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LOVE, LIES AND

Indomee

**NURIL
BASRI**

Author of *Not a Virgin*

A NOVEL



LOVE, LIES AND INDOMEE

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LOVE, LIES AND *Indomee*

A NOVEL

NURIL BASRI

TRANSLATED BY ZEDECK SIEW



EPIGRAM
SINGAPORE · LONDON



one

HIS NAME IS Hans, a boy I got to know through Facebook. I am setting up a date with him while dealing with the case of a Korean man who had lost his passport in Bali when my boss, Mr Hong, suddenly appears at the door.

“Ms Ratu, update me on your case as soon as possible, please ya?”

“I’m monitoring news reports about crimes around Jakarta, sir. Looking out for Koreans involved in road accidents...” I stammer, scrambling to click my Facebook page shut.

Boss stares at me goggle-eyed. He knows I am lying. Boss is a Korean ex-police officer and working for him isn’t easy. Especially in my position.

I am a legal secretary at the embassy. Even though I am a secretary, they do not want me to look pretty. They want me to appear tough. So goodbye to showing up at work looking like a Pantene ad, with luscious locks and stylish high heels.

Boss is so demanding, unrelenting. Maybe because we handle serious legal and criminal issues relating to Korean citizens.

I exchange phone numbers with Hans. From his profile picture, he's pretty good-looking. Ah, he could be using the photo of some pop artist, for all I know. I use a Hello Kitty doll as my profile picture, so I seem like a cute—yet mysterious—girl. Here is the problem: if I use my real face, nobody would want to meet me. I swear! It's not that I make a habit of asking boys out—I'm not that cheap—but I need a boyfriend. Right now. And because work keeps me so busy, I only get to meet boys online.

Before my workday ends, I am already in the staff bathroom. It is cold in here. I stand in front of the mirror though I am not really looking at myself. I don't like looking in mirrors, because mirrors make me look fat. I am 166.5cm tall, so if I were 45kg, that would be ideal. The problem? I am not 45kg. I am 65kg. (And sometimes I am 70kg when I am stressed.) Ratu, "queen"; that's my name and my size, too.

I try to comb out and smoothen my shoulder-length hair as best I can. My hair is coarse, and it is always a struggle to keep it tidy. Then I wipe my face with a wet piece of toilet paper. There is nothing interesting about my face, except for my smile. I think I have a Julia Roberts smile.

Then, after a session of self-criticism in front of the mirror ("Why are you so fat? Why is your hair like shit?"), I hurry out of the bathroom. I will not be late for my date.

This evening, Hans and I are supposed to meet at the busy south entrance of Plaza Indonesia luxury mall. He's thirty minutes late. This makes me think all kinds of things about him. What if he's just a fantasy? Maybe he was using a fake profile picture and never meant to show up? He could be spying on me right now, laughing his ass off! What if he's some serial rapist, on the prowl for his next victim? After waiting and waiting, I see he finally shows up.

To be honest, I was hoping he'd turn out to be average-looking (ugly, even) like one of those ojek motorbike taxi drivers who loiter and wolf-whistle at girls.

No such luck. The boy who shows up is 100 per cent the boy in the profile picture on my phone. He is tall, slim; I spy a broad chest under his unbuttoned shirt. He has clear skin, well-groomed eyebrows and sparkling eyes. A very sharp nose. His hair is shiny, slightly wavy.

So now the question is: why would a boy this good-looking want to meet a girl like me?

"Been waiting long?" he asks, his voice husky.

"Ya...half an hour," I say, vexed. Uh, damn, he is really good-looking. And he smells nice.

"Ratu, yes?" he asks, smiling a little. I am transfixed by the neat white rows of his teeth.

I nod, shake his hand. I don't want to let go.

"Sorry ya, I was late. Had a lot of work," he says, still smiling.

Again I nod. What sort of work does he do? Office hours are over, and yet he looks and smells immaculate. When evening rolls around, people who have been working all day end up with oily faces. Could he be a model?

"It's okay, no problem," I say, awkwardly. Truth be told, I hate people being late. It's my boss, rubbing off on me. I only need to be a minute late to set Mr Hong off. "Babo! Babo!" he shouts, in Korean; I have no idea what it means.

But for Hans, I'd be willing to wait a week. I wouldn't even get angry.

"I'm hungry. Let's eat," he says, leading me into Plaza Indonesia. We walk side by side. This makes me really shy. I have never been out with a boy as good-looking as Hans. As we walk our hands brush now and again. My heart pounds like waves on Kuta beach. He is so collected, so cool, it's as if we have known each other forever, as if we always go out like this.

Oh God, help me, I really like him! I have never known a

boy like Hans. And he is really nice. All my hard work has paid off, this time. YESSS!!! I am finally getting my dream boyfriend!

