



ONCE WE
WERE THERE

A NOVEL

BERNICE CHAULY

For mature readers only

“An exhilarating fiction with a breathless, breakneck pace, like the new Malaysia it lovingly and bitingly tells on, with corrupt, idealistic, greedy, confused, identifiably Malaysian ordinary-native-citizens-politicians-power-monger-dispossessed-resistant characters to usher in a generational shift in sensibility. A must-read for all who track Malaysian literature into the 21st century.”

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“A love song to thwarted motherhood and the blunted dreams of the Reformasi movement, *Once We Were There* is as Malaysian as *teh tarik*—sweet, dark and a jolt to the senses.”

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“*Once We Were There* is an exhilarating novel, capturing a Malaysia rarely seen in literature, of late 90s political activism and of KL's kaleidoscopic counter-cultures. Chauly also writes so wisely about love, injustice and profound loss, and how the human spirit endures and finds the strength to go on.”

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“*Once We Were There* is a timely and important novel. First it plunges the reader into the social, cultural and sexual environment of KL at the turn of the millennium. Then it tells a story which is both heartbreaking and gripping, and deftly illustrates the inextricability of the personal and the political.”

—James Scudamore, Somerset Maugham Award-winning author of *The Amnesia Clinic*

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Once We Were There

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BERNICE CHAULY



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For Tasnem and Leia

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PROLOGUE

MY NAME IS Delonix Regia. I am named after the most flamboyant of all tropical trees, the flame of the forest. My father, a well-known lawyer and an avid naturalist, had a particular passion for tropical flora and their Latin names.

On the day I was born, he planted a seedling in our garden. Today, it stands taller than our house, where the end of the garden meets Gasing Hill, and where the red flowers fall onto the grass like a magical cloak. As a child, I once saw a black cobra weave in and out of the flowers, this glittery black slash easing the crimson cover left and right. I was struck with fright and watched it slither into the leafy green undergrowth and disappear into the jungle.

I have long memories of rain. Soft tropical showers, majestic, thunderous storms, and itinerant drizzles, which would come and go for hours, days. The Malaysian monsoon is a vehement creature, powerful and glorious, yet tender enough to soothe one into the most delicious of sleeps. This is how I remember the rains. My childhood came with the rains.

And this, my father's garden.

ONE

STANDING IN THE EYES OF THE WORLD

KUALA LUMPUR. KL. *Kala Lumpa* or *Kala Lampur* to the white man, the Mat Sallehs. City of sinners and sex. Sodom and Gomorrah. It was 1998, and the city was the “party central” of Asia. Of the world. Drugs had opened up the minds of this one-time placid society and bayed in a new revolution, in a time when people hungered for freedom from authoritarian politicians, from the police, from their mindless jobs, from themselves.

Ecstasy had hit the town, in a way that could only be described as monumental. There were feng tau clubs in Bukit Bintang, Cheras, and Jinjang that catered to the Chinese riffraff, the ah bengs and ah lians who felt ill at ease in the posh, uppity bars like Museum and the Backroom Club.

There were clubs for Indian gangsters in Sentul and Selayang; there were dodgy dangdut clubs on Jalan Ipoh and Brickfields, where the girls would dance with you, get high with you, and then go down on you; there were underground clubs that opened up after the other ones closed, then stayed open till people had come down from their highs.

Dealers were raking it in. MDMA was on everyone’s lips and tongues. There was pussy and dick everywhere. Pink. Brown. Yellow. Black.

Everybody was high.

DJs flew in from all over the world to play to hundreds—no, thousands of people who swallowed pink, blue, white pills. Everybody wanted E. Nobody drank alcohol, water was the salve for the days and nights on sweaty dance floors.

Ecstasy was prayer. Ecstasy was the new god.

The great Asian financial crisis was crawling out. Billions were lost, millions gained. The ringgit had been pegged at RM3.80 against the US dollar. It saved us. Our ASEAN neighbours didn't fare so well.

The Petronas Twin Towers were finally complete. The towering phallic monstrosities had transformed the city. And there were stories that bled upon storeys for fodder. It was the topic of conversation at every dinner table, every mamak stall, every kopitiam between Bangsar and Cheras, how ugly it looked. How sterile, how un-KL, how Western.

Aiyoh, so sci-fi.

Like Gotham City.

So ugly lah.

Celaka betul.

Celaka. Cursed.

Cursed to never be built.

