



The Tiniest House of Time

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Sandhya initially had not wanted to attend the protests. What if they were all supporting a perceived ideal that spouted merely from self-preservation? It did not seem enough.

There were weekly events, organised at the last minute between allies, broadcast on surreptitious websites on hidden, changing servers, drawing millions of views per day. NGOs, students, opposition party supporters, random lay—all converged with single-minded devotion to the new phenomenon of demonstrations, despite, or maybe because of, the spectre of 1969 that ministers kept trotting out on the evening news.

“Let’s not have a repeat of that,” one or the other would say, to a generation that no longer remembered. All that registered with them, the would-be protestors of this generation, was that it really had been that long ago that any public outcry of any kind had occurred. That too much had been gotten away with on the semblance of external peace,

The venue somehow made it more significant. It was to be on the commercial crossroads streets of Jalan Tunku Abdul Rahman and Jalan Dang Wangi, to be witnessed by kilometres of malls and shopping complexes, and by the tallest flagpole in the world. The websites coded the event as “The Shopping Spree”.

The enthusiasm had been infectious. Plans and talks and tales sold the protest, complete with pamphlets, like a full-fledged marketing strategy. The sense of involvement, the intoxication all its own—Sandhya couldn’t expunge herself of it. Especially when Faisal, in the days after their rooftop makeup session, had held her close and begged her to come.

Sandhya shouted with the rest of the student cohort, “*Mahathir letak jawatan*,” Mahathir resign. The exhortation thrilled - the more they uttered it, the more convinced they were of its possibility.

Faisal wasn’t with them. He and Jamal and Khairul had left the college earlier, joining some DAP supporters as Keadilan members. Sandhya only half pretended to be miffed he wasn’t joining them - but to participate as a party member took the protest to a different level altogether. The entire nation knew of the new Keadilan party, dedicated to Anwar’s *reformasi*. The ceremony had seen nearly 100,000 in registrations, with more in attendance. There was not a single newsbyte, nor a single newspaper article on the event. The sight would’ve been unthinkable two months ago, but to Sandhya it seemed they had been doing nothing else.

The triangle of shopping malls witnessed a throng of shiny dark heads milling about, getting denser by the minute. They held out banners made out of bedsheets and tablecloths and posters of Anwar. A particularly eye-catching one read “*Mahathir zalim*”, Mahathir The Cruel, in blood red. Sandhya screamed with the rest, with Ida, Au Yeong, Noor and the others from the college. She couldn’t see an inch of the ground as the crowds crushed and rushed at will. Rumours flew that Dr Azizah, Anwar’s wife, might pass by to thank them, perhaps even make a speech asking for support. The crowd surged again, the excitement went viral, and caught the imagination of thousands like Sandhya, to whom ‘questioning’ used to mean haggling for a good bargain at the local bazaar. The crowd now contained families. Fathers, mothers, teens, kids. As if they’d stepped off the discount sales platform onto another, more exciting one.

“*Reformasi! Reformasi! Reformasi! Reformasi!*”

Someone ahead of Sandhya and her friends droned into the microphone on a slightly raised platform on a road divider. People squeezed forward and strained to listen. Sandhya had no idea who the man was. Different protests had different people giving speeches, some old opposition stalwarts, others new recruits who'd brought in another thousand into the *reformasi* fold.

Sandhya was drenched with sweat, her hair damp, with droplets falling off edges. Her shoes squelched and she licked salt off her lips. She was impervious to her discomfort—the shouting gave her a high. The collective chant, like the congregational prayers her mother took her to, gained power and momentum from the sheer numbers, increasing the impact of each syllable in similar measure. Nothing existed except its repetition, a unified rhythm that comforted, was finite and inclusive.

In this trance-like state, Sandhya at first didn't hear the sirens—she doubted later that anybody did. Perhaps in assumption that Dr Azizah had arrived, the crowd pushed into the direction of the sirens, Sandhya and her friends tumbling along in the wave. She held tight onto Ida, and scanned to check the rest were still within eyesight.