We go down to the basement level. This entire floor smells of food. We head towards Red Pepper—it is actually a food court, similar to other food courts in any other shopping mall. The food tastes the same, but at four times the price.

I order mutton soup with rice. Hans orders grilled ribs with French fries, which looks delicious—and pricey. I keep sneaking glances at him, because my chest is still full of joy and awe.

As I pay for my food, Hans bends down and sweet-talks into my ear: “Hey, pay for me too? Can’t be bothered to get my wallet out.” Then he saunters past me, beyond the counter.

Immediately I realise the type of male species he is.

I buy him a bottled tea because I worry he might order fruit juice—that costs 30,000 rupiah here. No way am I treating this guy so lavishly.

We sit opposite each other. My adulation of his chiselled face and charming smile has evaporated. I no longer feel the need to be nice to him. All his great features, the ones I was admiring before? I look at them again and he looks like a chimpanzee.

I’m so annoyed!

“What do you do?” I ask, just to make small talk. We have been sitting silently since we began eating.

“Secret,” he replies, gnawing the meat on his plate.

Secret! Hah! Typical: refusing to answer, just so he can play at being mysterious. Later he will probably say he is a magazine model, or an actor in an as-yet-unreleased soap opera, or that he owns some trendy boutique—when, in fact, he might just be a bum.

“Isn’t your husband worried about what you’re up to?” he teases.

“What? Do I look like a lonely housewife looking for a

fling?” I hope he gets that I find him insulting.

Instead, he asks: “Where do you live?”

“I rent a place not far from here.”

He nods. “Sorry ya, I can’t drop you home. After this I’ve got a photography session to get to.”

I snort. Photography session? Puh-lease. Besides, who wants to be escorted home by some chimpanzee? Hello, if you were really a model, why would you need a girl to pay for your dinner?

He isn’t attracted to me. Now that, I understand. He doesn’t even look at me. If I were pretty, he would be treating me like an angel. Everybody treats pretty women like angels. My lot is the curse of average looks and above-average body fat: people treat me like I do not exist. Boys like Hans are attracted only to my ATM card.

When we finish eating, we part ways. “Thank you for buying dinner. If you want to hang out again, just text me. If I’m not busy, I’ll text back.” He gives me a low-lidded look and his widest, most winning smile—the kind of stuff he uses on girls like me all the time, probably. Does he think I’ll swoon? Does he think I’ll be so entranced by his good looks, I’d ignore the fact he is a disgusting parasite? You think wrong, Hans! I may not be pretty, but I am not stupid!

“Okay,” I say, vaguely.

He bends, turning a little, offering his cheek, as if for a kiss.

“Ewwwww!”

I push him away, hard. He stares at me, stupefied. Maybe he assumed I would not pass up an opportunity to kiss him (an opportunity so graciously offered). But there he is: rejected. He can make assumptions about other girls, but no no no, not about me.

As he leaves I hear him mutter: “Ah, fatso wants to show off, whatever.” What a fucking freeloader!

somebody with average looks this time. And vet their Facebook profiles more thoroughly. Phew.



The next morning I head straight to Boss' apartment. He'd asked me to stop by there, before going to the office. Secretaries like me tend to spend a lot of time running about, rather than sitting behind a desk. I represent my boss at a lot of meetings because he cannot speak Bahasa Indonesia. And I don't speak Korean. The only word I recognise is "jinjjaaroo!" although I'm not quite sure what it means. We communicate only in English.

On the way, I buy nasi uduk from a roadside stall. Between mouthfuls, I resolve to stop eating breakfast, starting tomorrow. I need a diet. This nasi uduk is just going to add to my body fat. Maybe I should toss it out the taxi window. Oh, but I shouldn't litter, should I? I'll throw it away when I arrive.

When the taxi stops in front of The Sultan Apartments in Semanggi, all the nasi uduk is inside me. Oh God, I need to diet. It feels like I have a python wrapped around my belly.

I've been to Boss' apartment several times. Sometimes I have to accompany his wife around, as she goes shopping and so on. She has only been in Indonesia for a few months. A lot of things are new to her. I'm not only my boss' work secretary; I'm a personal assistant to his family.

Madam Hong comes down to meet me. She is a fragile tower, ready to fall at the slightest touch.

"Hyun Ji," she says.

Hyun Ji is Boss' daughter. She is a second-year student in Upper Secondary.