Before the Towers, the site was the Turf Club. Built by the British because they knew the land was unsafe for any structure taller than a coconut tree. Underneath the turf was a network of limestone caves. To build the world's tallest twin structures above hollow caves was an act of folly, of utter stupidity. It was a disaster in the making. Mahathir's "twin pricks", that's what they were. A sign that Malaysia had come into its own. That "we" had arrived. That our quest to have the world's tallest flagpole, its longest beef murtabak, and the biggest mall in Asia had succeeded—and that Malaysians had something, finally, something, to be proud of.

These towers, designed by a New Yorker of Argentinean descent and built by rival Japanese and Korean engineering companies who had to pump millions upon millions of tonnes of concrete into miles of limestone caves, had validated our feeling that Malaysia had arrived. Never mind that it was built by thousands of Bangladeshi and Indonesian workers slaving away on meagre wages, some of whom had been crushed to death in hushed-up accidents. That they'd died senselessly like frogs, *mati-katak*, for another notch in our country's race to become a First-World nation by *looking* like a First-World nation.

The towers loomed over KL, a new symbol for the city, like the Sears Tower, like the Empire State Building. We had come to be defined by two eighty-eight-storey shards of concrete, aluminium, glass, and steel. Two towering octagons inspired by sacred Islamic geometry. From distant suburbs to the Golden Triangle, the Twin Towers rose above everything else, flanked by the KL Tower, now dwarfed and comical with its pink shaft. This was engineering at its best, this was the strongest steel in the world, capable of withstanding tremors, because its steel beams could bend under pressure.

It was haunted, like every other building in KL. Yet the ghosts of the fallen would never be venerated here. Instead, people would flock to Gucci, Bally, Prada, British India, Chanel, Dior and Aseana to proselytise the gods of haute couture.

The newly built Bukit Jalil Sports Complex was sprawled out and ready for the Commonwealth Games. Malaysians were gearing up for the world stage, our time had come to show the world that we were capable, that Malaysia Boleh! *Yes, we can!* That we had arrived.

In September, everything changed.

On 2 September, Malaysia's Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim was sacked by Mahathir Mohamad, the dictatorial,

authoritarian Prime Minister who had ruled for 17 years.

On 11 September, the Commonwealth Games opened with no-expense-spared fireworks, pomp, and circumstance. Ella, the pint-sized Malaysian songstress, performed the theme song of the games, “Standing in the Eyes of the World”, with smouldering black eyeliner and poor diction.

I hope you enjoys!—to screaming multitudes.

On 20 September, Anwar Ibrahim was arrested.

On 29 September, he appeared in court with a black eye.

Malaysia, the beloved country of my birth, would never be the same again.

Run!

The gas is coming again!

The mosque!

Get into the mosque!

We ran, like thousands of crazed rats. Our clothes were drenched and I realised immediately that it was impossible to run with soggy shoes. My hand instinctively covered my camera lens. *A wet lens is a dead lens.* My feet slipped and slid inside my drenched sneakers. I did not need or want a sprain or a broken limb. Sumi grabbed my hand, her eyes wild.

Are you okay?

I nodded. Our slippery hands held fast. I heard screams as some tried to rub the tear gas from their eyes, giving in to instinct. There is nothing like tear gas to make you angry. Politicise you. Our politicians had no idea what they were doing. Revolutionaries were created on the street, that very day.

The protest took place a few hours before Anwar’s arrest that

night. We had gathered outside the National Mosque, getting handphone messages that he was going to be there. I picked Sumi up from her apartment in Sri Petaling and we drove into the city. The traffic jam was bumper to bumper all the way from Jalan Parlimen, cars inching up against each other, as we snaked along the road, all the way to Dataran Merdeka, Independence Square. A detour towards Central Market enabled us to find a spot in the parking lot. There were thousands of people already walking towards the mosque. You could sense the excitement, the anger. It was brittle, electrifying.

Anwar was sacked for supposed sexual misconduct—specifically, adultery and sodomy. In a country where draconian laws still harked back to the time of the British, giving someone a blowjob or having anal sex was a heinous crime.

The daily papers barked out offensive headline after headline, demonising Anwar.

Sodomite! Adulterer! The Rise and Fall of Anwar Ibrahim.

These words unleashed a national fury and Malaysians of all ages took to the streets. It was Reformasi. The Malaysian Reformation had begun.

Mahathir’s regime had created a generation of Malaysians who were complicit and afraid. The Internal Security Act ensured that. Detention without trial. Guilty until proven innocent. You were always guilty. And even if you weren’t, you’d still be.

