

A TEACHER FOR TOMOK

By: Faisal Tehrani

OH such lunacy and abhorrence!

To be in love with your own student!

For a teacher like yourself, to fall in love with your own student is such revulsion, moreover when it is you who possesses that feeling.

Thus, is it wrong? This feeling, that emerges from the depth of your heart so pure and tender?

You, the new teacher who has just received the order for a posting, who after months of endless waiting, terrified with the idea of being sent to a rural Kelantan or Pahang, or even to be flown to Sabah or the jungles of Sarawak, can finally breathe easily when it is just a boarding school in the heart of Kuala Lumpur.

Most of your friends are jealous and green with envy.

Why wouldn't they, when you are assigned to an elite school where the students are incessantly hungry for education. But a school in the city doesn't surely produce angels. Those were Saktini's words, the same person who was assigned to a school infamous for their breed of disobedience. Stories about students hitting teachers and moral decadence are repeatedly circulated. All of them came from the same school. And yet, you are grateful that you are not posted somewhere far, away from the family. Plus, there is that youngest brother of yours, suffering from Down's syndrome and is in constant need of attention after your mother's sudden demise.

You stepped into Tingkatan 4 Cerdik, a class filled with students from the science stream. You're ready, highly motivated to start teaching them English.

Those students looked at you, with that amazed look on their innocent pimpled faces. Well, you are a sight for the sore eyes, there's no need to explain that here.

Those fresh faces of sixteen couldn't seem to blink at the sight of their teacher's lemon green coloured baju kurung (without the need to further elaborate that it was bought at Pagi Sore boutique. A Tom Abang Saufi design to be exact!), complete with its sarong tied up in a cluster fashion, and a yellow-lined pastel coloured shawl with angler's basket pattern. You then placed your white Louis Vuitton clutch on the table. Introduction time, said you.

One after another, your students introduced themselves - where they come from, their family background, and of course, their nicknames. One of them who was sitting right at the front looked at you with his fullest attention. The broad forehead, the downward smile which somehow makes a charming face, those minuscule pimples on that forehead, and that long chin. Who does he remind you of? Oh but who?

People called me Tomok. Streams of laughter filled the air, intermingling with guffaws and cackles and unknowing smiles. The same boy who won your attention just now has finally introduced himself. And yes, he does resemble Tomok, the lead singer of that one rock band called the New Boyz.

Hardly blinking, the students kept on staring at the new English teacher, at her round face, the curves of those straight drawn eyebrows, that beautiful sharp nose and that brown eyes.

Miss, are you of mixed blood?

And then it started, questions after questions pertaining yourself. Yes, you are of Irish descent (your father from Dublin), with a mixture of Javanese blood (mum from Parit Sulaiman).

"We love the Irish!" the double fanged Zaki shouted from behind.

"May I know why? Is there any reason in particular?"

Grinning, Zaki turned to his friend Hakiki at the next table for assistance. Hakiki returned his grin, an obvious sign that he can be no help, and Muhaimin, who sat at the far right from the window, where the sun is shining its brightest, responded. Westlife, that's why!

Small laughter picked up and they started singing "Uptown Girl". For a while you felt like Claudia Schiffer in that particular music video.

Tomok, you love the Westlife?

Tomok grinned, shaking his head simultaneously. "I love Meat Loaf ..."

"Wow, good choice. A classic!" say you, a little surprised as there aren't many teenagers of today knew of Meat Loaf, a well-known in the 80's.

Your duty as a teacher has started and on one Saturday, when students are allowed to go out for certain hours, you nearly lose your

footing when both you and Tomok ran into each other at Sungai Wang. Downstairs, people are mingling and rubbing shoulders, while the deejay played Robbie William's "Supreme". Yes, he stood there agape again, seeing his teacher in tight black GUESS pants, with brightly coloured patterns, filigree on the neck, J. Lo's earrings dangling, and a golden bracelet on her wrist.

"Oh, it's you, Miss? Sorry, I didn't see you there ..."

"What are you doing here?"

"I am buying a cell phone."

"Wow, you must have a lot of money. But cell phones are not allowed in school, right?"

"It's nothing, Miss. My mother sent me some extra money last week. It's not that I want to call anybody ..."

Then, you did something that should have never been done, a cup of cappuccino with him at the Delifrance. And while you're having a cup, he chose a glass of cola and a bowl of delectably creamy mushroom soup. Conversations were taking place when of all sudden, Tomok asked, "Miss, what do people on a date talk about?"

You twisted your lips for a while, pretending to think. "Why are you asking? Are you thinking about asking a girl out?"

"No, that's not it." He denied in embarrassment. "I'm just asking. I am too nice. No girlfriend for me."

You smiled. And so did he. Out of the blue, you seemed to see a light coming from that smile. It blinded you for a while. Tattaraa ... tattaraa ... what kind of teacher are you?

You went to class with your thin-framed Maniac sunglasses. That pair of yellow La Primavera's Dahlia heels of yours clicking and clacking like the beat of your heart. You were supposed to be reminded that teachers are not fashion models. Well, hello? The Ministry of Education should have a fashion course for teachers. Psychology of Youth on its own could not suffice.

In true teenage fashion, later that evening, the story about Tomok and his English teacher, Miss Ilya Nadiah going out for a drink together in Bukit Bintang spread across the hostel rooms. Some of the form 5 students called for Tomok. With mysterious smiles plastered on their faces and those cheeky sniggers, they asked him, "What were you doing with Miss Ilya?"