Without warning, the crowd pushed back, in the opposite direction. It clashed and gurgled and foamed like a river changing course mid-stream. An elbow from somewhere slammed into Sandhya's breasts. Sandhya inhaled in shock, doubled over, and lost her grip on Ida.

The sirens were from the Federal Reserve Unit. The FRU. Specialised officers, brought out only for unique national situations. Before the National Mosque rally, Sandhya, like millions of others, hadn't known of their existence. She could now recognise them on sight.

Forming a straight line, they marched in time towards the crowd. Dark navy khakis, rough brown boots, the darkest glasses that obscured facial and racial features. Bulbous blood orange helmets screamed their presence, as they rhythmically tapped their plastic shields with batons, in time with their march. They chugged toward the chaos as guardians of order. The sirens came from behind them, from a mammoth tank, also comically orange. Its top swivelled, and suddenly Sandhya was drenched differently—they were water cannons.

Sandhya ran behind a street light, hugging the pillar of concrete for protection. She scanned around for Ida, Au Yeong, Noor, anyone.

The cannons had their impact. The crowd ran the other way, scattering into all directions. Usually that would be enough—it meant the protest was at an end.

Yet Sandhya felt her instincts sing. She ran from the light pole into the awning of some shops by the footpath, like dozens around her. There was nobody in the shops themselves. Everyone was either a protester or a spectator. Even the coconut palms around the area swung with the weight of boys climbing to get a good view.

A jet of water hit one of the palms, and three figures fell, arms flying. Sandhya looked away.

The FRU were now squarely within the throng—there were too many demonstrators for a hasty retreat. The batons swung arbitrarily, targeted randomly. One officer per thirty protestors. Some roared back, in anger and pain and revenge. They were hit again. Entire groups of witnesses fell back, ants scurrying individually and together.

Sandhya shivered, not knowing if it was because of her wet clothes or the sight before her. She scanned again with chattering teeth for Ida.

Instead she saw Faisal.

Amid chases and curses and cries, Faisal stood on a rainbow coloured shop awning with Jamal, steadily taking photos with a camera. He was on the other side of the street.

The sight of him calmed Sandhya. It also unnerved her to see him coldly recording the brutality.

“Faisal!” she screamed. He didn’t hear her. “Faisal!” she screamed again. It drowned in the prevailing cacophony. She then saw both the boys jump down from the awning onto the street.

Sandhya timed it before she ran into the street, into the thick of the retreat. Keeping Faisal in sight, she buoyed with the numbers, getting carried past him, towards a phone booth on the same side of the street as Faisal. She reached out and clung to the side of the booth, her knuckles whitening as she resisted the powerful human tide. By the time she reached the boys, she realised she’d lost a shoe, torn her blouse, and was limping slightly.

“*Sandy!*” Faisal and Jamal jumped off the roof when they spotted her. Faisal’s hug was strong but not tender, not the protective kind. It was the hug of a comrade.

“I lost Ida and Noor, I can’t find them,” said Sandhya, trying not to sob.

They considered searching for them together, realised it was futile in the current situation. “Look,” Faisal said finally. “The protest is going to continue at the Kampung Baru mosque. Maybe Ida will end up there as well. I’m sure that’s all it is.” They looked around—a man had fallen on his knees, covering his head to protect his skull from an FRU baton. The FRU officer didn’t pause in his punishment.

“That’s all it is.”

SANDHYA RAN WITH Faisal and Jamal, drinking in the sight. She had never been to Kampung Baru before—it was Malay heartland, the setting of many other episodes from Sandhya’s secondary school history textbooks. The memory most forefront now was the 1969 riots, but only in half-formed snatches, including the words Kampung Baru mosque.

The mosque was the central organism of the inner suburb. The entire area retained a time-frozen flavour from the 1800s, making one expect a British Resident General to walk around the corner any moment and chastise them all for their native stupidity. All the houses were wooden and on stilts, just metres away from the city’s skyscrapers. Once they reached the mosque, Sandhya noticed the Twin Towers—it loomed up in all its gloomy monstrosity. Its proximity made it more personable - a sympathetic but silent observer of proceedings, doomed to be no more than another record-breaking statistic in Mahathir’s list of Second World achievements.

