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The Keepers of Stories

"Mystical and multicultural in its mythologies, full of guileless verve and heart."
–Cyril Wong, author of *This Side of Heaven*

SUFFIAN HAKIM

Bestselling author of *The Minorities* and *Harris bin Potter and the Stoned Philosopher*

"Through an almost childlike lens of wonder, Suffian Hakim envisions a pre-urban storytelling community without shying away from the violence of resistance and the familiar agonies of modern existence. Mystical and multicultural in its mythologies, *The Keepers of Stories* is Calvino-esque in its ambitions, yet accessible and full of guileless verve and heart."

CYRIL WONG

Singapore Literature Prize-winning author of *This Side of Heaven*

"In this novel, Suffian Hakim creates a cast of identifiable characters and throws them into a magical setting. The result is an enthralling coming-of-age tale, weaved throughout with modern-day fables, demonstrating the power of stories to move, heal and inspire us."

IMRAN HASHIM

Author of *Annabelle Thong*

"The frame narrative is an age-old storytelling technique across cultures traceable to classic texts like the *Panchatantra* and, most popularly, *A Thousand and One Nights.* In *The Keepers of Stories*, Suffian Hakim has modernised this form to tell the familiar Singapore tragedy of displacement in the face of unrelenting development. Its stories within the novel suggest a sense of universality at play. Its appeal to the fantastical is not escapist but therapeutic. Suffian's most serious book to date should be part of a reading list on making sense of trying times."

NAZRY BAHRAWI

Senior Lecturer, Singapore University of Technology and Design

"I was drawn to Suffian Hakim's narrative the moment I set foot on his island of stories. I find it uncanny that he is essentially filling in the blanks that are missing from the pages of our history books, where facts and imagination meet!"

JOHNNY LAU

Celebrated creator of *Mr Kiasu* and *Utama*, *The Sage Slayer*

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The Keepers of Stories

SUFFIAN HAKIM

EPIGRAM

ALSO BY SUFFIAN HAKIM

The Minorities
Harris bin Potter and the Stoned Philosopher

For my Nyai,
who told me my first stories,
who left me to cross that last great ocean,
and whom I miss dearly

ONE

THEIR FATHER WOKE them late that fateful night, dishevelled, wide-eyed, manic.

"Hakeem, Zuzu! Pack your things, quickly! We need to leave before the bad people arrive!" His words escaped in short, raspy, breathless bursts, as if he had been running from the night.

Sujakon's two children, in their faded pyjamas and their dreams still spilling from their heads, scrambled into action. Hakeem, a month shy of thirteen, transferred the top layer of his box of clothes into his faded green batik bandolier bag, along with a slightly rusted canteen, and a paperback of *One Thousand and One Nights* so yellowed it was almost brown.

Zulaika, smaller and younger by three years, was more methodical as she picked out clothes from her box before transferring them into her stained green canvas rucksack, a hand-me-down from their mother. She then reached under her stained sleeping mat, and picked up a colour pencil-and-crayon sketch of a little girl holding the hand of a towering woman in black. She folded it into perfectly aligned quarters and placed it carefully into her bag.

They then returned to the living room, where their father was packing a blue tarp, clothes, canteens of water, unopened glass bottles of soda and packets of food (wrapped in banana leaves and newspapers) into a large duffel bag.

"Who are the bad people, Papa?" asked Zulaika. "Why are they taking us away?"

"My sweet Zuzu, they are not taking you away from me, I promise you. Do you have everything?"

"Yes, Papa."

"Hakeem?"

The boy nodded.

"Good. Good," their father said distractedly, with the countenance of someone making multiple calculations all at once. Sujakon then turned sharply and headed to the flat's master bedroom. He came back out shortly after with a jagged blade roughly as long as Zulaika's forearm, and sheathed in smooth jelutong. Hakeem had seen it before in the stained black-and-white photographs of his parents' wedding. He remembered the asymmetrical blade for its tarnished brass hilt, which bore at its end the grotesque face of the Rangda, the child-eating demon queen of Bali.

Sujakon placed the keris carefully into his duffel bag.

He then knelt before his children and rubbed their shoulders, as if through touch alone he could prepare them for what was to come. "Hakeem, Zuzu, listen to Papa. We need to move and we need to move quickly. If I tell you to do something, you do it, no questions, no hesitation. Do you understand? I will answer all of your questions later, and I know you have many, but if you want us to stay together, then you must do what I say. Will you do that for me?"

