

'Observations made at a Local Kopitiam, 13th of March, 2023'**By Yong Sin Kong Senior Runner-Up from Malaysia**

i.

Muhammad Ariffin bin Amir (aged 80) sat at a table below an awning tattered with holes, calmly sipping his kopi-o¹ and reading a book in Jawi script. His young grandchildren, Azam (aged 4) and Adham (aged 5) curiously peered over his shoulders, having never seen text written with anything other than the English alphabet. Ariffin smiled indulgently and patiently wrote individual Jawi letters on a wisp of a napkin with a shaky, rheumatic hand. Eager to learn more about this intriguing novelty, they copied the beautiful curlicues the best they can in their childish hand. As Ariffin continued to write, a group of regulars sat nearby, chatting over steaming cups of kopi. They too glanced over at the trio, intrigued by the sight of the old man teaching his grandchildren the traditional script. One of them, a retired schoolteacher (aged 64), nodded approvingly at the scene, reminiscing about the time when Jawi script was still a compulsory subject in school.

ii.

A group of musicians were jamming in a secluded corner. Johanna anak Joseph (aged 16) led them with the rhythmic beat of the gamelan², whilst her twin Joanne's (aged 16) sape³ added a haunting melody. Their friend Zhen En's (aged 16) fingers flew across the electric guitar, creating a riff that blended seamlessly into the mix. Wishing to get into the Royal College of Music, the trio were practising for their audition. They hoped to impress the admission board with their unique blend of traditional and modern music, of the old and new. They knew that the competition will be stiff, especially as they were a year younger than the typical admission age. Busking-cum-practising at the kopitiam came with its own benefits too. Through their meagre salary and donations from passers-by over the years, they could be somewhat financially independent, something they had been wishing for since they were little. They dreamed of the day when they can make it big in the music industry and repay their debt to their parents, cent by cent.

iii.

Juanita Subramaniam (aged 19) was making a TikTok video, blissfully ignoring the chattering of patrons and clinking of cups. As she filmed herself dancing, she noticed her elderly neighbour, Mr Lee (aged 68) watching her with great inquisitiveness. Piqued by his attention, she paused and seated herself at his marble table, inquiring if he would like to know how it works. After some cajoling and convincing, he eventually agreed to try, his eyes gleaming with childlike wonder unusual for one his age. Juanita, eager to impart her knowledge, excitedly guided him through the downloading process and patiently taught him to navigate the many vibrant buttons on the app's bright interface. With her enthusiastic encouragement, Mr Lee managed to upload his first video: a lively lip-synch performance to a popular Tamil song. Before leaving the kopitiam, she promised to show him the latest dance crazes the next time they meet.

iv.

¹ a coffee beverage found in several Southeast Asia nations, served with just sugar.

² a traditional orchestra made out of several percussive instruments.

³ a wooden-base instrument with some simple strings attached to it. works like a guitar.



Dressed in an impeccably tailored suit and heels, Hua Ning (aged 23) was an anomaly in the neighbourhood kopitiam as she took a hearty swig of her Milo Ais⁴ and furiously typed away on her laptop. She was absorbed in developing her startup: innovative mobility aids, such as smart canes and AI-powered wheelchairs, to help seniors maintain their independence and mobility. Determined to make a name for herself in the Malaysian tech world and beyond, she knew that her youth will make it difficult to gain the trust of potential investors. Despite that, she was confident that she could bring fresh ideas to the table, and could almost hear the Forbes 30 under 30 calling her name. Her parents (aged 56 and 58), traditional and conservative, did not understand her passion for technology and often question why she was not pursuing a more "practical" career like medicine or law. However, she remembered her late grandmother's last weeks, battling Alzheimer's and silently raging as her life was cruelly snatched from her, her freedom, her speech, her thoughts. It kept her going. She knew that her parents will be proud of her one day.

v.