Later on, Muhaimin appeared at the teacher's room, and asked you, "Is it true that you made Tomok your 'pet' brother?"

"Uhm, that's not true. He is my student. You are my student. You are all my younger brothers. I am your teacher and you are all like brothers and sisters to me."

That didn't sound convincing at all.

The rumour about you and Tomok having a relationship spread like wild fire.

Serves you right!

The principal called and advised. "If it's possible, please wear baju kurung, or at least a conservative long skirt. We are not in Beverly Hills." You were angry, you felt like your rights were denied, and you really felt like reporting to the NGO. And yet you agreed with him. And, the next day you chose to wear a typical dull red baju kurung (although there are still purple coloured laces at the wrist and an angler's basket pattern at the hem).

Then, the anonymous letters started to pour in. Love letters to be exact. Feelings were expressed. "I am infatuated. I can't sleep, I can't study, I can't play hockey, and I can't even perform in Silat Cekak. I can neither do this nor that. I am gone!"

You ignored it at first, but a dozen more came at your door. It contained nothing but of love, of longing, of fantasies and oh my, he even dared to text you on your cell phone every single morning.

You seek Saktini for advice (pity that you didn't come to me for it. Saktini is no better than you!)

As Saktini suggested, you met up with Tomok again (you chose KLCC this time around, in a cafe situated inside Kinokuniya Bookstore. A more respectable surrounding you might add, since it is a bookstore). Britney Spears' "Don't Let Me Be the Last to Know" is playing somewhere inside, forcing its melody into your eardrums without you allowing it.

"Why did you write all this? It's wrong, you know."

Tomok looked down, stirring his coffee all the same. He dared not to look into your eyes. That gloom of a face, with his childish nasal voice, expressed an aura of utmost affection.

"I like you, Miss. It's not like we are doing anything ..."

"No, you can't. I'm already engaged." You lied.

Britney Spears bemoaning voice neared its end.

Tomok sat in silence.

"You are still young. You will find a lot of special girls that you will adore. You will enter a university and find a better girl. You may even study abroad and find someone better, and from the same field too! I am your teacher. I am like lover - I mean, sister to you."

He tried hard not to cry, and blushed all over. There was Tim Pierce's guitar streaming, and one of Eddie Martinez's, followed by Steve Buslow's bass. A song started to play....

Alas! The cafe was playing Meat Loaf:

"... and I would do anything for love, I'd run right into hell and back, I would do anything for love, I'll never lie to you and that's the fact ..."

If you were to follow your heart at that moment, you would have said,

"Oh Tomok, I lied. I do feel the same way since the first day I met you. I love you too. I can't stop thinking about you. I can't eat, I can't drink, I can't even teach. I can neither do this nor that. I want us to ..."

Hello! Hey! You gave yourself an invisible slap on both cheeks. Get a hold of yourself. You are being tactless. Wake up from this dream and be strong.

"I am Miss Ilya Nadiah and you Tomok, is a student of mine." There was seriousness forced in your tone of voice, though you trembled as you speak.

"... I would do anything for love ..."

Tomok looked up. "Listen to Meat Loaf, miss ..."

"... I would do anything for love ..."

"This song, it is how I feel ..." he finished his words in falter.

Oh no! I would do anything for love.

Speechless you were, as you stared at him. There was a hint of admiration for his audacity, a little bit of awkwardness within yourself, and partly the pride of being too sexy for your own good. But a part of your heart just wanted to cry out, "This is entirely your fault, Saktini! Why oh why didn't I go to Faisal Tehrani for advice!"

"I know you like me too." He continued. Oh, stop it. No more! No more! Oh shut those ears with that wide palm of yours!

"I can never forget you ..."

"... But I won't do that."

"Tomok, I would never do that!" there was hoarseness in your voice. You were stammering, shivering and you trembled as you pick up the straw inside your glass of lemon juice.

As one would expect, you called. "I should have asked for your advice earlier. Saktini is crazy. Listen to me, there is an Open Day at school next week. Parents and outsiders are all welcomed. I need a favour from you. Would you come and pretend to be my fiancé for a while? Please."

The day finally arrived.

A lot of people asked, and in all smiles, you replied, "Uhm ... my fiancé. Yes, he is ..."

You can't imagine the hundred pairs of eyes looking at you, moreover that one particular pair that was observing this disguise. How disheartening this must be to him. Surely his heart must have shattered into pieces.

A letter came, not without its fair share of great heartbreak and disappointment, two lines that have made you confused and left you momentarily agitated.

"I hate you, Miss Ilya. I will never forget your betrayal."

You called again.

"It's okay. You will reach adulthood, a level of maturity and you will learn to become a man. Every man will experience such feelings and

you will be more of a man because of it, and you will learn to control and understand your own heart. Only through these experiences you will know women, to know when is it time to love them, and when it's time to leave. Such good knowledge only comes from experience. It will neither be taught at home, nor will it be a curriculum at school."

Days passed.

As an exemplary teacher, you will keep on praying. Tomok will succeed in his studies, in life, in understanding (hopefully Faisal Tehrani's view on this particular subject is accurate!) and he will meet a good woman and will love her wholeheartedly. Maybe, who knows, that the woman in question – beyond any human expectation and the one God has fated for him one day – is you.

And until that day comes, satisfy yourself by just being a teacher for Tomok.

(Translated by Kadir Ahmad)