Sumi was angry. We all were. She had studied law in the UK and we’d both been writers at *The Review*—“The smartest men’s magazine in town”—for two years. We liked each other from the start, we understood each other. We liked to drink and talk. We knew that what was happening was historic. And that it would change us forever.

By the time we got to the mosque, we could barely see Anwar,

who was perched on a makeshift podium. We could only hear him through the loudhailer. All around me, I saw faces twisted in anger. I started taking pictures.

Let them do their job! The media is showing us who they really are! Dogs! Anjing! Liars! Penipu! They supported me and now they want to see me guilty. Guilty! Do you think I am guilty?

The crowd roared. Some 50,000 voices, all shouting in unison.

No! HE is guilty!

Allahu Akhbar! Allahu Akhbar!

Together our fists rose in solidarity.

We who are gathered here in Kuala Lumpur pledge to defend the freedom and sanctity of the nation to the last drop of our blood... We resolve to revive the spirit of freedom... We will not suffer injustice and oppression in the land... We will not suffer the replacement of foreign oppressors with those raised from among ourselves... We oppose all cruel and oppressive laws which deny the people their fundamental rights and freedoms... We denounce those who corrupt our system of justice... We denounce corruption, abuse of power and the conspiracy devised by a greedy elite to blind the people to the truth in order to maintain their grip on power and wealth!

The crowd roared.

Reformasi! Reformasi!

Anwar, voice hoarse and fist raised, continued.

We raise the spirit of freedom! We are united against oppression! We are united in our resolve to establish justice! Long live the people! Give victory to Reform! We demand the resignation of Mahathir Mohamad!

Sumi and I looked at each other. We grinned widely. The revolution had begun.

Behind us, the Federal Reserve Unit trucks rolled up and the clanging started.

As if out of politeness, the bell rang three times. And then

jets of water hit us like a torrent of stones. A merciless pounding. Water bullets. We were getting a beating.

We screamed. I fell against a man behind me. He fell against someone else and together we tumbled to the ground like tiddlywinks. Arms, legs, hair, everywhere. All flailing. We got up and we started running. Or tried to. There was panic, confusion. We ran into each other, smacking into arms, chests, elbows. No escape. There was water in my mouth, in my ears. My camera was under my shirt. Sumi had vanished.

The crowd moved like a school of fish; it swayed to the right to repel a predator, then to the left to consolidate with greater strength. Right. Left. Right. Then another gust of water came and the configuration broke. I was in a sea of wet beasts, sweaty and angry in a swirling, hot sea.

I heard the hailer again.

Undur! Undur!

Retreat! Retreat now!

The crowd moaned. It was low, gurgly, like fish out of water, drowning in air. The water ceased. Bodies were exposed, stunned. Brown. Yellow. Black. Soggy eyes stared ahead at the figure on the podium. He was still there. Anwar stood strong and resolute.

We will fight this. We will overcome this. Malaysians will rise, now! This is the time to rise!

A tide of drenched people. We could smell one another's unravelling scents: salty, raw, ripe.

Reformasi!

Reformasi!

Reformasi!

Tens of thousands of voices, screaming in unison.

With our lungs, our hearts, our faces. Our bellies, our tongues.

Then Sumi was there, by my side. She had blood on the side of

her face.

What happened?

It's okay. Run. It's coming. Now!

And then we saw it. A canister flying above us, a metal bird, wingless. Then another. We swirled again to avoid it, but the configuration was broken, the moment was gone. Too late. As it fell, slivers of gas escaped streaming out like thin white fingers.

Then, it started.

Your breath stops. Your eyes sting, like they're being gouged out by an interning dentist. The nerves in your nose begin to explode. Panic. Panic sets in.

I grabbed Sumi.

I can't see!

I got you. Just hang on!

Run!

Lari!

Run!

To the mosque!

Shit! The gas is in the mosque!

We ran up the stairs. My slimy sneakers slipped and I crashed onto the steps. My knee hit the white marble floor. My camera fell, heavy; my zoom lens thudded, then bounced with a splintering sound. Then, darkness.

My cheek was shoved onto coarse carpet. I opened my eyes, lungs heaving. I tasted gas in my mouth and I raised my nose upward to breathe. Above me, the cloud of gas still hung like a grey shroud. Others were on the ground, retching.

Loud weeping. Strangers vomiting. A large woman in a scarf sprawled on the floor, sobbing.

Ya Allah, Ya Tuhanku, tolonglah kami.