Hakeem nodded first. Zulaika took the cue from her brother and nodded as well. They then left the house, and none of them thought to close the door behind them.

Sujakon led the way down the corridor, one hand inside his bag, no doubt holding tightly to the stained brassy hilt of his keris. Zulaika followed, her rucksack bouncing against her back as she kept pace with her father.

Hakeem brought up the rear, noticing (and it felt like for the first time) the pale yellow paint of the corridor walls, the coriander and basil scents of their neighbour's potted garden that lined the walkway, the grey concrete screed that echoed underneath their feet. He had an inexplicable feeling that this would be the last time he experienced them. It was a certainty, bitter and strange, that everything he knew was about to change.

They stopped at the lift lobby. Their father looked past the corridor rails, down to the ground floor. He scanned every direction, his breaths rapid and burdened. Zulaika, finally overwhelmed by her father's demeanour, began sobbing. In the dead of the night, it was deafening.

Sujakon knelt before his daughter and placed an urgent palm over her mouth. "Shh. Hush, my sayang. Be brave. Don't let the bad people hear you." His voice was a wide-eyed whisper.

And through her tears, she whispered her childish, frightened return: "What will they do to us if they find us?"

"Don't even think that, sayang! I promise they will not take you away from me. Come, my darlings." He pulled both his children close and embraced them, tight and tremulous. Then he rose, but he seemed shorter than his children had ever remembered him to be.

There was a ding from the lift.

The doors slid aside, revealing a towering hulk of a man, dressed in jeans and a greasy singlet, whose rough tanned skin was canvas to an endless network of tattoos. The man's eyes glinted with recognition at Sujakon, and moved from father to children and then back to father. With a dark smile, the stranger said, "Ah, Mister Suja—"

It happened so quickly. Sujakon covered the distance between the two men in a single bound, unsheathed his keris and buried the jagged blade where the man's lower jaw met the neck. Blood, dark as the night, cascaded from the wound onto Sujakon's hand and forearm and all over the lift floor. The large man clutched at his neck as he made terrible retching, choking sounds, his mouth opening and closing. He would have been screaming were it not for the slab of jagged iron obstructing his vocal chords.

"Cover your eyes!" Sujakon said to his children, but they had already seen. He found himself considering, for a mad, split second, the example he was setting for them.

Neither child could tear their eyes from the scene as their father withdrew his blade, and the man slumped to the floor like a marionette with its strings cut. He writhed and convulsed terribly for several grotesque seconds before he moved no more. Zulaika was no longer crying; she simply stared. Both she and Hakeem had gazed upon death before, but never knew it to be this visceral, this frenzied and undignified.

"Come in, the two of you. Not a sound."

The children entered the lift, giving the corpse a wide berth. Their father pushed the button for the ground floor, and the blue doors slid shut. The elevator started with a metallic groan, reverberated and began descending.

In the dim light, Sujakon knelt before his children. He wiped his bloody hands on his black pants. Gently, he pushed Zulaika's locks behind her ears, and wiped at her moist cheeks. A faint smear of blood spread across her face like war paint. Beside her, Hakeem was trembling.

"Look at me, both of you. Look at me! This was a bad man. I had to do it." The lift's floor indicator was down to the fifth level. "Other bad people might still be looking for us. Once we're out of here, we

need to move quickly and quietly. If they take me—"

"No, Papa!" cried Zulaika. "Don't let them take you."

"If they take me," Sujakon repeated more firmly, "I want the two of you to run. It doesn't matter what they do to me. Just run. As fast as you can, and as far as you can."

Zulaika shook her head vigorously, as if the force of it could undo all of the night's terrible events.

"Run, run deep into the night, and never, ever get separated. Can you do that for me?"

They nodded, Hakeem more assertively than his sister.

"Never get separated," Sujakon repeated. "We are all we have. No matter what happens, the two of you must always stay together. You hear me?"

"Yes, Papa," Hakeem said, failing miserably to inject some courage into his voice.

"Say it!"

"We will always stay together."

"Zuzu?"

"We-we will always stay together."

A ding. The doors to the lift slid open again. No bad men awaited them on the other side.

"All right, let's go. Towards the road."

