

## Sorry, Nenek

“Your grandma is going to flip,” mused Eric. “A gay grandson who is already mixed race *and* is marrying a White man? It’s like the triple nightmare of any racist homophobe!”

He was right, but Amin didn’t want to hide and pretend anymore. Amin knew Eric was trying to make light of the daunting truth and ease his nerves, but as they boarded the KLIA Ekspres train from Kuala Lumpur International Airport into the Malaysian capital’s centre, his heart and mind continued to race at top speed.

His Malay grandparents almost completely disowned their son Khilal when he married Amin’s Chinese mother and then emigrated to England with her. To add insult to injury, they despised the idea of their grandchildren being more assimilated with their Chinese heritage and allegedly ignoring their Malay side. After Amin’s grandfather died, Khilal attempted to reach back out to his mother with limited success.

Amin and his sister Ayu still saw their grandmother whenever the family went to Malaysia to visit relatives. However, she would always remark on their allegedly obvious “mixed” looks - they were not as dark-skinned as their cousins and had smaller eyes - and she’d complain asking why they could speak Mandarin but could barely understand basic Malay, or why they’d been given Chinese versions of their names. “You may as well give them *Mat Salleh* (White people) names!” she’d protest to Khilal. Their mother Pei Yee was often blamed. They were not fans of her but the importance of respecting and speaking courteously to their elders had been instilled in them since childhood, even if their own parents didn’t get along with her.

Amin and Eric were now visiting Malaysia alone, which was Eric’s first time experiencing Malaysia. Although they weren’t specifically going to see family, Amin couldn’t not tell some of his cousins whom he kept in touch with that they were coming. Most of them were on his mum’s side and he never actually mentioned wanting to meet up but he also

informed one on his dad's side. Little did he know - and he should have really, because Asian families seemed to enjoy gossiping about other relatives with each other - that cousin would blab and word would soon get round, eventually reaching his grandmother.

"Khilaal, why is your son coming to Malaysia and didn't bother to tell anyone?" she scolded Amin's dad down the phone just a week before his flight.

"He did! He told Hilmi!" Khilaal insisted. "He is going there with a, er, friend on holiday, not on a family visit." He was careful not to slip up. He and Pei Yee were quite shocked at first but eventually more tolerant and understanding when Amin bravely came out as gay to them during his time at university. Unfortunately, homosexuality was a major taboo in Malaysia that severely impacted the LGBTQ community there, especially if they're Malay.

"So he's just going to pretend we don't exist? Having fun and his friend are more important than family?" she retorted angrily.

Khilaal pleaded with Amin to visit some family as a courtesy while in Malaysia, to which Amin very reluctantly agreed. He knew it would appear extremely rude if he went and didn't see them but it would make things so much more unnecessarily awkward and complicated.

Amin's parents both advised him not to tell the family about the true nature of his relationship with Eric. They had been together for four years now and had been engaged for a year already. Now thirty, Amin felt that even in spite of the cultural barriers, it was ridiculous to even try and lock away that part of him. He had an inkling some of his cousins knew via social media but he had never let that idea or the idea it might be hot gossip in the family bother him.

"So you're not going to tell them?" Eric asked Amin as they rode the Ekspres; the mixture of traditional Malay buildings far out in the suburbs, colonial British-inspired architecture

downtown and the more modern high rise and flashy establishments right in the heart of the city flashing by. “Or will you let them figure it out? I mean, it’s not exactly hard to tell...” he joked cheekily. Eric was respectful of the dilemma Amin was in and had assured him he didn’t mind their relationship not being open in front of his family and would help and support him in any way possible whatever his decision.

Amin slapped him lightly on the arm and chuckled in response. He still wasn’t sure. He was extremely apprehensive about seeing any of his family again as it had been nearly ten years since he’d last been to Malaysia. He was sick to death back then of the constant, prying “have you got a girlfriend yet?” questions and had been dying inside to scream out loud and proud. Should he now face them with the truth or should he save his parents’ face?

“*Salaam, nenek,*” Amin smiled curtly and bowed his head slightly as he started walking up the driveway to his grandmother’s house while she was stood in the doorway.