God, help us all.

The bastards had tear-gassed the National Mosque. A sacred sanctuary.

Fucking assholes! Fuckers!

Sumi hissed through a dirty towel. Her eyes were wild.

Here, breathe! It's still damp.

She took it off and gave it to me.

Take it! You're okay. You're going to get a motherfucking bruise, but you'll live.

She managed a muffled laugh.

I grabbed the towel and shoved it against my nose. Took deep breaths. It was pungent, sweaty, sharp, I almost gagged. Bile was threatening its way up my gut; I forced it back down.

I looked up to the domed ceiling, and its stark, lean curvature gave me a shiver of comfort. I turned around. The floor was covered with men and women, some prostrate, some lying down, some curled up in the foetal position. There was a dull ringing in my ears and the heavy sounds of my laboured breath.

You're fine. You're safe... Sumi muttered.

I nodded. Everything hurt. The insides of my head felt scorched. Fried.

Slowly we got up. Some rubbed their eyes in wonder, some were still in shock. Shouts of acute pain.

The cloud had dissipated; the air was clear again. As the air conditioning kicked in, vents sucked out the angry gas. Many had started praying, prostrate on the ground. Soft murmurs surrounded me.

I pulled myself up. Shivered. Everything was still wet and my knee hurt like hell. I turned and retched; out came clear yellow bile. I wanted a cold beer.

Sumi nodded. She felt the same. We stumbled out, Sumi supporting my arm. All along the street, hundreds huddled up

against each other. Hugs were shared, some brave smiles. I clicked again and again, my lens still intact, images of solidarity after tear gas. Weak shouts of *Reformasi!*

The rallying cry had to continue. I set the camera to autofocus and let it capture continuous frames of people stealthily disappearing into the folds of the city.

It was dusk. Then, sudden music. A relief, a comfort. The *azan*, blaring out of the minaret above us. The mosque still had its voice. *Allahu Akhbar, Allahu Akhbar...*

We grabbed each other and walked slowly, shoes still squelching, as silently as we could into the damp twilight.

Two hours later, at exactly 9pm, masked policemen armed with sub-machine guns stormed into Anwar's house in Damansara Heights, frightening his wealthy neighbours, startling well-dressed diners sipping Chianti in nearby restaurants, as they arrested him under the Internal Security Act in plain sight of his four terrified children and his wife.

Nine days later, he appeared in public again. He stood there, in front of the High Court, waving his hand while cameras of the press from all over the world captured him. That image.

Our Deputy Prime Minister, right there, brutalised, beaten. His black eye was printed on every major newspaper in the world. Kuala Lumpur, city of mud, city of sin, of tear gas and riot police, would erupt again and again.

And again.

* * *

Take a city, imagine it encased in a snow globe and shake it upside down.

Like KL. There would be no snow, of course.

But there would be monitor lizards, tigers, giraffes, refugees, domestic workers, Bangladeshis, girls in pigtails and navy blue school uniforms, nasi kandar with all the condiments, chopped green chillies, beef in dark soya sauce, crab curry, cabbage with turmeric, mustard seed and dried red chillies, guns, machetes and parangs, BMWs, Protons, Kancils, Ferraris, Porches, BMW bikes, strawberry-flavoured condoms, pink Ecstasy tabs, politicians, policemen, taxi drivers, footballers, red plastic furniture, dogs, cats, parakeets, rabbits, snakes, ducks, the occasional slow loris, and some of most morally reprehensible people on the planet.

We had come face to face with a reckoning, as if we had to pay for all our sins in one go and yet find redemption at the same time. KL had unearthed a side that no one had ever seen before; it was new, exhilarating, but entirely unpredictable. Thousands had woken up, but no, this wasn't like Indonesia where Suharto had resigned. *Resigned*. He was shamed, by his own people, students who took to the streets, by the tens upon tens of thousands. Indonesia had witnessed genocides, millions had died in seas of blood, but we didn't share the same script. We had a bloodless transition from colonial rule to independence, we had only one major incident of racial riots in 1969. But what we did have was an endless simmering. Of something, and everything.

But, this. This. With Anwar, we had something to fight for, something to write about. We needed to document it, we had to write it, record it.

Fight it.

We had to fight it, we had to fight back.

And we did.

* * *

The Review was a monthly magazine, funded and edited by Lan, short for Roslan. His mother was Malay, his father English and Iban, the largest indigenous group in the state of Sarawak.