The three moved quickly on tiptoe, rushing from pillar to pillar, staying in the shadows. They were whispers in the night. They finally stopped when they reached the pillar marking the southern edge of their block. Before them was the car park, a wide swathe of open space.

"I want you to run as fast as you can across to the next block. Zuzu, you go first."

The girl's eyes widened at what her father was asking. She shook her head and backed away into her brother.

"I'll be right behind you, sayang."

"No, Papa," Zulaika pleaded. "I cannot go alone."

"I'll be right behind you."

"Papa, please, come with me."

Before Sujakon could reply, Hakeem had set off, sprinting across the car park. Zulaika wanted to shriek for her brother, but her father clamped a hand over her mouth. And just as soon as it began, Hakeem's run finished. He staggered to a pillar, steadying himself against it, trying to gasp inaudibly.

There was a sound from above. Somebody was coughing. But in the car park, nothing stirred.

Wasting no time, Sujakon carried Zulaika and set off across to the opposite block. When they reunited with Hakeem, the three carefully made their way to the edge of the block, and faced the quiet road.

To their far right was the sleeping village of Geylang Serai. During the day, its thatched roofs and peeling paint were shrouded in the shadows of the towering government flats. Now, even from where they stood, the village was almost invisible, blotted out by the indomitable dark of night. Opposite the village, and more worrying, was the Haig Road market. The last stalls were only just closing. Goods were being loaded into carts for storage. Rusty blue panelled shutters were being dragged across shopfronts. Activity, however, meant people, and the likelihood that there could be those among them who would take Hakeem and Zulaika away from their father.

The road itself was empty. A car passed, but the driver did not seem to notice the man and his two children. A lorry approached. Sujakon held his breath, hoping not to see a familiar face behind the steering wheel, but it too passed them. Another car—

Sujakon stretched out a hand, and a light blue NTUC Comfort taxicab stopped. The three of them hurried inside.

"Changi Beach, please, Pak," Sujakon said to the elderly Malay driver.

"At this time?" The driver turned and registered Sujakon's blood-stained T-shirt, the smear on Zulaika's face, Hakeem's fear-stricken countenance. "Is that blood? No, no, I'm sorry, I cannot take you. I don't want any trouble."

"Please, Pak, these children are in danger."

"Are you their father?"

"Yes, I am."

"Where's their mother?"

"Mama passed away four years ago," Hakeem answered.

"Is this true?" the driver asked Zulaika, who nodded sadly in response. "Is this man really your father?" This time, both children nodded.

The cab driver turned his attention back to Sujakon. "All that blood. What happened?"

"We have to go now, Pak."

"Not until you tell me what happened!"

Sujakon pressed his bloody knife against the older man's ribcage, staining his white shirt. "Please, I do not want to hurt you."

The taxi began moving.

"And we do not have money to pay you," added Sujakon, less assertively this time.

The taxi slowed.

"I'm very sorry." Sujakon took out all the money he had in his pockets, which amounted to slightly over two dollars, and placed it on the front passenger seat. "This is all I can give you."

The taxi driver sighed. "Just don't kill me."

"If you take us where we need to go, and say nothing to the authorities, I promise I will not." Sujakon eased the blade from the older man's side.

The taxi began moving faster. The concrete flats of Haig Road receded out of sight. Inside the car, the driver and his passengers sat in tense silence. Hakeem could only stare at his father's bloodied shirt as his mind played over and over again the convulsing body. It was his father who'd caused that—his father who had taken life away from another man. His father, who had taught him right from wrong, who had told him to be kind to other people, who had buried the blade in the man's neck. Zulaika watched the world outside as it zoomed by her, wishing she could be any one of the sleeping children in their homes, who could take sleeping in their homes for granted. For nearly half an hour, the silence festered. It was only broken when they drove past a massive construction project: several towers of scaffolding surrounded by acres of artificially flattened land. When Zulaika could no longer help but ask, "What are they building there, Papa?" there was a collective jolt in the taxi.

They recovered and relaxed; a child's curiosity displacing the tension and fear of death that prevailed in the vehicle. Sujakon leaned back and placed the knife back in his duffel bag. "They're building a new airport. Changi Airport."

"What's an airport?"

"It's a place where aeroplanes can stop and pick up passengers. Aeroplanes are these huge flying transports. Like cars, but in the air."

"You mean in the sky, among the clouds?"

"Yes, and they can take you anywhere you want to go, no matter how far. Even to the other side of the world."