Ashefa Nabilah (aged 9) was passing by the kopitiam on her way home from school when the loud rattling of stones caught her attention. She peeked inside and saw two middle-aged men seated around a wooden board, moving small, brightly coloured stones in and out of the intricately carved holes. Having never seen anything like it before, she couldn't help but be curious. She quietly sidled in, hoping her small stature would prevent the men from noticing her. Despite Ashefa's best efforts, one of them, Mahessan (aged 56) left the table and crouched down, asking if she would like to join the game. Torn between wanting to return home and the potential of learning about a fun new game, she decided on the latter and shyly admitted that she did not know how to play it. Chuckling, Mahessan offered to teach her the mechanics of it, with the help of his friend, Vikram (aged 55). She felt hesitant, thinking that she might not be able to keep up with them, but they reassured her that congkak⁵ knew no age. Ashefa soon found herself fully immersed in the game, forgetting the stresses of school life as her senses buzzed with the way the stones click when she moved them. After an hour, the outside world beckoned, and she reluctantly realised that it was time to go. As she pulled on her pink schoolbag, she promised to meet the duo again next week. Mahessan watched her skip away, a warm feeling spreading in his chest as he remembered the precociousness of his late daughter. Ashefa reminded him of her in so many ways, and he couldn't help but feel grateful for this unexpected moment of connection with the young girl.

vi.

"You may say that I'm a dreamer, but I'm not the only one," one of the musicians busking in the corner sang, his soothing voice washing over the trio. Rheshika (aged 18) grinned; the ubiquitous John Lennon track happened to be her favourite song at the moment. It reminded her of the task at hand. Her friends and she were huddled over a laptop, their faces illuminated by its soft glow as they brainstormed ideas. Danish (aged 19) paced back and forth while Amirah (aged 18), the most composed of the three, scribbled notes on a well-worn notebook. Their project, named "Project Biji", aimed to tackle the issue of food waste in Malaysia. They had been inspired by their visits to the loud, bustling pasar malams⁶ where they had seen mountains of unsold produce being thrown away at the end of the day. The trio had spent countless hours researching and brainstorming ideas to reduce food waste in a way that was sustainable and cost-effective. Their solution? A mobile app that connected grocery stores and restaurants with NGOs and shelters that could use the excess

⁴ a chocolate-flavoured malted beverage served on ice, popular in Southeast Asia and Australia

⁵ a variation of mancala, a two-player strategy board game played with small stones and rows of holes

⁶ a street market that opens in the evening and lasts till the night, usually in residential neighbourhoods



food. The app would notify the NGOs and shelters when there was excess food available for pickup, allowing them to collect it before it went to waste. Rheshika, Danish, and Amirah had even reached out to a few NGOs and shelters to gauge their interest, and the response had been overwhelmingly positive. They knew that they were onto something. As they took a break to sip on their creamy teh tarik⁷, they recognised that their work was far from over, but that they were one step closer to making a difference.

vii.

In a corner of the kopitiam, an old television flickered, displaying the Academy Awards ceremony live. Usually, it did not broadcast anything modern, instead showing old reruns of P. Ramlee films, but today was special. One of their own was on right now. A motley crew of young fans and staunch supporters in their 50s were gathered around it, their excitement palpable as they stared transfixed at the screen. Suddenly, they erupted into loud cheers and ringing applause as Michelle Yeoh (aged 60) was announced as Best Actress, drawing queer stares from everyone else in the kopitiam. As they watched her take the stage in a blur of tears and happiness, one of them, Yu Ting (aged 20) was particularly taken by her speech. "For all the little boys and girls who look like me watching tonight, this is a beacon of hope and possibilities. This is proof — dream big and dreams do come true. And ladies, don't let anybody tell you you are ever past your prime." It struck a chord. As an aspiring film student, she often felt hampered by her lack of experience, but now she knew. No matter how long it takes, she would make it big in whatever she pursues with perseverance and her spark of passion. With a renewed sense of purpose, she vowed that one day, she would be what Michelle was to her for a younger generation.

⁷ a popular milk tea beverage, characterised by its frothy head made by repeatedly pouring the drink from one container into another (or "pulling") with arms extended during preparation