Call me Fairman, he'd say if you just met him, shaking your hand vigorously.

Roslan Fairman was born in Kuching, Sarawak, in Malaysian Borneo, raised in KL, sent off to Harrow at ten and then went on to read law at Oxford. He had inherited his father's law firm but had decided that a career in journalism suited his dress sense and temperament better.

No, he'd insist, *I always wrote; did law just because the parents wanted it.*

He was tall, wore a battered bespoke waistcoat and kept imported copies of *The Guardian* on his desk in a neat pile. He had a shock of hair that kept falling over his face, which he'd swing to the right, much like a singer in a 90s boy-band, except for the expensive tortoise-shell glasses and the worn, hand-made Church's shoes. We all decided to call him Fairman; it seemed the most apt as he was the editor of a magazine, after all.

The Review consisted of four full-time writers, one advertising exec, one secretary and one tea lady. There was Jin, short for Eu Jin, who was sullen and smelt of whisky in the morning. He wrote all the features on finance—business, investment, property. The boring stuff, except he was a whiz at it. Harvard Business School. Dropped out in his final year. Reasons unknown. He pissed off his mum and dad who practically disowned him; he was forced to live in a room in his uncle's mansion in Damansara Heights. Drove a beat-up white Proton Saga. Had terrible dress sense, but

I'd heard that he was a great fuck from the girl who sometimes helped with the audits. He could go all night and was apparently hung like a horse.

Then there was Imran, who'd left a job with Barclays in London to come back to KL because of his father's dementia. He wore a battered Savile Row blazer—wool and silk combo—to work, every day without fail. How he survived the tropical heat in that thing was nothing short of miraculous. He persisted, as it was part of his desired image of being Malay-born but British-educated.

Fuck off, wankers! A shout followed by a loud thump on the desk. That happened at least once a day. We'd look at each other and roll our eyes. Imran was a stickler for details, and if or when anything, or anyone, contradicted his research, he would fly off the handle. Or he'd just swear, for no reason at all.

Imran and Fairman were drinking buddies, and would often disappear at 5pm on the dot to go to the Bulldog round the corner from the office. They'd start with a dry ale and end the night raucously with Guinness.

Imran was stocky and a little wide in the hips, with pert buttocks which sometimes looked odd at certain angles, but he had a smile that could slay you. Every time he talked to you, he'd lean in and you'd get a whiff of his cologne and you'd melt. Penhaligon's. Found only at Harrods and other exclusive shops. Sandalwood and orange. He rolled it off his tongue once when he was drunk. *Pen-ha-li-gons*. Four syllables. Very posh.

One night, as I was coming out of the ladies in the pub, he threw his arm around me and crushed me against his chest. *I'm drunk, Del, take me home. I'm yours.*

He kissed me. Hard. Then it was urgent, probing. Too much tongue, too wet. He slathered my mouth with beer. I pushed him away. He stumbled back, laughing, wiping his full lips with his

right hand. *Prissy, that's what you are*, he slurred and stumbled into the men's toilet.

I had a soft spot for Imran. He intrigued me. I was flattered that he had kissed me, but I didn't know if it was because he was drunk or if he liked me. The next day, I went into the office, half nervous, expecting an apologetic Imran, reticent maybe, would he ask me on a date? But nothing happened. He was at his desk, thumping the keyboard for all it was worth. I shrugged. Nothing lost, nothing gained.

Rose, our tea lady, looked like she was ninety. She had been Fairman's housekeeper for almost ten years and he couldn't bear to have her leave for the Philippines once her contract ended, so he paid for her to stay on. She couldn't make decent coffee or tea, and could barely dust, sweep or vacuum, so Sumi and I took turns to clean the office from time to time. The toilets were everyone's responsibility, so in fact, Rose was there as a reminder of Fairman's childhood—or lack of it—and that all was well in his world. There was a story going around that she had drowned Fairman's pet kitten in the toilet bowl when he was a kid, and when she stood there unmoving, every day, staring out the office window, I often wondered about the horrors she had seen. I remember Fairman saying once—*her father was in the army, Marcos got to him*—as he drew his hand across his throat in a flourish.

Sumi read law in Leicester, England and specialised in human rights. By the time we met, she had already worked in Hong Kong, Iran and Indonesia. She was also back in KL to look after her ailing mother. *Nothing terminal, thank goodness, but god, can she be a nag!* Filial piety. Didn't matter how long you'd been away. If your parents needed you, and if you were born and raised Asian, you just had to be there.