"Is Hyun Ji okay?" I ask Madam Hong, in English. The last time I dealt with Hyun Ji, the girl had asked me to accompany her to watch a movie at Blitz Megaplex. This was a cover—she actually had a date with her boyfriend. I was just there as

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I'M NOT HOPING that some pretty boy will fall in love with me. If anybody like that showed any interest, there would be some kind of ulterior motive. They would want me to buy them things, or help them with work, or clean their houses for free. Maybe there are girls willing to do all that for a handsome face, but not me. I'm not that desperate. I am not going to buy love. But it does hurt, when it happens to me.

On my way home, I listen to "Parasit" by my favourite pop star Gita Gutawa and sway to the music—all the way to my rental place, behind the office.

Just forget Hans. Pretend I never met him. He is a disgusting parasite, undeserving of the least attention. I decide I will unfriend him and delete his number from my phone.

But I still need to please Mother, who can't wait to get a son-in-law. For her sake, and to keep up this great hunt for a sweetheart, I need a new date soon. It's important to get

insurance, like insect repellent.

“Hyun Ji, eye.” Madam Hong’s English is stumbling, difficult to understand. I wait and keep listening. “Eye, pain... Later, Ms Ratu, bring to doctor... Pick up, school... I cannot.”

Ya, of course she can’t. She can’t even handle getting credit top-ups for her phone. Taking her daughter to the doctor, having a medical conversation in English? That would be beyond her.

She is a lovely woman. She looks like the prima donna of some Korean drama. But she is a bit of a bimbo.

If Madam Hong is a Korean drama star, what does that make me? The poor-girl character in an Indonesian soap!

Madam Hong hands me 1,000,000 rupiah, in cash. She asks me to wait on the apartment steps. Her driver will drop me there, she says. Great, I won’t have to take another taxi. I know Boss’ family employs two chauffeurs, though I’ve only met one.

Shortly after, a Nissan MPV with ‘CD’ plates (special plates, belonging to diplomatic staff) appears. It pulls up in front of me. I wave goodbye to the beautiful Madam Hong, open the door and make myself comfortable inside.

“Pick up Hyun Ji from school first, ya, Uncle? I’m going to nap a little. Feeling sleepy,” I say. I rearrange the fluffy seat pillows. I don’t like to be too friendly or polite with people. One: the boss doesn’t like it; I need to be tough, he says. And, two: plain girls like me don’t get much out of acting all sweet. It’s nauseating. I myself hate to see plain girls go all cutesy, dreaming they are members of some girly girl group like Cherrybelle.

I know the drive to Hyun Ji’s school will take a while. She’s enrolled in an international school; the students there are all expat children. I’ve been there a number of times.

I snap awake the moment we stop at the school gate. A few minutes later, Hyun Ji emerges. She gets in immediately and

sits down beside me.

“What’s wrong with your eyes?” I ask.

“They hurt. Maybe my contact lenses have expired. My eyes are all blurry.”

Heh. Expired contact lenses? What a weird kid.

“We’ll go to Aini Hospital ya, Uncle?” I tell the driver. Aini Hospital is Jakarta’s largest eye hospital.

The driver says nothing. He keeps his eyes on the road. Doesn’t even turn around to acknowledge me. What a snob!

“You know? I picked my own driver. All the girls in school are crazy about him,” Hyun Ji says, lounging. She can tell me anything because we are quite close. She is a Korean schoolgirl, cute and pretty like that Suzy character in the Korean drama series *Dream High*.

“Him?” I say, pointing at the guy in the driver’s seat.

Hyun Ji nods and grins. I look at the driver again. He is giving the road his 110 per cent. He wears a beret and sunglasses. Oh, please. He looks like some sleazy masseur.

“Can’t see his face,” I say. (This whole time, everything I’ve been saying to my boss and his family has been in English. And that driver there doesn’t understand English, I think. He is just a driver, after all. Hyun Ji and I are free to gossip about him.)

“He doesn’t like people looking at him while he’s driving. Shy, maybe?” Hyun Ji whispers. “Sometimes I sit in front, next to him, and pretend we are a couple. But he is too old for me.” she giggles.

Often I look Hyun Ji up and down, up and down, and the same question keeps repeating in my head: What’s it like to look like an SNSD girl group idol? How does she deal with real life?

“Is he that handsome?” I ask her, trying to catch a clear glimpse of our driver’s face.

“Very handsome. Hang on, I’ll get him to take off his hat and glasses.”

“Nah, no need, leave it,” I say. Poor driver Uncle! What if he feels like we are making fun of him? I don’t want to become the fat girl who bullies her boss’ chauffeurs.

“Hans, take off your hat and glasses, please,” Hyun Ji says in her best schoolgirl voice.

The driver says nothing. He doesn’t understand English, maybe. Wait. Hans?

“Hans?” I ask Hyun Ji. That name. It can’t be.

“Yup, his name is Hans. Like a Dutch person, right?”

