

COMING OF AGE IN SULAWESI

A Tale of Tolerance and Friendship

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WHEN WE TRAVEL, IT IS WE WHO ARE THE STRANGERS

An Invitation to Travel Responsibly

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Karin Jensen

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DEDICATION



I wrote this book for all who are ready to embrace the unknown.

You may wonder

how young people grow up in distant lands

and how their distinctive beliefs influence their lives.

Know that they, too, need a friend and someone who loves them.

If you can, go and see the world; it's more fantastic than you can ever imagine.

And don't worry about language skills: kindness is spoken everywhere.

Happy travels to Sulawesi!

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Indonesia lies on the Pacific Ring of Fire. Tectonically, the country is highly unstable, making it a site of numerous volcanoes and frequent earthquakes. In West Sulawesi, a powerful 6.2-magnitude earthquake on 15 January 2021 resulted in many deaths and destroyed the homes and livelihoods of 19,000 people. The landmass of Sulawesi includes four

peninsulas that lie in the ocean in a vague shape of an orchid. Sulawesi is the world's eleventh-largest island.



Subaeda and her family are **Torajans**, an ethnic group indigenous to a mountainous region of South Sulawesi. Their population is approximately 1,100,000, of whom 450,000 live in the regency of Tana Toraja (“Land of Toraja”). They speak Toraja Sa’dan, Bahasa Indonesia, and English. Subaeda invites you into her village and into her family, to take part in an important funeral that will stretch over several days.

CHAPTER ONE: BY THE RIVER

Grandpa Mohimbi has been dead for almost three years. He’s calmly reposing in his open funerary box in our sleeping room, watching over our comings and goings. Soon after he closed his eyes for the last

time, a pharmacist came to preserve his earthly remains with a chemical. Ma wanted Grandpa to be embalmed with special herbs like it was done in the old days, but Bapa insisted modern chemicals were better. That way, the deceased can wait for a longer time, if necessary, until his funeral ceremony at the Rante. This April, when the rainy season is over, Grandpa's spirit will finally be able to go back to the stars where he came from.

My best friend Rakyat and I are squatting on our sleeping mats in the first light of dawn, braiding each other's hair. Every morning, as her dark silky strands glide through my fingers, I tease a few ringlets out, as Miss Sulawesi did in the newspaper photo.

I have barely gotten below shoulder level when Rakyat abruptly gets up.

"Let's go!" She's in a hurry.

It's wash day today.

"OK, OK," I say, fixing the elastic to the end of her braid, not hiding my annoyance, "But I won't leave before I've served Grandpa Mohimbi his breakfast."

While I carry bowls of rice and mango to his bedside, only one thought swirls in my head. "Grandpa, please make sure Bapa and Ma have enough pigs and buffaloes to send on the journey with you. Make sure they don't have to borrow too much." I touch his forehead and close my eyes while I whisper into his ear.

I know that sometimes, even when every participant contributes to the cost of the funeral, it is not enough. Rakyat joined our family when she was only eight, because her Bapa was unable to pay back what he had borrowed for just such an extravagant ceremony as we are preparing. I personally benefited from this custom, as Ma and I gained a servant-girl.

I'm carrying the bar of soap as we run down to the river, while Rakyat's balancing a basket piled high with the week's laundry on her hips, sarongs and T-shirts, underwear, shorts, and school uniforms.

"How's the weather up there?" I ask my friend while glancing up at her. She's almost a head taller than I am. In the first rays of the sun, wisps of Rakyat's curls blow about her face.

"You'll know in a couple of years," she laughs and looks into the distance above my head. I can't wait until I am 14. I want to be like her, almost done with school and almost grown-up. Another two years.

The day has barely started, but it is warm already in our mountain village. Rakyat dumps the load onto a pile of rocks. Then, up to our knees in the shallow water, she soaps, I rinse, item by item, as we have done forever.