The office's secretary Jackie doubled as Fairman's personal

assistant, bill payer, salary dispenser, agony aunt, nurse, occasional moneylender and chauffeur. She got us home when we were too drunk to hail a cab or stumble to our cars. She was the office saviour, our veritable Good Samaritan. We all loved Jackie; she was the heart and soul of the office and she mothered us all in her no-nonsense manner, with her ample derriere, painted eye-brows, frosted lipstick and her ancient blue Mercedes which smelled of Salem menthol cigarettes.

Our advertising executive Ridzwan Muhammad Nordin, or Riz, barely spoke to any of us. Nobody knew why. Maybe he hated the fact that he was working for a bunch of drunken Anglophiles. His sat, back straight, headphones perpetually stuck in both ears, twirling a pen in his hands with expert dexterity, brows twisted in a constant frown. He did his job well enough despite his poor social skills: ironic, as he had to sell ad space to keep the magazine going. He never once joined us at the pub, or partook in any office excursions. He was just there to sell ads. He came to work, stepped out for lunch, had three cups of coffee a day, went to the mosque to pray on Fridays—which neither Fairman nor Imran ever did—and went home at exactly 5.30pm every day.

The Review's office was located on the ground floor of a shop lot at Phileo Damansara, just off Jalan Damansara. Sumi and I took turns to carpool to get to work, so we could save on petrol. Our salaries weren't much: we made minimum wage and slightly more, but we knew that the writing was what mattered. And Fairman gave us that freedom.

The magazine kept pushing the boundaries of journalism; it was risky in many areas by Malaysian standards, but we didn't care. As long as our Fairman stood by us, we would keep writing until someone saw it fit to shut us down. Our covers were sometimes controversial—we had lawyers, architects, a once-exiled student

activist, a comedian, a popular musician, someone who was gay and HIV positive and, the month before, Anwar Ibrahim. Imran had written the cover story and he was mad, infuriated that Anwar was now behind bars.

He knew it was coming, you know. He fucking knew. Bastard wanted him out!

There was a brittle tension in the office. We were operating on adrenaline, gumption and a compulsion to flirt with risk. After Anwar's arrest, we were on the streets again and again. We took to wearing sneakers to work every day, just in case there was another protest, and there always was. Every day. As the trial progressed the stories became more and more lurid: semen-stained mattresses, a how-to on sodomy, a self-inflicted black eye. It was vile. Whatever dignity we had as a country was gone; the spectacle was the fodder of international headlines. Such was the malaise of Malaysians. Our judiciary had become a mockery of justice and we were sickened to the core.

We had written stories on the new sex drug Viagra, the Clinton affair, Matthew Shepard's death and the demise of Suharto, but none matched the ferocity of the Anwar story. As expected, other players were dragged onto the murky stage: Sukma Dermawan, Anwar's supposed step-brother, who was alleged to have been sodomised 15 times; Azizan, one of Anwar's aides, who had denied being sodomised, but later retracted his story; Dr Munawar Anees, scholar and speech-writer, and around them a motley crew of rogues and villains, all in powerful circles, with the Prime Minister on top.

It became our main story. We dug and we wrote, getting angrier by the day, getting drunk and having heated conversations at the Bulldog, waking up with blistering hangovers, but pushing, constantly and consistently, the boundaries of whatever little press freedom we had.

On 13 November, the last day of the trial, foreign press packed the High Court. The UN Special Rapporteur for Malaysia, Param Cumarasamy, was not allowed in. Furious, he vented at the press. *This is an obvious and blatant miscarriage of justice!* He had sat in courts for trials on Cambodia, El Salvador, Haiti and Rwanda, and here he was, denied entry to the delivery of the verdict of the most watched trial in the world.

By 8am we were all there at the courthouse, waiting for the verdict, along with the foreign press. It was humid from the rain earlier, the sky a stark, cloudless blue. And then it came, first like a hushed whisper between illicit lovers, then a barbaric yawp. A tearful press secretary came out and softly mouthed the verdict. Anwar was sentenced to six years in prison. Screams of dismay.

What? No! No! NO!

Fairman, Imran, Sumi and I were all there. Wan Azizah, Anwar's wife, came out of the courthouse in tears, surrounded by her two elder daughters, weeping openly. Then an angry horde.

Reformasi!

Reformasi!

Anwar emerged, face drawn, herded into a Black Maria like a common criminal. The crowd surged forward. It was a farce, a mockery of justice.

Six fucking years! For what? Six fucking years! Six fucking years!