This clearly astounded the girl, and despite their situation, she proclaimed excitedly, "I want to go in an aeroplane."

Sujakon ran a hand through his daughter's hair. "One day, my darling. I promise."

"Where would you go, little one?" asked the taxi driver cordially.

Through the rear-view mirror, he glanced at Sujakon and his duffel, and chuckled nervously.

"Indonesia," Zulaika replied. "Where Papa's family came from."

"They just finished building a great marble mosque in Jakarta," the driver said, his voice straining to maintain a calm, conversational tone. "It's the largest and grandest in our part of the world. It took almost twenty years to build. Masjid Istiqlal. The Freedom Mosque."

"Is it as big as our block?"

"Ha! Forget your block," said the man. "It can fit more people than all the government flats in Haig Road combined."

Zulaika let out an exhalation of awe. "I want to see that! Let's go together, Hakeem!"

Her brother simply smiled and nodded. He was still trying to erase the image of a convulsing corpse from his mind.

Sujakon said, "The world is full of wonders, Zuzu. If you ever get the chance to see the world, don't stop at Indonesia. Go beyond. Go until you find people who don't talk or look like you, and even then, go beyond that. I hope you get to understand the world better than I ever did."

"Your father is right," said the taxi driver. "The world is a big place, and you should see as much of it as you can. You'll learn different ways of doing things, different ways of living a life."

The two men exchanged glances through the rear-view mirror. Sujakon shifted uncomfortably in his seat, and set his gaze into the night.

Eventually, the airport construction site receded into the distance, and all that surrounded them were endless trees. The tarmac finally gave way to sand, and the taxi came to a stop at the end of the dirt road, which opened up to a small beach.

The taxi driver called out to Sujakon as he opened the door. "Hey, brother. You take care of those kids, you hear?"

"Yes, Pak."

"Whatever trouble you got yourself into, don't let them become part of it."

"I know, Pak."

"Peace be upon you." The old man sighed, and slumped against the back of his seat.

"And you."

Sujakon, Hakeem and Zulaika waited until the taxi disappeared into the shadows before they followed a path that led to a T-junction, facing the sea. To the left was the distant, twinkling lamplight of a fishing village. To the right was dense, dark jungle, its foliage obscuring any sign of civilisation beyond. They took the path to the right.

"Where are we, Papa?" asked Zulaika.

"This is Changi Beach. There is a community here that can help us. They are good people. Their matriarch is somebody very dear to me, and she will take care of the two of you."

Hakeem caught the evasion in what his father said. "What about you, Pa?"

"After I hand you over to the good people here, I have to make sure the bad people never come after us again. Then maybe—maybe we can go back home."

"Will you come back?" the boy asked his father, as his sister let out cries of protest.

"Why do you even ask that, Hakeem? Of course I will."

"You don't have to leave us, Papa," Zulaika sobbed. "You can take care of us instead of leaving us to these people we've never met before. You can stay with us, and not go to where the bad people are. You can sing for us. You can play with us. You can tell us stories."

"I will. I just have to settle a few things, and then I will come back, I promise. And I also promise I will sing and play with you. I

promise, my darling Zuzu."

"You missed out telling stories," said the girl, hugging her father's arm more tightly, but sobbing less.

"What do you mean?"

"You said you'll sing and play with me. But you didn't say you'll tell me stories."

Sujakon smiled at his daughter, lifted her with a slight groan, and carried her as he used to when she was little. Instinctively, she rested her head on her father's shoulder and threw her arms around his neck. "Where I'm taking you, Zuzu, they tell even better stories."

TWO

UNDER THE INFINITE stars and the sentinel moon, the salted waves rasped, reached out and receded, slapped the shore and foamed.

They walked into the night, Sujakon carrying his daughter in one arm and holding his son's hand. The path they followed snaked into the trees, which grew denser and denser until it seemed almost improbable that they were near a beach. The trilling twilight-hymns of the forest became more pronounced than the roaring of the waves. The night was dark, but here, it seemed that the light of day was a forgotten myth.

Haig Road already felt like a distant memory. There in the dark, sheltered from revelation, Sujakon could not see the blood-red of his hands.

Zulaika asked, "Who was the man in the lift, Papa?"