Quick as lightning I lean forward to look at him. For a long time I stare at his lips, his nose. “Hans?” I ask again.

OMG! It is really him!

I laugh out loud, and loudly. Haha! I laugh like an evil witch, like Mak Lampir played by Farida Pasha. I laugh and I hold my belly. Hans looks distressed. His hands twist on the steering wheel.

“You know him?” Hyun Ji asks.

“Hang on, let me double-check,” I say, mid-snigger. I pull out my phone. I forgot to erase his number last night—I dial that number now. A moment later I hear a phone ringing from inside the driver’s pants pocket. Bingo!

“Nah. I don’t know him. The Hans that I know is a nutcase,” I tell Hyun Ji, and I laugh some more.

As I help Hyun Ji explain her problem to the ophthalmologist, I am still smiling. I have to stop myself from bursting into laughter; I don’t want to be labelled insane. As for Hyun Ji’s eyes, the doctor says it is only some mild irritation. He prescribes her some really expensive eye drops—probably because she looks like a walking wallet.

From the hospital we head home. The whole journey back I talk to the girl. I ignore Hans completely. He fumes bitterly in the front seat.

We are greeted by Madam Hong. As Hyun Ji gets out of the car, Madam Hong ducks down and speaks to Hans: “Please

send Ms Ratu back to office.”

Hans only nods. I beam. I am so satisfied.

“Wait! I want to sit up front,” I say. I don’t wait for his response; I get into the front passenger seat. As soon as we pull away from the apartments, I break out laughing again.

“You told me you had a photography session?” I ask him, mockingly. I feel like poking his face and cackling. I was right—this handsome, vain boy is really just some cheap parasite. Oh my God, just yesterday he was giving me shit, like I was some fat spinster nobody wanted. And now? He’s driving me to the office. My chauffeur.

Hahahaha! Look who’s the loser here!

“What’s with those shades? Worried your fans will recognise you?” I ask him. He is red-faced.

“Okay, sorry,” he says quietly.

“Sorry? But why? Whatever did you do wrong?” I sneer.

He stammers a little. “Sorry...for yesterday,” he says, forcing the words out.

“Yesterday?” I reply, feigning forgetfulness. “Sorry ya, whenever I meet people who don’t matter, I erase them from my memory immediately. Especially the kind of person who thinks he matters, who pretends to be a model.” I pause for dramatic effect. “When, actually, he is just a driver!”

I know my words hurt, they are nasty. But what he did to me yesterday was nastier. He called me a fatso show-off who didn’t know when she was getting a good thing. Plus, he didn’t even see me as a human being. I was just a cash dispenser to him.

I don’t say anything else. I have got what I wanted. One—all. I put on my sunglasses and turn to look out the window. I ignore him all the way to the office. Goodbye, Hans. After this, we’re better pretending we never met. All this was just inconsequential kismet.



As soon as I arrive in the office, I give Boss the doctor's note about Hyun Ji's eyes. He reads it, nodding, and asks for the payment slip. Not even a "thank you".

"Translate the letters that just arrived, then get me today's paper, please?" he says. I nod and leave.

After I get him his newspaper, I sit at my desk. There is a pile of letters. They come from every corner of Indonesia. Most are from different police districts—they concern the status of Korean detainees in local detention centres. My job is to get these letters translated, then contact the stations, following up on the aforementioned detainees, checking on how those cases are going. Can't say I'm interested in all that, now. Let me check Facebook first.

Scrolling through my feed, my phone rings. It is Mother. Ah, great timing, she always knows when to call: it's when I am busy!

"Ratu, that man who came that day? He came again. Seems like he has important business with you," she says.

Apparently, in the last few months, some guy has been turning up in front of our house. Like he's looking for somebody. Mother thinks he is looking for me, because even though he sees that both Mother and Father are home, he never comes over to say hello.

"Why is he looking for me? I don't owe anybody anything, Ma."

Actually Mother's story is pretty suspicious. Ever since she caught the I-want-a-son-in-law bug, she keeps talking about this guy or that guy who's been asking about me. I think all these are just stories Mother is making up. She keeps talking about serendipitous romance. You know, a stranger sheltering with you under an awning, in the rain, and it turns out he's some rich bachelor, looking to start a family. Fairytales like that.

"Who knows? Might be an old friend of yours. Maybe your senior from school. Or your future husband?" See, I knew

she'd say something like that.

"Eh, maybe he's a terrorist, Ma, planning to plant a bomb right at our front gate," I say. "I don't have a single guy friend from school, much less a senior. Impossible!"

"You don't understand, this man is really handsome, he would really suit you. Impossible that such a handsome man is a terrorist," Mother replies.

"Maaa, please. I've got a lot of work. Call you back later, okay?"