The Kalumpang Valley stretches out toward the horizon. The jungle is coming alive around us with the voices of parrots, thrushes, and piping crows. This is the home of the anoa, the dwarf buffalo, and the babirusa, a pig deer with tusks that curl back above its eyes. The canopy hides tailless monkeys, tiny tarsiers, and giant snakes. All these creatures are waking up at this glorious time. They're going about their daily tasks of getting food, building nests, and preserving their territory, not much different from the people in our village.

"Hey, Monkey Face, this is for you." I aim baby Yandi's soiled T-shirt at Rakyat's head and laugh as she jumps, fully clothed, into the water to catch it. She loses her footing and disappears with a grunt.

"You'll have to put more effort into that," I shout. But her hair is the only thing listening to me. Why isn't she coming up for air?

"Rakyat!" My heart starts to hammer. My voice turns raspy.

"Rakyat!" Should I go in after her? I run up and down the beach, knee-deep in the water. What if she is stuck in a branch and I can't get her loose? What if a water djinn is holding her down? I barely dare to breathe.

She emerges in the shallow eddy, sputtering and coughing. Relief floods over me. But then she throws the sopping fabric at me. The surprise knocks me off my feet.

“Don’t do that again,” she says in a deep voice.

Side by side, we scrub some garments in silence. I can identify the owner of a shirt by its smell, even with my eyes closed. Sweat trickles down my face. We are alone, and the sunlight sends blinding sparkles into my eyes.

“You finish the rest,” I goad and slosh out of the water. She looks at me.

“Well?” I taunt her, partly because I am bored and partly because I enjoy the feeling of power I have over her. She has to do what I say. She is mine, after all.

A cloud rolls in from the mountains and darkens our faces and the pile of washed clothes.

“I’m leaving, Subaeda,” Rakyat says calmly, “In eleven days.” Her voice trails off. I perk up as if a snake had bitten my ankle.

“What?”

“Your Bapa has found me a job in Makale.”

The ground gives way under my feet. “Without me? You are not going, are you?”

“Your family needs the salary, and I agreed to contribute what I can to the funeral.”

This is not possible. We can’t manage without her.

Nothing will change, I tell myself, and I push the thought out of my mind. We are friends. She loves me, and I love her. She’s understandably a bit resentful right now because she is working, and I am goofing about. We are like sisters. And just like sisters, we share everything: our sleeping space, the walk to school, the daily gathering of firewood, and all our other chores. I may call her Chicken Poop or Monkey Face,

depending on how I feel, but she is my most favorite person in the whole world.

“Get down from that tree and stop behaving like a monkey.” Rakyat is not even looking at me but scrubs a stain out of a school uniform. “You know that Grandpa Mohimbi’s soul is watching us. You don’t want it to become stuck in this world, do you?” Rakyat is starting to sound like my mother. Anger over my powerlessness heats my face and makes it red. To hide it, I hang upside down.

“At least until the funeral is over, could you behave like a girl?” She sounds annoyed.

Rakyat grabs the last T-shirt without another word and rubs the bar of soap around the collar and down the front.

Soak, soap, rub, rinse... Many of baby Yandi’s clothes require several rounds of soaping. Slowly, and with her eyes locked into mine, she lathers up the garment, and then, without warning, she beats it against the washing stone as if it was a poisonous snake.

“Whack!” she groans through clenched teeth.

“Whack!” What did that little shirt do to her?

“Whack!” Is she angry with me?

Sudsy water splashes in high arches in a million tiny droplets. I slither from my branch and join her in the water with a splash. She chases me with her bar of soap. I know she won’t throw it; it’s too precious. But she grabs me by the shoulder, rubs the bar through my hair, and pulls me under. We’ll smell good in school today.

Our clothes cling to us as we start the final stage of our chore, wringing the water out of each garment. We pile the bundles into our basket. It’s much heavier than on the way here, and we each carry a handle on our way home. I’m so upset I can’t speak. Bapa didn’t even ask me. I can’t imagine life without my sister, my best friend, my servant girl.