"He and his people were going to punish me because of a mistake I've made. And for my punishment, they were going to take the two of you away and hurt you. I've made mistakes in my life, my darlings. Many mistakes. But I will never let anyone harm you."

"Killing anyone," Hakeem declared, with conviction at first, before faltering, "is a mistake."

"Yes. Yes, it is. Don't ever second-guess that. Killing is always wrong," said Sujakon. "All my life, I've made mistakes, but I *had* to make those mistakes because if I didn't, we do not get to be a family. That's why I did what I did."

"I understand, Papa," Zulaika said into her father's shoulder.

"Hakeem, do you have anything to say?"

A pause. Sujakon wished he could see the look on his son's face. One of the most difficult things in life is to be a parent in the dark. "No, Pa, I have nothing to say."

"Will you take care of your sister while I'm away?"

"Yes, Pa." Hakeem sounded inconvenienced, but it was not at the prospect of taking care of his sister; it was for the fact that such a question even had to be asked.

"Do you remember what you promised me?"

"We will always stay together."

They walked on in the dark. Somewhere along the path, Hakeem thought he could hear voices from among the trees whispering, growling their dark secrets. He tried to approach the voices to investigate, but his father forcefully pulled him along.

"Don't let go of my hand, Hakeem!" In the dark, Hakeem felt his father's grasp tighten into a suffocating vice grip. "This is no place for a child to get lost."

"I am not a child, Papa!"

"Do not let go!"

Hakeem felt his father's grip move from his hand to his wrist. The boy walked on, in step with his father. He did not know how his father was navigating the gloom, but sure enough, the ground underneath them felt like bare earth, a path keeping out the encroaching trees. They walked on and on, for what felt like forever

and also no time at all. The voices faded back into imagination.

And then there was light.

The sound of waves returned.

The trees stopped suddenly, and the path opened up to a vast clearing the size of the Padang in downtown Singapore, beset on all sides by thick jungle, except the northern end, where the clearing met the beach, where grass and sand intermingled, where the waves came and went as they pleased. The sun had emerged slightly farther above the horizon, colouring the sky a rosy purple with streaks of pink and yellow.

Sujakon eased his breathing. He let go of Hakeem's wrist and put Zulaika down. Hakeem looked back, and he found that he could not see the spaces between the trees for they were shrouded in utter darkness.

"Where are we, Papa?" asked Zulaika.

"A safe place, where the bad people will never find you." Her father sighed—a deep, tired sigh that seemed to emanate from the very depths of his being. He surveyed this place cursorily, as if he had been here before and was rueing the fact that he was seeing it again.

The clearing was generally flat, until it began sloping gently upwards towards a plateau in the south. There was a formation of banyan trees near the shore, their thick strands of aerial roots like a veil against the world outside. There were strange, billowing triangular shapes under the banyan trees, but from that distance, and under the predawn light, it was difficult to discern what they were.

To the south, alone atop the plateau, sat a jelutong tree, tall and grand. Its leaves reached for the heavens in an elegant conical spiral of green above a thick, rich brown trunk. It must have been the height of twenty men.

Sujakon led them off the dirt path and started walking towards the sea. The three of them stood there silently, simply allowing

themselves the pleasure of the cool morning winds against their faces and in their hair, listening to their enigmatic whisper-songs. Against the beatific machinations of nature, they forgot momentarily the events of the previous night.

"Papa?"

"Yes, Hakeem?"

"There's a strange old lady coming towards us."

"Where?"

Hakeem pointed down the beach. Indeed, there was a strange old woman there, walking slowly towards them, aided by a gnarled walking stick that stood almost as tall as the woman herself. She had on a loose farmer's blouse, and a faded batik sarong. She wore her grey hair pulled up in a tight bun, accentuating the harsh features of her wrinkled and weather-worn face. The overall effect was rather intimidating, even though it was clear all three of them, even Zulaika, could easily outmuscle or outrun her. Perhaps it was her eyes. They were sharp and piercing, as if meant for the sole purpose of seeing into the very souls of other people.

"Get behind me," Sujakon whispered to his children, and they complied without hesitation.

The woman saw this and stopped, then planted her walking stick into the sand at a spear's throw from Sujakon and his children. She spoke, in a voice that seemed at odds with her slight, aged frame. "You have finally returned, Sujakon," she said, as if announcing it from the mountaintops.

"Do you know her, Papa?" Zulaika whispered.