"Work work work. That's all you know to do. When will you ever meet the man for you, if all you chase is money?"

"Mama, you don't need to worry about me, okay? I'll find a man on my own."

"Where?"

"Facebook. Okay, Ma. Call you back later, bye!" I put my phone down, resume scrolling through Facebook.

Eventually I get sick of reading my friends' status updates. Everybody's lives seem full of smiles and happiness. Ah, forget it. I'll look for a man later. Time to get to work. I'm just twenty-seven. I have loads of time.



There is an important letter for the boss this week from the district headquarters of Serang Banten police. They have just arrested a Korean national. Boss gets me to arrange a meeting with the Serang Banten police chief. We will be travelling there to check on the detainee's condition and the details of his case. Does he have any allergies? Is he being treated humanely? Things like that.

We start our trip two days later. As usual, I tag along as an interpreter. Sometimes (actually, most of the time), the police officers we meet don't speak any English. The funny thing: when I get into the boss' car, it isn't his usual driver. It is Hans.

I give him a casual glance as I get into the front passenger's

seat, next to him. Boss settles in, behind us.

“Where is the usual driver, Uncle?” I ask him, calling him by that polite honorific on purpose. I pretend Hans and I are strangers.

“He’s sick, miss,” he says, quietly.

I nod and put on my seatbelt. Ah, this will be a long ride, Jakarta to Serang Banten. I will torture him all the way. Just need to wait until the boss falls asleep.

Taking my most formal tone, I ask him: “Have you been a driver long, Uncle?”

“Just started.”

“Oh really? Since when?” I say, feigning curiosity.

“Three months,” he answers, every word an effort. He’s probably swearing at me inside.

“Ooh,” I say, nodding. “Why become a driver? It doesn’t seem to suit you. You look like a model.”

Hans is dead silent. He doesn’t dare say anything, except for a low grunt.

“You are supporting your wife and children?” I ask. Didn’t he tease me once, about being a housewife?

“I’m not married, miss,” he says, formally.

I grin, sly. I pat him on the thigh, like a woman flirting, looking to seduce. “I’m single, too. If there’s time we should go out together, no? Don’t worry, everything will be on me. You like that, don’t you?”

Hahahaha! That has got to touch a nerve!

“Sure,” he says, playing along. “If you need my number, miss...”

I cut him off: “Thanks but no thanks. I was just joking. You’d be too ashamed to be seen out with me. I’m a fatso, after all.”

There! Let him have it! Cook his heart in boiling water!

I stop taunting him. Hurting people for extended periods gets boring. I may be plain, but I’m not evil. I stuff my ears with earphones and listen to music on my phone. I pretend to

fall asleep. Hans says nothing. He keeps his eyes on the road, all the way to our destination.

It takes a few hours. I act mostly as an intermediary, explaining the situation to both sides. Then I leave the boss to talk to his fellow countryman, while I sit and chat with the investigating officer.

It seems this Korean guy was arrested while on drugs. Nothing the embassy can do to help. Serves him right. Go to somebody else’s country, just to cause trouble? Shameful.

On the way home, Hans doesn’t talk, or even look at me. His face is frozen, sour. He keeps speeding—the boss has to shout at him.



The next day, I finally get in touch with the investigating officer handling that missing-passport case in Bali. Just as I am about to grumble about how tardy the police have been in giving us information, the officers tell me that they’ve caught the thief though the passport itself is still missing. Wah, not bad, Indonesian police! I thought they were only good for issuing speeding tickets.

I tell the boss this piece of good news. He receives it indifferently. He doesn’t seem to be happy with my work at all. He orders me to finish up here then go get Hyun Ji from school. His daughter’s eyes are hurting again, it seems.

I grin to myself. More opportunity to emotionally abuse Hans! This time, I plan to give him a cash tip—to buy cigarettes, or lunch. He will be so insulted. These pretty boys have such massive egos. I try to visualise his reaction when I wave a wad of cash in his face: “Here, 10,000. Go treat yourself to some nasi padang after this, ya?”

I take a taxi to Hyun Ji’s school. She is already waiting for me at the guardhouse. So we wait for her family driver to

arrive, and we talk.

“Your eyes are hurting again? Have you been using the eye drops?”

“I have,” she answers.

The Nissan MPV appears. My chest leaps in anticipation. But as it pulls up, I see that it isn't Hans in the driver's seat.

“Where's the other driver?” I ask Hyun Ji, as we clamber in.

“He quit,” she says, rubbing her eyes.

“Quit?”

“Ya. Last night. Said that there was some psycho girl bothering him. Maybe she's obsessed. Damn stalker bitch.”

I freeze. “You're kidding, right?”