“I’ll work in a hotel,” Rakyat smiles.

“No,” I wail, while we spread the clothes on fences and bushes near the house for drying.

“And at the end of this school year, I’ll be free.” Her grin widens. “Then I get to keep my entire salary.” She looks super excited to get paid for her work.

My whole being is reduced to one syllable, “Don’t!”



Ma is packing lunches. The sound of her sigh carries to where Rakyat and I lay out the clothes.

“Mohimbi’s funeral will bring a thousand people,” she mutters as Bapa picks up his banana-leaf wrapped parcel. “How will we feed them?” Ma’s repeated this number so often that I’ve tried to tally the numbers of visitors myself. True, we Torajans have big families. While some of our relatives still live in our village here in Torajaland, many have moved to bigger towns in Sulawesi for work. And several have left the country altogether and now live in a foreign city somewhere in the world.

Besides our relatives, all the people from the town Grandpa helped rebuild after the last disastrous earthquake will want to celebrate with us. Add to them the families of the pupils who attend the school Grandpa started in the neighboring village, and all the members of the citizens’ council and their families. It makes my head spin. Ma frets daily that what Bapa has saved is not enough.

“We live to die,” Bapa repeats his favorite saying.

The requirements of Grandpa’s impending funeral, and the number of pigs and buffaloes needed for it, are like a song between the two, and this is their refrain. ‘Living to die’ means that all our lives, we save every smallest amount of money for a proper send-off for a deceased relative. This is a hardship, for sure. My plastic slippers got glued

instead of replaced. Bapa didn't go to see a doctor in town when he twisted his ankle, and his foot swelled up like a melon.

"We've been saving now for a long time, dear," Bapa says, thinking his words reassure Ma and me.

When we are finished with our chore, Rakyat and I walk to school together. I'm silent the whole way. My legs feel like logs, my head tries to understand. Rakyat was supposed to work for us until she's done with schooling to settle her Bapa's debt. I assumed she would stay with us for good. Every girl needs a best friend, and Rakyat is mine.

CHAPTER TWO: SCHOOL AND FAMILY

I stumble into class with my thoughts buzzing about in my head like bees in a hive. Except that the same bee is buzzing by over and over. I plop down beside my friend Erlin, barely appreciating her welcoming smile. Hot and exhausted, I'm annoyed by the loud and carefree antics of the boys who sit in rows of two on the right side of the room. Erasers are flying above short-haired heads; the occasional fist finds an unprotected arm. After school, they get to go home to be served while girls wash and clean, chop and cook, gather fruits and firewood, and toil from morning to night.

"Hey, let's compare math results before she comes in," Erlin says and pulls out her notebook. "She" is our teacher, Mrs. Sambolingi, who enters at this moment, hair in a bun, a binder under her arm.

I rummage in my bag and fling my book, unopened, on top of my desk. I wish I could explain to Erlin why I'm sad, but she doesn't even have an older sister, much less a servant girl. I brood. Erlin grabs the ends of my braids and arranges them on her face like eyebrows. If I have laughed at that before, it's not working today. I rest my face on my folded arms.

“Leave me alone,” I whisper as I prop my forehead up on my fists. She pushes a scrap of paper under my arm. “BORING,” it reads in her hasty handwriting. If only she knew.

Sarah leans forward and pokes me in the ribs with her pen, making me yelp. Heads turn. Mrs. Sambolingi whacks a desk with her bamboo stick and shoots me a stern look. What did I do?

These two are so childish, I judge, and compare them to a pair of chickens who aimlessly peck here and there in the street. Erlin hands another folded piece of paper to Sarah. *Undoubtedly saying unkind things about me*, I think and clench my teeth. Sure enough, Sarah giggles.

Mrs. Sambolingi points her bamboo stick at me. “What are the capitals of the six provinces in Sulawesi?” she looks me straight in the eye.