Her question was answered when her father strode forward and fell to his knees before the old woman. He took her wizened hand in his and kissed it tenderly. "Apa khabar, Nyai Timah?" he asked, placing her hand against his cheek.

"Suja, you have actual blood on your hands." It was a statement

of fact, with no register of shock or apprehension.

He paused to look at his own hands, stained red-brown. "I know, Nyai."

"You're always getting into trouble," she said, somewhere between admonishment and bemused observation. "It seems nothing has changed."

"I could say the same about you, old woman," Sujakon chuckled, and Nyai Timah returned a smile that could illuminate the world from end to end. They embraced, like a mother would a son. Hakeem and Zulaika could not quite discern the relationship their father had with this woman. They knew their grandmother had passed long before they were born.

Their father broke the embrace. He then turned to them, gestured for them to come over and said very proudly, "Nyai Timah, these are my children."

The delight on Nyai Timah's face was unmistakable, palpable. "It is so good to finally meet you, Hakeem and Zulaika!"

The children took turns to give salam to the old woman, taking her hand in theirs and bringing it to their nose and lips in reverence.

"Nyai Timah took care of me after your grandparents passed away, when none of my own relatives would," Sujakon said to his children. "I would have been lost to the streets, and neither of you would have ever been born if it were not for her."

Hakeem gazed up at the aged face. She beamed warmly at him, and he returned it as best as he could. But if she was so important, how come his father had never mentioned her?

"You still are lost to the streets, Suja," said Nyai Timah, her eyes boring into his father's. Hakeem realised that it was difficult to read the woman. Whenever she spoke, there was always a dichotomy in her words: gentleness and fire, anger and bemusement, poignant melancholy and cold criticism. She spoke in Malay, but it sounded

unlike anything either child had ever heard. She made the language seem ancient, epic, otherworldly. "Sometimes I think the whole country is lost to the streets."

"You should give it a chance, Nyai Timah. Much has changed in Singapore since—"

"I know what the country is like. I am moulded from its mud and detritus," she said sternly. She began walking down the beach. Sujakon followed her, and Hakeem and Zulaika followed their father. "Why have you come back, Suja?"

"I need a safe space for the children while I take care of some… work matters."

"The Anak Bumi never turn anybody away, especially one of our own—even if they've been gone for a long time."

This seemed to embarrass their father. "Oh, no, Nyai Timah, I cannot stay."

"Because of 'work matters'? It will be the death of you, Suja." It was impossible to tell if it was a threat, prophecy, expression of concern or stern telling-off.

Hakeem turned to his father, who looked pained and troubled. He wished his father could be entirely honest about the situation surrounding these bad people. "The bad people cannot find you here, Papa. You said it yourself."

Zulaika hugged her father, resting her head against his hip. "Stay, Papa."

"I will come back, I promise."

Nyai Timah stopped in her tracks and heaved a tired, ancient sigh. "We will hold you to that promise, Suja," she said, more powerful than the morning's waves. "Let's get the children out of those filthy clothes."

Hakeem looked down and registered for the first time in hours that he was still in his pyjamas.

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Nyai Timah allocated them a space just outside the formation of banyan trees to build a tent. Their father proceeded to do so with the blue tarp he brought from home. Hakeem and Zulaika offered to help, but Sujakon insisted that he wanted to build this temporary home for them himself, and told them to go see what Nyai Timah had in store for them.

"Don't you want to spend more time with your children, Suja?" asked Nyai Timah as the children walked to her. When they reached her, she touched their faces gently with heavily creased, walnut-brown hands.

"Not on this," Sujakon replied, spreading the tarp taut before nailing it into the hard ground. "They shouldn't have to suffer this."

Nyai Timah sighed and said to the children, "Your father has a good heart, but his head and his heart are not always working in tandem." She beckoned them to follow her. As they stepped away, her walking stick made soft rustles as it dug into sand and grass.

The children asked the old woman many questions. "How do you know Papa? Do you know who the bad people are? How long have you lived here?"

"The time for answers will present itself, children, but it is not now," she replied, and neither child could tell if she was amused or angry.

"Don't you have a home?" Zulaika pressed on—a question that was on Hakeem's mind as well, but he felt it too impudent to ask.

"This is my home, my dear Zulaika."

"Like, a real home."

"What's not real about this place? I have a roof over my head." She pointed to the stars and then to the ocean. "I have running water. How is this different from the homes the government built for us?"