Imran repeated it again and again like a bad mantra in the Range Rover until Fairman told him to shut up. We sat in silence as we drove past the police cars, past the frenzy of the screaming, weeping supporters, past miles and miles of traffic, cars honking, drivers white with shock. We got to the Bulldog and started drinking. We drank shots. After one bottle, Fairman ordered another. *More vodka! Drink up guys, tomorrow we start again.* Imran wept openly, Fairman took his glasses off and buried his face in his hands. Sumi

and I smoked cigarette after cigarette, staring at two guys playing pool, until it was time to leave. We had drunk two bottles of vodka. I got home and threw up, passing out on the toilet floor.

The next day, with heads pounding, we sat numb at our computers, staring into black screens, not knowing what to write. We were devastated, gutted.

Two days later, *The Review* was shut down, for reasons that were undisclosed. I remember Fairman coming out of his office, his eyes wild. *Guys, we've been shut down.*

Fucking wankers! Imran threw his coffee mug at the wall. *Always wanted to do that!* He smiled, then started throwing papers into a box.

We got to work. We grabbed files from the cabinets and shoved them into black garbage bags. I ran into the photo archives and pulled out negatives and prints, trying to arrange them with some semblance of order into boxes. I grabbed leftover stocks of film in the fridge and shoved them into plastic bags. Fairman shouted, *Save all your floppy disks, make sure they're marked and give them to me before you go.* Imran took charge and stood by the door, marking handmade lists. *The Review* had been around for only five years, precious noteworthy years, and our archives were worth saving. Riz and Jin packed up their desks silently and efficiently; in spite of what was going on, they still remained emotionless. Rose kept sighing and shaking her head. She packed up the kitchen things, muttering in Tagalog, stacking up mugs and old plates. *What you want me to do, Sir? Keep or throw away?* We threw out a mountain of paperwork. Jackie drove her car to the front and we stuffed bags of rubbish in the front, back and boot. She made ten trips to the dump that day. Fairman was on the phone making calls. He got no answers that day. His beloved stack of backdated *Guardian* newspapers had to be thrown out. *Only take what's necessary! We have to get out by today or we're fucked!*

The Review's license had been revoked and for the first time in my life, I felt angry enough to draw blood. It was the end of a short era, our spirits were crushed, and when Riz walked out the office door for the last time, I swore I saw him wipe away a tear.

You can't do that!

What? An assassination? I'd be doing us all a favour.

How? How would you do it?

There are ways.

But he's guarded by a small army, armed to the teeth!

Yeah. You know that they call him now?

Mahafiraun.

The great pharaoh?

Bastard. Kiss my ass. Mahafiraun.

Hmmph!

I wish he would just drop dead.

Black magic.

Sure, let's find a bomoh in Kampung Baru who can whip up a really devious spell. Something that will make his penis fall off or something like that.

Yeah, if you can get a bomoh to stop rain and thunder, damn, why not an evil politician?

Except his bomoh is probably more powerful than any other in KL.

So how?

Shit, man.

Bugger! Fucking bastard!

Fuck!

We had been drinking and were probably on our fourth gin and tonics. An empty can doubled as an ashtray on the arm of

my chair. Sumi's apartment was sparse, but there were two comfy armchairs with Afghan throws and large, fluffy cushions on the floor. A pair of wooden candlesticks from Istanbul. An Iranian saddlebag with colourful wool tassels—gorgeous but too prickly to lie on. Boho-chic. Cool.

The almost empty bottle of gin sat between us and there was already a line of empty bottles in her kitchen from our drinking sessions over the past few weeks. We'd lost our jobs so we had been reduced to drinking at home.

One more gin pahit coming up! Gin, served up with a sliver of lime, colonial style.

Goddammit, Sumi, you need a planter's chair. I am a sweaty Englishman, waiting for his houseboy to bring his noontime gin.

A planter's chair? Where the hell am I supposed to find one? Do they even still make them?

Antique shops. My dad found one in Malacca. Kutty's.

Drive down there one of these days?

Sure. Why not?

We clinked glasses and sighed simultaneously.

I feel so helpless.

Tell me about it.

I was chain-smoking Sempoernas: skinny, sweet Indonesian clove cigarettes. Sumi didn't smoke as much as I did, but that day she did. She took one from me, lit it up and inhaled deeply.

This is going straight to my head.