I get up slowly from my chair, letting its feet scrape the ground. “Mamuju, Manado, Palu, Makassar...” I recite what we had to learn for homework. Erlin’s hand shoots up. So do some others, Sarah’s included. “Goro... Goro...,” I knew them all when I reeled them off to Rakyat last night.

“Gorontalo and Kendari!” Erlin bursts out before I can collect my wits and without being asked. She beams at Sarah. My face burns as Mrs. Sambolingi turns back to her desk and scribbles some notes in her book, undoubtedly saying nothing good about me.

Our teacher’s voice drones on and on, but my mind is blank. I feel alone in the world. How can I concentrate on English grammar or math problems about vectors and tangents at a time like this?

Shouldn’t school teach you how to deal with real-life dilemmas? What to do when you lose your best friends, for instance. How to earn sufficient money or breed enough pigs to pay off all debts, or how to make your brothers wash the dishes in the river after eating.

My imaginary lesson plan puts a smile on my lips, but it does nothing to ease the deep ache in my stomach. If only Rakyat would stay!

After school, I want to talk to Erlin, but she and Sarah are playing hopscotch. I walk up to them just when they decide to leave. I stand on the grid, apparently invisible, unsure what to do. I watch them pick up their school bags and go home. I might as well go home, too.



The path to our village is deserted. Rakyat is not beside me. All I can do is to drag one foot after the other, head bowed, eyes on the dirt before me. Pigs slop their food, dogs pant in the shade, and chickens peck the earth as if it was an ordinary day. I have to remind myself to take one breath after another in the stifling humidity of the afternoon.

Ma greets me as I arrive. I drop my school bag near the stairs beside Rakyat's. She is cleaning the eating area with our twig brush.

"You skipped dance class," I say by way of greeting.

"I won't be dancing this year, anyway," she answers. "Your Ma and I have been talking about the city." She offers me a mango she has picked earlier. Then she lifts Yandi, my baby brother, onto her hip and bounces him up and down. He squeals with laughter.

My younger brother Perak shows up, whistling a tune. He looks as happy as a 10-year-old boy could.

"Today, I brushed my buffalo's hair into a symmetrical pattern, for good luck," he announces. Better not answer, or Perak will entertain us with every move his buffalo made, including his bowels'.

Just then, Bapa returns from the fields. He is hot and sweaty and will go to the river for a bath before dinner. Perak dawdles about, telling everybody within earshot about his beloved water buffalo's new hairdo.

"He gets to spend every hour outside of school with the beast," I say, but I know how proud Perak is of the precious animal Bapa bought five years ago when it was young and skinny. Under his care, it has

grown into a majestic creature and has become the pride of our family. Still, tending to the buffalo is the only chore that falls to my brother.

The sun is about to set, and Ma starts the dinner preparations. Rakyat makes a fire in the hearth. Ma scrapes the scales off a handful of small fish for Sop Saudara, steamed rice noodles with fried fish, some boiled eggs, and crispy taro fritters. I grab a knife and concentrate on peeling the mountain of root bulbs in front of me. We all pretend Rakyat is not leaving.

Sampe arrives home from the gold mine, dressed in his miner's uniform and heavy, closed-toe shoes. He is already 16, and when he's not working, he is out helping Bapa build temporary housing for the upcoming funeral.

"Hi." Sampe is not known for using more words than strictly necessary. His hair is matted with fine dust, and he runs his calloused hands through it.

A smile crosses Sampe's mouth as Ma and Rakyat answer his greeting.

"Tough day?" Ma asks.

"I am exhausted." Sampe sinks into our blue plastic chair and begins to untie his shoes. Rakyat brings him a bowl of water. He thanks her with another smile. Then he shows off by picking up Perak and twirling him in the air.

"You should have started lifting my buffalo when he was young," Perak laughs. "Then you could twirl him just like this now." Yandi toddles over to his big brother and stretches out his little hands, hoping to be lifted up, too.

A handful of taro peels falls on the ground. I look at Perak and point to the bucket of pig-slop with my foot. But he spins and lifts a delighted Yandi on his shoulders. They gallop around.