Nyai Timah led them to a quiet end of the beach, where they washed themselves in the sea and changed into fresh clothes. The old woman then showed them around the community. The billowing, triangular shapes they had eyed earlier turned out to be other tents, made of a variety of materials. Some tents were, like theirs, made of tarps. Others were actual tents, held up by rusted metal tubes. Then there were those made of what appeared to be curtains.

Sunlight was more pronounced now; for the first time since they had fled their home in the dead of night, the children saw morning.

People were now emerging from the tents. Some stretched remnant slumber out of their bodies. Some headed to the sea with towels and fresh clothes. Most noticed Nyai Timah with the children and stared curiously.

The old woman led them up from the beach. "My community," she told them, "is made of free people, free from the chains of modern society and city life. Here, they breathe the air of the Earth, not smog or sawdust. Here, they have a place to stay where they are accepted, where nobody but the Earth judges them." She stopped to gently touch each of the children's faces again. "We are called Anak Bumi, and now, you are one of us."

Anak Bumi. Children of the Earth.

It was hard to imagine old Nyai Timah as anybody's child. It was as if she was born into old age, wrinkled and grave, with all the knowledge of the world inside her heart.

They headed up the slope and onto the plateau. There was an old man in a singlet, a batik sarong and a stained white taqiyah sitting under the lone jelutong tree that marked the plateau. He was smoking a cheroot, whose fumes made the children cough. In front of the man were the charred, smoking remains of what must have been a great bonfire.

"Children, meet Pak Jumaat, one of the elders of our community.

mess of frames and paintings and their constituents, to his sister, and placed the frame in her hands. "And this is the first time you're staying long enough for me to show it to you."

"It's perfect." Zulaika gazed at it, studied it, and touched it over its glass cover like touching the face of a long-lost loved one. The colours had faded, but the image was clear. There was a woman, larger than life, drawn in crayon by an obviously childish hand, and a girl, drawn in pastel pencils by a more mature, impressionist hand. At the figures' own hands, crayon and pastel pencils met, a meeting of two people separated by age and sensibility, but connected eternally through something deeper, something more intrinsic to human nature. "I remember the day I drew this with Mama. We were all in our room. You and Papa were reading that book you love so much, *A Thousand and One Nights*. Mama and I were next to you, this mess of crayons before us. I drew her and she drew me." She held the drawing to her chest. "Sometimes I get scared that I might forget her. I have so little to hold on to."

"Don't worry, Zuzu," said Hakeem, putting an arm around his sister. "Her stories live forever in you."

Later, the siblings rejoined Jamaliah and Little Timah in the living room. Together, they watched a comedic Hari Raya telemovie. Through this shared experience, the simple ritual of watching actors present a humorous story on television, they laughed as a family. After the programme ended, Hakeem and Jamaliah excused themselves and proceeded to the kitchen to prepare food for their first wave of visitors.

Little Timah turned to her aunt and pouted. "I'm bored," she complained.

Zulaika reached out a hand to her niece. "Come sit with me, Timah. Let me tell you a story I heard a long time ago…"

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

IT IS 3AM on a Wednesday as I sit down at home, pondering what to write for this page. Sometimes, despite a writer's best efforts, the most difficult words to conceive are in acknowledgement. There are so many people to thank, so many people who deserve mention. If I could, I'd name every person even remotely associated with the chaotic happenings that led to the conceptualisation and crafting of this book.

I guess I'll begin with the most obvious. I wrote this novel to immortalise my everlasting love for my paternal grandmother, Fatimah Binti Idris. I inherited her imagination and her love for storytelling, the greatest gifts ever bestowed to me. Between the ages of seven and twelve, I had to share a bedroom with her, the result of a family of six living in a small flat in Bukit Panjang. Every night, before slumber took us, my grandmother would tell me stories—some sad, some dramatic, some fantastical, but all extraordinary. These stories and the characters that inhabited them would fill my head for days. Some, as revealed within these pages, have stuck with me for decades. My grandmother was my keeper of stories.