“No, I'm sure it's one of my friends. They are all crazy. Ah, forget it. I'll find another one, a more handsome one. This one's just a temp.”

Ah, that psycho bitch must be me. Oh God, what have I done?

three

HYUN JI NEEDS TO throw away her old contact lenses. This girl! She is still using them even though the ophthalmologist told her not to. Maybe she thought he was just joking. I scare her a little—I tell her that her corneas will get scratched and she'll miss the upcoming Big Bang concert in Indonesia.

All the way, she whines and wriggles and pulls at my arm. But I'm elsewhere, thinking about Hans. He quit his job because of me. Did I go too far? I feel like an ugly witch who has just sucked blood from a cute little fawn. Earlier, I was so excited at the thought of getting my revenge. Now I feel terrible. I was only joking. Why did he have to take it so personally?

“It's true. That's what the doctor just said. You need to start wearing glasses,” I tell Hyun Ji.

“No way! I don't want to look nerdy!”

“Glasses won't make you look nerdy. You'll look better, like a Power Ranger.” I poke her.

“Oh my God. I should just wear a helmet,” she says, mortified, covering her face with a pillow.



I cannot stop thinking about Hans, even though I have a ton of work this afternoon. There are letters to get done, faxes to send and so on. Performing these tasks, I war with my feelings. Should I call him, and apologise? Or simply ask: “Hey, I heard you quit?” I still have his phone number.

I hate this feeling of guilt. Weighing it in my head, I finally decide to apologise. That will be the end of it.

As soon as I clock out, I work up the nerve to send Hans a text. If he replies, I will say that I’m sorry. If he doesn’t? That means he’s too angry with me. I will still say sorry. This matter has to be dealt with immediately. I may be a fatso, but I am a good person.

Dinner? On me.

That’s what I text him. Playing it cool.

A moment later, my phone chimes. Yes, he’s replied!

Hahaha! Funny.

I’m serious. Whatever you want, wherever you want.
Interested?

That goes unanswered for a while. I think he is done with me. But after a couple of minutes my phone chimes again.

What time?

Now.

Okay. Meet at Sushi Tei in ten minutes.

Damn! Sushi Tei? That’s an expensive place. Wah, this guy really knows how to leech off people. But, in the spirit of reconciliation, I have to go along with it.

I wait for him at Sushi Tei for about ten minutes. It’s in Plaza Indonesia, too. When Hans appears his expression is soft; no sign of the anger I saw yesterday. He sits facing me without so much as a hello and immediately starts ordering. I can’t bring myself to stop him. I just watch.

“How come you asked me out?” he snaps. “Not ashamed to be seen having dinner with a lowly driver?”

“You’re not a driver anymore, are you?”

He doesn’t answer, but starts flipping through the menu again.

“You quit because of me?” I ask, all seriousness.

“As if. Who do you think you are?”

Ah, damn this boy. Here I am, extending the olive branch. But he’s still looking to get back at me. We sit in silence. I stare at my menu. He looks at the people passing by, outside.

The food comes soon after. We eat without talking. I expected him to be angry—but not like this.

“Hurry up, I want to go home,” I say, mid-chew.

“Me too. Got lots of dates with girls who are actually pretty,” he says, scowling. “I’m pretty handsome, after all.”

“Cih!” I spit. I stuff a piece of salmon sushi into my mouth. Asking this boy out was a huge mistake.

Finished, we cannot wait to leave the restaurant. But Hans does not leave. He follows me.

“I’ll forgive you,” he says, serious now. “On one condition.”

“What condition?”

“Buy me some clothes.”

“What?” I shout. Passers-by jump and slide away from us. I ignore them. “Buy them yourself! Are you broke?”

Hans pouts. “Ya, I’m broke. I’m jobless now, remember?”

“Who asked you to quit your job?” I say. “Call yourself a man, but thin-skinned like some girl! A little teasing and you run off sulking!”

“Ah, whatever. That is my condition. Otherwise I won’t forgive you, you horrible woman. Hope you regret this for the rest of your life!”

I stop. This damn parasite! What I really want to do is give him a slap, then leave. Screw feeling guilty. But three steps away from him and I hesitate. Damn it. This thing needs some sort of closure. Fine! He wants some clothes? I’ll get him clothes. Think of this as alms for the poor.

“Okay,” I say, annoyed. “A shirt.” Hans smiles wide.

He leads me to Zara. Damn, damn, damn, triple damn! I myself have never bought anything from Zara. He strides straight in among the displays—I am left hanging by the entrance. Afterwards he walks over to the counter with a shirt. It costs nearly 300,000 rupiah. Reluctantly, I pay up.

We leave. Hans has a grin and a Zara paper bag. I contemplate my poor purse, purged of its contents.