"At least get some eggs from the hens." I hand Perak the basket, but he brushes my hand away.

“Men don’t do housework,” he states with a smirk and turns to go upstairs. I take the basket and fetch the eggs myself.

When Bapa comes back, refreshed from a swim in the river, we are ready to sit down together. Ma and Rakyat put the pot of Sop Saudara in the center of the table.

“Lord, bless the food before us,” Bapa says when everyone sits in front of a steaming bowl, “Bless the family beside us and the work that sustains us.” He picks up his spoon, signaling it’s time to eat.

“Is Rakyat still part of our family, now that she is leaving?” I want to know. I look at my older brother.

“Is Sampe’s work included, even though he hates it?” I’m not waiting for an answer, and boldly share one more of my opinions.

“I would not include Perak, who thinks only of himself. He’s such a lazybones.” Yet no matter how much I glower at him, I can’t spoil his good mood.

Yandi fidgets on my lap. Bapa serves himself, before Sampe and Perak. Ma then scoops a few morsels of stew over her noodles and hands the spoon to me. I help myself, taking only two little fish and leaving some large pieces for Rakyat. *I have not often done that*, I realize and feel ashamed. She is always the last one to pour what is left into her bowl. Not that anybody in our family goes hungry, but some of us definitely get more meat than others.

After we have eaten, Rakyat and I gather all the bowls and spoons into the big pot and make our way to the river to clean them. Soon I will have to do this by myself. But for now, I’m glad she traipses through the darkness with me.

“You are quiet,” Rakyat says.

I bite my lip because my thoughts are like djinns, unpleasant, wispy, and without form. I blow a long breath through my cheeks. This does nothing to loosen the tightness around my chest. We walk on in silence.

“You are not exactly entertaining, either,” I say and rub the back of my neck with my free hand while a thin sliver of moon turns its cold shoulder toward me.

“I wish I could go with you,” I finally admit. An animal’s cry pierces the chorus of cicadas. Every one of my limbs is heavy, and I can’t wait to get back.



Rakyat and I say good night to Bapa and Ma and go upstairs. On a shelf above the TV, papers and folders are piled high. They are reporting on things that go on around our villages and in the world. Rakyat loves to read the headlines, and I often sit on the floor with her, taking turns.

“Palm Oil Production at an All-time High in Borneo,” Rakyat reads.

“Is that a good thing or a bad thing?” I look at her. She shrugs, “I know they’re forcing orangutans out of their habitat, and that’s sad.”

It’s my turn, and I flatten out the flimsy pages like I’ve seen Bapa do.

“Forest Cleared for New Rice Paddies.” I read, but my mind is not yet done with the previous thoughts. “Remember the pictures of a mother and baby orangutan? They are like a hairy version of us.”

“Chinese Mine Owners Treat Indigenous People as Second-Class Citizens.” Rakyat points to another article. She would read a lot more if I didn’t dwell so long on things that catch my imagination.

“Thanks to them, Sampe has a job,” I say. “Do you know how cute a baby orangutan is? It’s all orange with these enormous eyes.” I form circles with thumbs and index fingers, hold them over my eyes, and stick out my tongue for good measure.

“Yeah,” Rakyat says, rolling her eyes.

A photo of a gorgeous dark-haired girl smiles from the page. What catches my eyes is the crown she’s wearing. “Miss Indonesia Hails from

Kalimantan,” I read. Rakyat puts away her paper and glances at the photo.

“She’s gorgeous. And happy.” A sigh rises from her chest.

“What an adventure that would be!” I’m almost yelling while I imagine Rakyat and me, in gorgeous robes, each of us wearing a crown.

“Let’s both of us become Miss Indonesia! When we are rich and famous, we will preserve the mountainsides and help orangutans.”

Finally, we spread out our sleeping mats, side by side, and lie down.

“How did today make you different from yesterday?” Rakyat quietly asks me this question every night before we fall asleep. “What surprised you? What made you happy?” she adds. I giggle.