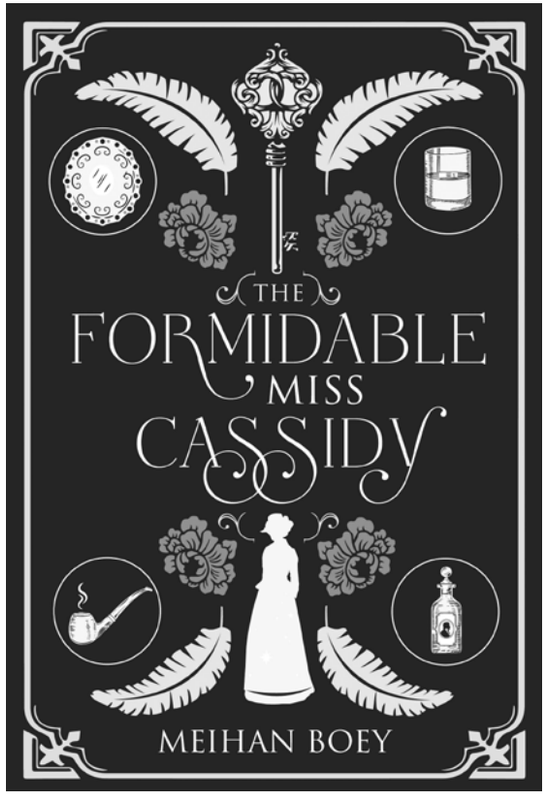
The Keepers of Stories would have been a poorer experience without the wisdom of my editor Jason Erik Lundberg, whom I have learnt to love and respect in the process of crafting this book. The gorgeous cover is the work of Muhammad Izdi, one of the most brilliant illustrators I've had the privilege of working with. And of course, this book would not even have seen the light of day were it not for my publisher, Edmund Wee, founder of Epigram Books. This is my third novel with them and it still feels like a new adventure each time. Thank you to the three of you—and everyone at Epigram Books—for believing in me and the stories that swirl haphazardly in my head.

As I'm writing this in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, I want to send my love to the people I have been unable to see for too long: my friends and family in Malaysia, Indonesia, the United States and the United Kingdom. I also want to send my love to the millions of people who have lost loved ones to this deadly virus. May our next steps, as one species, be of healing and grace.

Last but never least, my love and gratitude goes to my family: my parents, Supoano and Mazlah; my brothers, Shahrul, Syahmi and Aidil; and my beautiful wife, Shelby.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

SUFFIAN HAKIM IS a Singaporean author and screenwriter of Javanese descent. He has been hailed by *The Straits Times* as "undoubtedly one of the most whimsical, creative and unpretentious young voices in Singapore literature". His creations carry the mark of his kaleidoscopic imagination and distinct worldview, and they can be seen in television shows such as *Random Island* and *Amaranthine*, in contributions to *Esquire (Singapore)*, in his short stories such as "Sang" and "Who's Your Daddy?/Siapa Bapak Kau?", as well as in his books. *The Keepers of Stories* is Suffian's third novel, after the national bestseller *Harris bin Potter and the Stoned Philosopher* and the critically acclaimed *The Minorities*.



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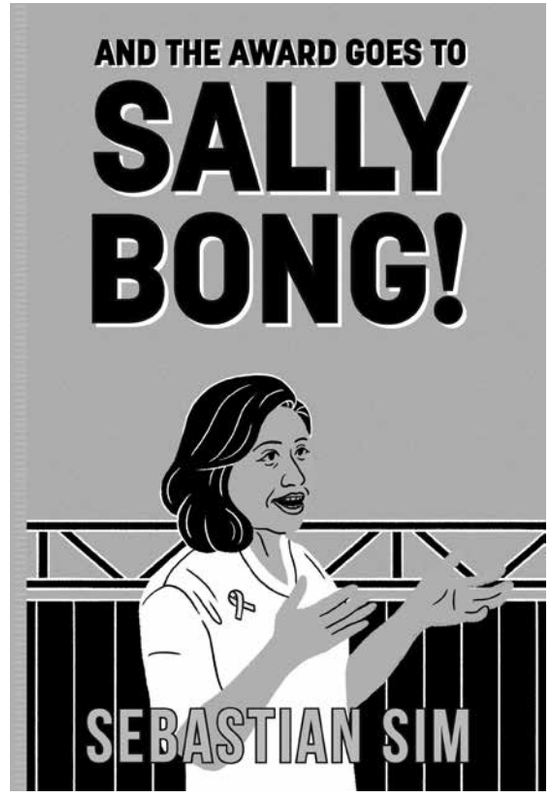

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