Dressed in a royal purple Baju Kurung with dark yellow spots and a matching sarong and tudong covering her hair, ears and neck, Amin’s eighty-five-year old grandmother walked slowly out of her house down the drive. She had a cane to help hold her up her slight, five-foot-three frame, which Amin remembered she didn’t need as much when he was last here. Hilmi had driven them to her house to see her the same afternoon they had touched down. Amin was originally adamant he did not want to face any family on the first day - or even the first couple of days - but Hilmi had annoyingly turned up unannounced at their hotel only an hour ago.

The corner of her mouth barely twitched at Amin as she eyed up Eric suspiciously, who stood further back as if waiting to be beckoned forward. “So, you finally come back to see your *nenek*, eh!” she said in an accusing tone, her already rather wrinkled, dry face screwing up as she squinted to look at him without moving any closer. She’d stopped

about twelve feet away from Amin, like she daren't come any closer and she made no move to invite them inside, hence probably why she'd come outside to meet them.

Whether she meant he's finally come back to Malaysia or finally come to see her wasn't clear but "*It's our first fucking day!*" Amin screamed internally. Honestly, why was she like this?

"Why your *bapa* didn't come back?" she asked, as if she was a police officer interrogating a culprit. No care for his mother's whereabouts.

"Because I'm on holiday without *them* this time," Amin made sure to stress *them*. "*Nenek...* This is Eric." He turned to gesture to Eric to come forward. His grandmother glared intently as Eric cautiously stepped forward. Hilmi looked away awkwardly, as if he was aware of the situation.

"*Salaam,*" Eric said politely and bowed his head as well, as Amin had taught him to. Beads of sweat glistened down his pale face from the thirty-four degree heat - but also from the obvious nerves. His curly, light chestnut brown hair was fluffy from the humidity.

"Ah, Amin taught you all the Malay he knows then eh," she quipped sarcastically with a smirk. Amin clenched his temples and jaw to try and stop himself from shouting and rolling his eyes. Eric let out a little nervous laugh, unsure of whether she was actually trying to crack a joke or not. "You've put on a lot of weight!" she said to Amin, giving him the once-over.

"No, I just go to the gym..." Amin countered her jibe as if she was retarded. She scoffed.

"Maybe we should go in for a drink? It's too hot to stand out here lah!" Hilmi looked pointedly at her and then back at Amin and Eric assuringly. She didn't look happy in the slightest at being ordered to let them in but she grunted unenthusiastically as she turned round and headed back towards the front door. The three of them followed, with

Hilmi next to her as she hobbled back inside, then Amin and Eric who sighed at each other. Amin was already near the end of his tether but Eric half-smiled encouragingly at him and gave his hand a quick little squeeze.

*Ah! Handsome and the ability to make me feel better with just a look!* thought Amin contentedly.

The inside of her bungalow was practically the same as it was a decade ago when he last came. Ghastly celadon painted walls in the living room, large oak beams that rose up towards the high ceiling, dated furniture she'd probably kept for years, and the smell of Rendang curry paste mixed with coconut in the air. Everywhere was decorated with an array of Islamic art pieces and ornaments, many featuring the Prophet Muhammad, Arabic calligraphy, and geometric patterns. There were countless pictures of family members from over several generations. Amin already knew none of his family were in any, except his dad in childhood photos with his other four siblings.

Amin and Eric sat down on the bamboo settee, the hard cream-coloured seats thin and uncomfortable. Hilmi sat on the comfier armchair to their left opposite the rocking chair their grandmother always sat in, while she immediately went into the kitchen to get the drinks which she insisted on doing even though Hilmi offered to.

After a few minutes of Hilmi asking them how long they would be in Malaysia for and where else they were visiting and awkward silences in between, she reemerged slowly from the kitchen with a tray of three glasses of Milo Ais, which she tentatively laid down on the coffee table. It seemed she didn't need the cane inside.

As Amin sipped the ice cold malted chocolate drink that he only drank when in Malaysia, allowing the happier memories of being a kid on holiday with his family to flood over and relax him slightly, she sat down and suddenly asked that dreaded question with her eyebrows raised, "So, Amin... still single eh?"