“I showed Perak,” I say and wish someone had backed me up.

“I chased away a djinn,” Rakyat whispers. “It tried to burn branches that were not in the hearth.”

“Wow,” I say, admiring her courage. “Djinns are always up to mischief.”

I have another observation to share, “Sampe smiled at you.”

“He asked me to look for a job for him when I’m in town.”

My stomach constricts and I wrap myself into my sarong. I don’t want her to leave.

CHAPTER THREE: RAKYAT'S DEPARTURE

Too fast, the dreaded day has arrived. It’s a Saturday like any other, the last one of February. The early morning sun sends some tentative

rays over the mountains, but the sky looks like rain again. It's a day full of birdsong, chores, and games, but today, a big bus will carry my best friend away into the unknown. We're braiding each other's hair.

Sampe is putting on his work clothes, watching us. He stretches and yawns loudly.

I kick Perak's foot to wake him up. He curls into a ball with a grunt.

Ma has cooked rice for breakfast and dishes it into a large bowl. Every morning, we crowd around the fireplace to receive food for our bodies and food for our souls. Ma provides one and Bapa the other.

"Remember the Golden Rule and trust that God will provide." Bapa's eyes turn heavenward. He likes to start the day with wisdom from the Bible. I think he speaks about the funeral and how much it will cost. My family has talked about little else, making me more worried every day. I hope God will provide so that we don't get too deep into debt like Rakyat's father did. *Please, please, Bapa, don't let our obligations get out of hand. I don't want to be someone's servant girl!*

Rakyat and I clamber back up the stairs so she can pack a few more things into the old suitcase. Grandpa Mohimbi is watching us from his resting place.

"I wonder if Grandpa has been to the city?" I fill the space between us with words, wishing nothing more than that they could tie her to our house. "I don't remember him ever talking about it. Do you?"

"They say that in the city, the tourists walk around with suitcases full of money," Rakyat muses.

"Who told you this rubbish?" I ask and picture the tourists who visit our village, curious people who take pictures of every house and stone and everything that moves. None of them was lugging a suitcase.

"Do you want to know how much I'll earn?" Rakyat asks.

I look up and hold my breath.

"More than 3 million rupees a month."

My head jerks up.

“Until June, I’ll send most of it to your Bapa. After that, it will be all mine.”

“And school?”

“I don’t need a school certificate because I’ll be rich.” She takes a big breath and snaps the lock of the suitcase shut.

“What am I forgetting?” She creases her forehead and scans the room. Under my pillow, my hand plays with the T-shirt she wore yesterday. “Get moving; I don’t want to miss the bus,” she snaps. She seems calm, but her voice is tense. I would like her to miss this wretched bus, though, so I get up extra slowly.

“If you stay with us, you can stop your fretting,” I say with a glimmer of hope in my voice. “After all, there are crowds of people in cities. There may be bullies, and who knows what other dangers we don’t can’t even imagine yet.”

Rakyat grabs the half-filled case.

“There will be nobody who loves you like I do or like Ma does,” my voice is almost a whisper.

Rakyat looks into the distance and chews her lower lip. She seems far away already.

The impending loss weighs me down. It’s the hardest thing, losing a friend like this, and it’s ripping my heart in two. Why doesn’t she feel the same way?

“Why don’t you stay?” My throat is so tight, the words sound like a whine. “I will miss you so badly.” I press my arms to my side because they want to hug her and hold her and force her to stay.

“Aren’t you going to miss me...us?” I add and swallow hard. Rakyat is not looking at me. My thoughts are crawling like a nest of cockroaches, unwelcome, unpleasant, and repetitive.

Bapa sharply taps the banister.

“The bus is not going to wait; move it!” he shouts.

We are seeing Rakyat off to the bus stop outside our village: Ma and baby Yandi, Bapa, Perak, and I. Only Sampe could not get the day off. We drudge wordlessly along the rutted path leading to the main road and Rakyat’s parting. Perak, shoulders slumped, trudges beside her silently. He’s watching Rakyat while pretending not to. He looks like he wants to cry, but boys don’t.