The sudden invasion of population into the tiny streets alarmed the sleepy suburb. Other than the regular culprits, there were bystanders and women and men who had only been out shopping. They ran to the mosque for refuge.

Faisal dragged Sandhya up the steps. He had rightly guessed her restraint against entering a Muslim place of worship, a result of a lifetime of being told she couldn’t. Sandhya was borne up in the press of the crowds. The cheers and chanting started, as more poured in, pockets of people coming up with their own.

“*La-ilahi-illallah!*”

“*Undur Mahathir!*”

The mosque looked ready to burst, and the three of them had to content themselves within its compound, swaying with the throng. Sandhya was aware of still more filing in, stopping all gaps with humanity. Houses, roofs of cars, benches, trees—anything that one could sit on, hold on to.

“*Re-for-ma-si! Re-for-ma-si!*”

Damp, hoarse and slightly feverish, Sandhya attempted a shout. It came out a sputter, and she coughed. Faisal yelled in full force next to her, at one point letting go of her hand to punch his fist in the air. She hung on to his shirt.

This time the response was quicker. There were no sirens—just a sudden parting of the crowd, a rough push from the middle that rippled all the way to Sandhya at the mosque compound. Faisal and Jamal nudged Sandhya to hang on to one of the steps leading into the mosque, so she could get a better view.

Orange helmets. Batons. Water cannon tanks. Sandhya sighed.

Rifles.

“I think they’re armed,” said Sandhya to Faisal, who looked up at her quickly. Sandhya realised she’d spoken too loud—those around them had heard her words. They exclaimed and pushed each other in mild panic and agitation.

“It’s a mosque, I’m sure they won’t do anything,” Faisal amplified his voice on purpose.

“*Dengar sini.*” An FRU officer bellowed into a megaphone. “Listen here. We don’t want to do this, but we can if we want to. You know this is illegal. No assembly of more than three. Disperse, all of you. Disperse. Now.”

Not a soul stirred. The Petronas Twin Towers twinkled, merry in the oncoming twilight.

The assault started on the other side of the crowds. From those right on the street. Stones, bottles. Picked up from somewhere, maybe even the ground, a kind of belated revenge for the beatings at Jalan Tunku Abdul Rahman.

The stunned FRU personnel actually seemed to retreat for a few minutes. Sandhya craned her neck—the protestors made a massive move forward, toward the FRU, as if to ensure victory. Sandhya felt a sudden relief below her knees, and realised they had been pressed on by five men, men who had now thrust themselves forward, following a crowd about to turn manic from fear, adrenalin, rage, and sheer exhaustion.

The gushing sound was now familiar—the water cannons were unleashed on the oncoming crowds. Some still advanced, undeterred. If the force of the cannon pushed them back, they merely picked themselves up and continued forth.

Then they screamed.

They ran haphazardly, without a clue to their destination. They bumped into other protestors, other FRU officers, unable to distinguish between them. Into perpetrator and victim alike, sometimes right into the foray of swinging batons, welcoming the pain as a distraction.

“Fucking bastards,” said Jamal. “They’ve mixed acid in the water.”

The press of humanity was now back on them. In the brief rush forward, Faisal had hoisted Sandhya up on the mosque steps, asked her to step inside. She now watched from the main window, oblivious to the stares from other Malay women, wondering at her uncovered head.

It was like watching a movie. One of those Hollywood disaster flicks that was all the rage.

Balls of smoke had been fired into the air. Nameless faces that poked out of houses and cars withdrew and shut their glass windows. The mosque’s windows were gaping holes, the glass having been shattered from countless incidents in the past weeks. Sandhya coughed and sputtered with the rest, wishing she did have a *tudung* at that point to help cover her nose, as the other women were doing.

“See, that’s why, if you had a head scarf, you won’t be in this problem,” one of the ladies said to Sandhya in Malay. It would take more than a catastrophe to diminish religious strictures and codes for her.

Sandhya paused, regarding the woman for a second, then burst into a laugh. She heard no mirth in it, and it made her stop.