Amin closed his eyes for second to take a deep breath. “You are older than Hilmi and he already married!” Hilmi was a year younger than him and had got hitched two years ago (his parents were invited and went but he and Ayu weren’t, so Amin wondered why he bothered with him).

Hilmi shot him a warning look. Did he know? *Who cares*, Amin thought. “Actually, *nenek...*” Amin began. Hilmi was about to say something before he continued quickly, “I’m not single, no.” He heard and felt Eric draw a quick breath and fidget a little as he sank even lower into the settee.

She abruptly sat bolt up in her rocking chair. “*Walau!* What? Who is she?” she demanded. Before anyone could reply, she added quite cruelly with a touch of disgust in her tone, “I bet she is a *Mat Salleh*, anyway!”

“*Nenek...*” Hilmi started to say then turned to Amin, “*sepupu* (cousin)...”

But Amin’s ears had taken enough poison from his grandmother to pay attention. He’d decided he wouldn’t say anything unless she asked a question like this but of course it was naive of him to think she wouldn’t bring it up. “NENEK!” he suddenly shouted, his voice smashing through the dead air. He glared at her as she did to him, her eyes wide with shock and anger that he’d spoken to her in a raised voice like that.

“Not that it’s your business or should be of any concern to you since you seem to hate my *bapa* and the rest of my family for no reason, but...”

“Amin...” Eric said, “maybe now isn’t -“

“No.” Amin said firmly, grabbing his hand, to which his grandmother noticed and stared at their hands in horror. “I AM marrying a *Mat Salleh*, and it’s Eric!” he stated. Eric turned to him and gave him a worried but reassuring look which he knew meant he was by his side.

“Alamak!” Hilmi muttered audibly, but Amin shot him a look of annoyance.

“As if you didn’t really know!” Hilmi shut his mouth wordlessly.

“*Cheh!* This is sick joke!” his grandmother spluttered. If it was possible, her weathered, dark brown face was turning red with fury.

“Nope!” Amin said firmly.

His grandmother began to shake, outrage threatening to explode out of her any second. “*Aiya* Amin, why did you say that?” lamented Hilmi.

Amin glowered at her. “Because I’m sick of it! She asked me, so I told her the truth!”

“Your *bapa* knows? He should be ashamed! You *keji* (vile) son-of-a-bitch!” seethed his grandmother. Another clear dig at Pei Yee? They all stared at her, speechless. Amin’s heart pounded louder as he felt a rush of resentment, fear, and even guilt wash over him. But not regret. His fists clenched and his arm muscles tensed up. Eric’s hand squeezed his even tighter. “*KELUAR DARI SINI* (get out of here!)” she suddenly screamed and stood up. Eric was right - she’d flipped.

Hilmi was about to interject to calm things down but Amin shot up shouting back, “FINE! And yes, *they* do know and *unlike* you, *they* care for, love and support their children no matter what!” he hissed.

His brutal honesty seemed to knock the wind out of her. She continued to shake angrily and breathe more heavily, her face scrunched up and her nostrils flared but she was speechless. She may be the Noor clan matriarch but Amin wasn’t going to allow her to intimidate and discriminate against him anymore.

Amin turned to Hilmi, “if you want to stay here, you can. We’ll get a taxi.” Hilmi was rooted to the spot, unsure what to say or do.

“Amin!” she gasped as he and Eric started towards the door, “you no longer welcome -“ she couldn’t finish her last sentence as she suddenly buckled over, her fragile knees giving way. They spun round as her hands slammed onto the coffee table to try and keep herself from hitting the cold, hard linoleum floor.

Hilmi immediately rushed to her side. “*Nenek?* Is it your heart again?” She nodded without a word, spluttering for air.

Amin looked down at her, that same mixed rush of feelings coming back again. “*Nenek...* are you -?” he started to ask.

“KELUAR!” she managed to gasp again, both panic and anger evident in her forced voice.

Amin’s lips tightened and pursed with indignation. He turned round again while Eric looked helplessly between him and his grandmother. *That was that*, Amin thought. If she still didn’t care then neither did he.

“Come on,” he called to Eric. “If that’s one wish she’d like me to fulfil, then I will.” And with that, they exited her house and her life for good.