*

That afternoon when Zein was delivering the supplies that Sri had bought for the ceremony, he took the opportunity to examine the house of Juragan Haji more closely. Despite its extravagance, it had never once been broken into.

His resolve was strong. He was ready.

Zein checked his things one last time before putting them, one by one, into a faded duffle bag.

*Hm. Perhaps he should leave a note for Emak, incase.*

Just as he reached into his pocket to look for a piece of paper to write on, his fingers touched something. Small pieces of paper Sri had given him before he left the supermarket. Startled, Zein froze for a moment.

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“Damn it,” she said.

The gorgeous woman pushed her sunglasses up to her head. An hour after leaving the café she was still furious.

*“I made mistakes...” he had said.*

Most likely the same mistakes that her husband had made with other girls at work. With them it was easy to make amends. But Mitha, The Secretary, was different. From the very beginning the wife had sensed something different about that slender young woman. A little too polished, a little too savvy for a simple young secretary who claimed to have no experience. Now she had to come up with a proposition interesting enough to dissuade Mitha from spilling everything to the media.

Her head was pounding. Then tear drops began to fall from her eyes like the drizzle outside. She could not see clearly. Several times she wiped the windshield which was now fogging up.

A figure moved across the street.

*God, she did not see the red light!*

She slammed on the brakes with all her strength, the car screeching before it hit something hard. People on the street were shouting and screaming. The sunglasses flew off her head. In a panic she backed her Porsche up and sped away as fast as she could.

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He had never before allowed his fate to depend on pieces of paper.

The man could still feel raindrops splashed against his face as flashes of memory filled his head like sparks of firecrackers in the dark. Lottery coupons from the big supermarket, which Sri gave after they shopped. Pieces of small papers he had almost forgotten. The figure of his mother staring for hours on end with eyes glued to Juragan Haji's house, kept niggling at him. Giving him extra energy filling in the columns in lottery paper at that midnight: name address, ID number... all the while praying ceaselessly.

A blotch of hope that suddenly wiped away his intention to break into the abode of Juragan Haji.

These flashes of memory followed him day after day right until the day the name of the lottery winner was to be announced. They had said the names of the winners would be printed in the paper that very morning. How Zein felt his heart burst open when he saw his name on page eight. A joy that made him jump and dance along the street.

His whole life, he had never cried. He did not even cry when his father died – but a few moments ago Zein really cried. As if of disbelief. Emak and he were one of five grand prize winners of an all-inclusive hajj travel package, for two.

*At last I can take Emak to Mecca. Pray before the Kaaba. Chant at the Prophet's grave in Raudhah.*

Amid the hysterical screams and clamor, the man sprawled on the street tried to move his hand, now stiff and unresponsive, trying to find the newspaper he had in his hand moments before. He just had to show it to Emak.

But the wind had picked up the newspaper and blown it away in an instant after the black Porsche had struck him.

In the sky, in the vision that had begun to fade, Zein could see Emak in her full *ihram*<sup>4</sup>, circling the holy Kaaba. Her face was radiant with smile as she turned her gaze upon him.

*Translated from the Indonesian by Mark Peach and Ari Peach.*

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<sup>4</sup> Ihram is the state of sacred purity the Muslim faithful must enter before conducting the hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca. Men symbolize their state of Ihram by wearing a white, two-piece, seamless garment--sheets or towels--that covers the upper and lower part of the body. Women's clothing doesn't have to follow a particular form as long as it is modest, covers the hair and the whole body. Usually in white as well.