“Thanks,” he says, teeth showing. “If you need anything next time, give me a ring, okay?”

“Enough! Enough of this. I owe you nothing after this,” I say, roughly. I have been scrounged off twice by this boy. Even once is one time too many. But I was forced to, for the sake of an apology, and to assuage my guilt.

Back at my place, I raid my cupboard for a packet of biscuits. Okay, I just had sushi, but now I feel like junk food. I sit on the sofa by the balcony and stare into the night air. My rental room is on the second floor.

It is a big, two-storey lodging house, with several rooms. Many of the rooms are empty. Before I moved in I heard stories about this house being haunted. When I actually started living here, I found out that the haunted house rumour mainly stems from the fact that one of the rooms is a storeroom: piles of

clothes; old mattresses; one or two bolsters that, at a glance, look like corpses wrapped in funeral shroud.

That rumour, plus the fussy landlord, is why not many people want to live here. My landlord lives on the ground floor. He forbids us from bringing guests to the house. We ignore him. We pay the rent, don’t we?

I turn and catch a boy slipping out of Lala’s room. Lala rents the room opposite mine. She’s not super good-looking—she looks like Christine Hakim, minus a shower and make-up— but a lot of men go for her, oddly enough.

“Bye!” Lala says, hanging from her door. She watches him walk away for a while then joins me on the sofa. She pulls out a cigarette from the packet she has with her and lights up.

“You keep changing boyfriends. Is that healthy?” I say. I crunch on another biscuit.

“Better than staying single until I die. I’m not going to be a spinster, like you,” she replies, puffing smoke rings into space. Ugh, cheap slut!

At least I have dignity. “I’m looking for a proper fiancé. Just you wait, I’ll bring him around one day,” I say.

“Oh, really? Good luck,” she says, sarcastically.

Lala likes to think herself a free spirit. Very aggravating, impossible to take seriously. I hope she dies asphyxiated by her own smoke someday.

Thing is, I was hoping one day she’d say to me: “Hey, I know this guy who’s handsome, rich and single. I’ll introduce you to him?” But Lala is a miser. Of the many boys she’s had over, she has never introduced a single one. She hoards them all for herself. Stingy shrew.

My phone rings. Ah, my dear mother.

“Yes, Ma.”

Instead of saying hello, Mother gets right into it: “Found your true love on Facebook?”

“No, Ma.” Does she think finding a boyfriend is like picking

a shell on a beach? Ugh!

“I told you, over and over...” Oh Em Gee, she’s doing it again! She’s going to launch into a lecture: the importance of dieting, of caring for one’s skin, of watching manners so I don’t come off too rough and masculine.

Quickly, just to stop her, I say: “Mama, I’ve found him. I’ve got a boyfriend now.”

“La? Didn’t you just say you hadn’t found one yet?”

“Umm, I’m just not sure whether I want to introduce him to you yet.”

“Why not? This weekend, bring him over to the house. I’ll be waiting.” I can practically hear the joy in her voice.

“But we’re not ready, Mama...”

“Or do you want us to go visit you at your place?”

“No! No need! Okay I’ll come home!” Why is Mother so mental? “I’ll call you later, okay? Boyfriend is calling me. Bye!” I end the call in a hurry. Damn it! What the hell did I just do?

Lala snickers at me.

“What do I do?” I ask myself, aloud.

Lala hears this. “Next time, when you lie, say something more convincing,” she sniggers. Coming from her, I expected no less. She’s a consummate liar. Me? Straight as a ruler.

“Can I borrow one of your boyfriends?” I blurt.

“What? No way!”

“But you have so many!” I say, pleading.

“Sorry, my boys are not boyfriends-for-hire, okay? Go look for somebody you can buy.” She gets up and leaves me there alone. I mutter at her back and curse her in my heart. Hope she dies, choking on her cigarettes.

It isn’t long before somebody’s face pops into my head. What would you do, in my situation? You’d go ask a close friend, somebody you can trust, wouldn’t you? Or one of your gay friends, the one who helps pick out your outfits and make-up—you’d get him to act macho in front of your parents.

Maybe you’ll get an old classmate, one who used to have a crush on you in school, unrequitedly. Those are the kinds of guys you’d get, in films or novels.

I don’t have friends like that. I don’t have anybody I can turn to. No options, except the one that involves a cash transaction. My only solution is to pay somebody to pretend to be my boyfriend.

And the best candidate for this is... I am sure you can guess.

Hey, I have a business proposal for you. Interested?

It doesn’t take long for the screen to flash.

Want me to be your personal driver?

I smile. He replied. A good sign.

Something like that. One day only.

How much?

500,000. But you need to act like you are my boyfriend.

That goes unanswered for so long I nearly call him to tell him I’m just joking. But before I can dial his number, I get an answer.