The air became thicker with the tear gas, new arcs of smoke materialising all the time. Nobody got near the water cannons, although the FRU batons worked overtime, finding sinew and bone anywhere and everywhere, uncaring of guilt or fault.

“Ida!”

Sandhya thought she heard wrong. The boys were just under the window, Faisal looking up occasionally to check she was okay. But yes, she could make her friend out, barely, as she looked to where Jamal pointed.

Ida and Noor, Sandhya could see both of them on the street trying to flee, a little by the left of the mosque. Watery eyed, unsteady gait, their noses semi-covered by handkerchiefs and headscarves. They seemed in shock. They probably mirrored her, Sandhya thought.

“I’ll go get them,” said Faisal.

“What?” Sandhya said.

“They’ll be safer in the mosque.”

“You’re crazy!”

“I’ll be fine. I’ll just have to catch their eye.”

“Catch their eye? Have you any idea how many there are on the streets?”

Too late, Faisal was gone. He hadn’t even waited for Jamal.

Jamal fidgeted, wiping his eyes, breathing into his hand. He threw an apologetic look up at Sandhya and plunged into the crowd after Faisal.

“Jamal! Where are you going? Oh they’ve all gone mad. Jamal!”

He paid no heed.

Sandhya turned around to the sea of faces looking back at her, waiting to see what her next move would be. Nobody moved an inch. They were too safe. There wasn’t space to put a foot forward.

Sandhya turned back to the crowds outside. Cursing and praying at the same time, she jumped.

Once in the melee herself, everything blurred for Sandhya. The cannons were much further off, but not being used anymore—the protest was now routed.

People ran, shops closed in fear, black smoke came out at two random spots. Sandhya kept tripping over things—shoes, umbrellas, bicycles, even a walking stick. She choked and coughed and was reminded of walking through morning mist.

Loud, loud sirens, different this time. Sandhya tried to place the source. Buses and vans, unmarked and unpainted, pulled up around corners. Regular policemen stepped out, with sky blue uniforms and four-foot rifles.

Sandhya’s vision by now was a constant blur, and her eyes burned as she unblinkingly looked out for Faisal. She was certain she had spotted him—he was now talking to Ida, and Jamal was on his way towards him, bending and jogging to escape the smoke.

The memory of it came much later to Sandhya—the sudden turn to her right, at the sound of shouts. The lone Chinese man looking on, bewildered, a little shattered even. A non-Malay on Malay territory. He couldn’t pass off as something else, something other than he was. A Chinaman was a Chinaman, no matter where you found him. In a second three policemen surrounded him. Two of them pulled his arms back and handcuffed him—another slapped him across the face. They pushed him into a police jeep, and hit him again.

Arrested.

The word jangled in Sandhya's foggy mind, and she turned to find Faisal with renewed purpose. She kept moving forward though she felt she was still at the same spot. She didn't seem to be getting any nearer—all four of them were still running, but Faisal seemed to turn back, looking at the mosque.

Sandhya saw a woman being dragged away by her hair.

"Faisal!" The cry was of its own volition, seeking protection.

Faisal turned, trying to place the voice. Jamal and Ida and Noor hadn't noticed.

"Faisal!"

"Ah! Sandy!" He'd seen her. He stepped away from the others, his shoulders slumped, limping a little. There were still people on the streets, but all fight had gone out of them. It was time for shelter, for recuperation.

It was over.

Sandhya tried to force a smile.

The whole thing took less than two minutes. The guards swooped in, caught hold of Faisal. Someone said something, Faisal replied. Ida and Noor had withdrawn, wide-eyed. Jamal became a statue.

Another question. Faisal spat on them in response.

"NO!" Sandhya's voice sounded guttural. It was too late. The guard had struck back, waited two seconds, then struck again. Handcuffs, pushing, head down, straight into the FRU truck.

"Faisal!"

Ida and Noor were now beside Sandhya. The truck growled away, snaking through obstacles. Jamal ran after it for a while until a guard struck his forehead with his rifle butt.

"Faisal! FAISAL!"

As a last cry of triumph, the FRU emptied a round of shots into the air.