My heart beats so hard, I wonder if she can hear it. The rain pelts me, but I don’t care. With feet as heavy as concrete, I trudge beside my friend. “Aren’t you nervous?” I ask through my mask of calm.

“What do you mean?” she snaps back. “Spooked like the warthog that glimpses the hunter? Flustered like the wood-spirit that is still out after sunrise?” Rakyat is not looking at me. She is nervous, I can tell. Tears roll down my cheeks. Ma looks at me, and I think she would like to cry, too.

“Pull yourself together, Suba.” Bapa reprimands me. *He is probably relieved to have one less mouth to feed.* This speculation infuriates me. It’s all his fault! Hot anger flushes over me. My nostrils flare, and I take a deep, noisy breath while I kick the root of a tree that crosses my path. I can’t decide who to be angrier with, Bapa or Rakyat or maybe Grandpa Mohimbi, whose long-awaited funeral occupies our every thought and action.

An enormous, rusty-orange bus is waiting already, rattling and shuddering, puffing smoke into the air. The folding doors are open, and a line has formed. We all join this line of young men who work in the city and older men who visit relatives in other villages. They jostle bags, packages, and tightly wrapped bundles. Our neighbor from down the street holds her usual tray of eggs to sell to other villagers, while two old men are laughing and gesturing with their clucking chickens. The chickens will probably be in a stew tonight.

A steady shower drenches us and fills the potholes with mud. Rakyat is the only girl, better said, young woman, in this crowd. How is

she not afraid? Just before it's her turn to climb the stairs and let the rumbling cavern full of people swallow her, she wipes the rain from her eyes. We hug wordlessly.

Please don't go, my mind screams, but she doesn't hear it.

"Be safe, Rakyat. Let us know if you need anything," Ma says. Rakyat nods while she climbs the stairs. Ma puts her hand on my shoulder. It feels hot and heavy, and I shake it off.

"The Lord makes firm the steps of the one who delights in him." Bapa reminds her of a Proverb and hands her the suitcase a moment before the door gobbles her up. The windshield wipers two-step their frenzied dance, spraying me with soapy water. I don't care.

"I want to go with you," I whine, unable to bear the pain of losing her.

After everyone has boarded the monstrous vehicle, I keep holding on to the bus, not wanting to let it move. My life is ruined. I will never laugh again. Nothing will ever be the same as it was before. I see the pieces of me shattered in the mud, ready to be crushed under the wheels. The driver blows the horn. I jump, and I let go. The heartless wheels jerk into motion. My chest heaves, and I crumple on the ground. How can I put myself together again?

Ma comes over and pulls me up.

"Come on, now," she soothes, "we'll get over it." Ma knows nothing. I will never get over losing my best friend. Nor do I want to get used to being the only girl in my family again. I don't even want to think of all the tasks that rest on my shoulders now. My eyes are fixed on the vehicle that is stealing my friend. The bus sways from side to side in the furrows. It will be a long and rough ride for Rakyat, who took nothing but a few strips of dried meat and a flask of water with her. *And my heart*, I sigh.

The afternoon heat threatens to suffocate me, and the walk seems twice as long without Rakyat. Ma's arm holds me up and drags me

onward until we arrive at our home. I feel tired like never before and want only to be left alone. How I miss my sister already! I'm sorry now for calling her names, and for every time I made her feel she was not one of us.

You were my favorite person in the entire world, Rakyat, I think, and the hollowness in my heart spreads to all my limbs. Didn't she know that? I flop down on my bamboo mat, unable to move. Ma is preparing the evening meal by herself. When she finally calls us to dinner, I don't budge. I lie on my mat and stare unblinkingly at nothing, paralyzed from hands to toes. Rakyat stole all my energy. She took my happiness with her and left only memories behind. And chores.