Deal.

Okay. Will get in touch later.

I smile and stare at the road past our veranda. Lala, out of her room again with a mug of steaming coffee, sees me smiling. “Suddenly smiling to yourself, that’s a sign of insanity, you

know,” she says, in that irritating voice of hers.

Eh, what’s wrong with this woman? What’s so crazy? I’m just taking advantage of the options I have. I mean, Hans is out of a job, isn’t he? He needs money. I need him. What’s wrong with that? I blink. Shit! What have I done? I hate that boy, damn parasite! Why did I even think of him just now? How can I ever make nice with him, pretend we are lovers? I can’t even bear the thought of touching him.

four

THE WEEKEND ARRIVES and I cannot stop it. Boss asks me to look into rabid dogs in Bali. He thinks Koreans visiting the island should be warned about them. I think this is idiotic. Come on, who wants to be told that their holiday destination is full of dogs with a deadly disease?

He asks me to check with the Balinese health department for official numbers. But, what’s the internet for? So I Google it, and find info on the Balinese health department’s official website.

I don’t gossip with the other staffers too much. My desk is separated from them. I have my own room. There are other secretaries working here at the embassy. We are all Indonesian, us secretaries. Our work is all quite similar: we are translators, intermediaries between Indonesian and Korean officials. But the rest are all prettier, their bosses don’t shout at them and in their jobs, they don’t come into contact with criminal elements. They only deal with trivial matters, like “culture” and “the economy”.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nuril Basri was born in a small village in Tangerang, Indonesia. He writes tragicomedies and bildungsromans with themes of loneliness, insecurity, friendship, dysfunctional families and the minorities. For Nuril, writing is a means to escape and relate at the same time. He was a grantee of the Indonesian National Book Committee's writing residency in the UK in 2017. He was also a 2018 grantee of the Crossing Borders programme jointly run by the Robert Bosch Foundation and the Literarisches Colloquium Berlin.

While writing, Nuril has worked as a salesman, internet café operator, waiter and cashier. His published works include *Halo, Aku Dalam Novel* (2009); *My Favorite Goodbye* (2015); *Enak* (2016); *Sunyi* (2017) and *Not a Virgin* (2017). His novels have been translated into English and Malay. *Love, Lies and Indomee* is his second novel to be translated and published in English.

More information can be found at www.nurilbasri.com.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

The most interesting challenge in translating *Love, Lies and Indomee* involved pronouns:

In Bahasa Indonesia, the distance between Ratu and Inu is reflected verbally; talking to each other, they use the first-person pronoun “saya” and second-person pronoun “anda”—polite language, the kind that airport announcers might use.

It is a sign of growing intimacy when they begin using “aku” and “kamu”, instead—casual forms, used between friends. Both characters remark on this shift. At various points in the story, they switch between the two sets of pronouns, as conflict ebbs and flows between them.

Such interplay was impossible to directly render in modern English, which only has the first-person “I” / “me” and second-person “you”. My solution involved having the characters call each other “Mr Inu” and “Ms Ratu”, which implies a kind of deliberate petulance—“*Mr Inu*”, “*Ms Ratu*”—not quite present in the original.

Prior to this, I’d never translated a Bahasa Indonesia text. I read the language okay, but speak it like a tourist. I have never been to Jakarta. I was intimidated.

Nuril was present throughout—clarifying my lack of context, correcting my mistakes. I am thankful for his patience. I am glad to have got to know him, his work.

To quote poet and translator Goh Thean Chye: “It is surely true that translation is an artful bridge connecting two banks, the palates of two tongues, an open way through which two different hearts may meet.”

ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR

Zedeck Siew is a writer based in Port Dickson, Malaysia. He has been a journalist, essayist, editor and game designer. He writes short fiction in English, and translates from Bahasa Melayu and Bahasa Indonesia.

More information can be found at www.zedecksiew.tumblr.com.

Determined Jakarta girl Ratu needs a boyfriend—now.

She can't stand her mother's nagging, and she'd rather die than be forced into an arranged marriage. When she meets a stranger online, Ratu thinks she's found Mr Right...until she finds out he's a freeloading bum. Desperate to get her parents off her back, Ratu hires the handsome Hans as a fake boyfriend. But falling in love wasn't part of the plan.

Love, Lies and Indomee is a sharp and witty novel about the struggles of finding love in 21st-century Jakarta.



Nuril Basri was born in a small village in Tangerang, Indonesia. He was a grantee of the Indonesian National Book Committee's writing residency in the UK in 2017. His novels have been translated into English and Malay. *Love, Lies and Indomee* was first published as *Enak* in Malaysia, and is his second novel to be translated and published in English.

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