We'd been talking about options. There was a protest that day and we were exhausted from running the streets. The number of protests was growing and KL had seen nothing like it. Malaysians were angry, and people were coming out in droves to show their support. Fear had left us. Years of indoctrination were rendered futile. People had woken up to an anger that had to be released.

And for many, the only option was to just show up on the street, to be seen and to be heard.

I felt a measure of pride, and to be running next to strangers felt more meaningful than anything I had known until then. It was full-throttle adrenaline; it was heady and rich, it made us bolder and more reckless, as if history had conspired and collided into one moment, where all could be free.

There were coiffured ladies linking hands with women from the kampungs, men, women and children from the suburbs of KL. There was no issue of being Indian, Chinese, Malay or Other, we were one, we were all the same opposed against injustice. We had never been so bold.

It was inspiring; I felt proud. Proud that people were coming out of their houses to stand on the street with us. It was historic, we would rewrite the history books or at least try to.

The day before we'd read that a 15-year-old girl had been arrested as she'd pelted a policeman with an empty gas canister. She was hauled away kicking and screaming, and one newspaper showed a close-up of her face twisted in rage. The headline screamed, "RENEGADE TEEN".

The papers are so shit right now, it's so bloody biased.

Well, what do you expect, they're all scared and they have to toe the line, otherwise they'd lose their licenses. Look what happened to us.

Nobody reads the papers anyway, it's all lies.

So what do we read then—apart from the threads and Sang Kancil?

Sang Kancil was an independent online journal that was the cumulative observations of our very own veteran journo MGG Pillai. Apart from Sabri Zain's online *Reformasi Diary*, which was a brilliant documentation of the day-to-day street protests, there was no other alternative. The real news was out there on the streets, and we were being fed lies by the mainstream papers.

Sumi stood up, then sat down again, quickly.

Oh god, too much gin.

It's the Sempoerna. Goes straight to your head.

She sat down again and inhaled deeply.

What if? What if?

What?

If we started something!

Like...?

An alternative newspaper, something that we can all write for.

What do you mean?

Citizen journalism.

I sat up, lit another Sempoerna and sloshed more gin into my empty glass.

You think Fairman would approve?

Heck, he'd fund it, no?

It could be like an underground newspaper, something that we can send out to everybody.

Alternative news—on the Internet, on a website...

From the street!

Opinions, columns, photos—document it all! We can do this.

I was drunk, but it made sense. Why not? Take it into our own hands.

Call him now!

We did. And that's how it started. After half a bottle of gin and many more Sempoernas, *Saksi* was born.

Saksi. Witness.

We were going to bear witness to the Reformasi movement. We were going to do it our way. And we were going to do it right.

The People Accuse

Saksi is a site for independent journalism. Our first issue focuses on 20 September 1998, when a massive demonstration took place in Kuala Lumpur. Features, opinions, photography and other stories analyse and document the events of the day and subsequent developments. Saksi is a weekly magazine that is constantly updated. Saksi will present news that is real. News from the streets. News from our reporters who are not afraid of telling the truth.



PHOTO BY: DANIEL ADAMS

ABOUT THE
AUTHOR

Bernice Chauly is the award-winning author of five books of poetry and prose; *going there and coming back* (1997), *The Book of Sins* (2008), *Lost in KL* (2008), *Growing Up With Ghosts* (2011) and *Onkalo* (2013, “Direct, honest and powerful” —JM Coetzee). Born in George Town, Penang to Chinese-Punjabi teachers, she read Education and English Literature in Canada as a government scholar. She was an Honorary Fellow at the University of Iowa’s International Writing Program (IWP) in 2014, has served as Festival Director of the George Town Literary Festival since 2011, and currently lectures at the University of Nottingham Malaysia Campus (UNMC). She lives in Kuala Lumpur with her two daughters.

Journalist Delonix Regia chances upon the cultured and irresistible Omar amidst the upheaval of the Reformasi movement in Kuala Lumpur. As the city roils around them, they find solace in love, marriage, and then parenthood. But when their two-year-old daughter Alba is kidnapped, Del must confront the terrible secret of a city where babies are sold and girls trafficked. By turns heart-breaking and suspenseful, *Once We Were There* is a debut novel of profound insight. It is Bernice Chauly at her very best.



“A love song to thwarted motherhood and the blunted dreams of the Reformasi movement, *Once We Were There* is as Malaysian as *teh tarik*—sweet, dark and a jolt to the senses.”

—Mei Fong, Pulitzer-prize winning journalist and author of *One Child: The Story of China’s Most Radical Experiment*

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