Global Asia is pleased to announce that with this Spring 2008 issue, we will begin publishing fiction by distinguished Asian authors. Indonesian writer Dewi Anggraeni’s short story is our inaugural offering.

The Peach Baju Kurung
By Dewi Anggraeni
Illustrations by Mak Siu Fung
IT WAS A DREARY MELBOURNE winter evening and I would rather have curled up in my couch watching Inspector Montalbano on TV, but instead here I was driving on the wet road, through heavy rain and the occasional thunder and lightning, toward Nurella’s house on the other side of town.

Nurella was putting on a big welcome party for her younger brother and his new bride. They had met in Aceh when they had both been working for a foundation, established to help rebuild the province after the devastation by tsunami in December 2004.

Working up a mood appropriate for a party, I turned into the neat cul-de-sac where Nurella and her cousins lived, and was dismayed to see the rows of cars already taking up all available parking spots. So I drove out again and parked a fair distance from the house.

There I sat and waited for the rain to ease, then watched helplessly as it became heavier every minute. Finally I buttoned up my coat and gathered my handbag and the gift for the newlyweds. Taking a deep breath, I heaved myself out of the car. The old umbrella I placed over my head for protection promptly folded away from me with the first assault of strong wind. Swearing audibly, I thrust it willy-nilly into the paper bag containing the gift.

I approached the back door, hoping to sneak into the laundry and make myself relatively dry and presentable before anyone saw me. No such luck, however, because the door burst open when I was still some distance away from it, and someone stepped out, then moved quickly toward the carport carrying a box of empty bottles and other containers.

“Ooh, Fida! Look at you!” Nurella’s voice boomed out of the house. “Come on in! Here, let me take your coat and pop it in the drying cabinet! Come to the bathroom, I’ll get you a towel to dry yourself…”

“No, no, no need,” I said weakly, “I’ve got a gift here for Firo and Lena, but it’s drenched, I’m afraid,” taking the pathetic-looking parcel out of the paper bag, “maybe you can pop it in the drying cabinet, too, before giving it to them.”

Nurella took one look at it and her face turned momentarily despairing before her sense of humor caught the absurdity of the situation. We both burst out laughing. Then she saw me shivering and promptly rushed me along the corridor to the bathroom.

I was drying my hair facing the mirror when the door which I had forgotten to lock, opened. A female figure appeared, then seeing me, quickly apologised and turned around. I switched the hairdryer off and called out, “It’s okay! Come in!”

A young woman walked in tentatively bringing with her a pleasant fragrance. Her shoulder-length dark hair glimmered under the light, her tastefully made-up face glowed when she smiled. “I just want to wash my hands,” she said softly.

“Of course,” I said, moving aside from the vanity bench, still holding the hairdryer, “would you like me to get out?”

“Oh no, no need,” she said.

The proper thing to do in a situation like this was to turn discreetly away and let her carry on with what she needed to do, but I could not help looking at her.

There was no doubt she was pleasing to look at. Slim and tallish, she was wearing a sky-blue Malay-style baju kurung, a long blouse with a matching long skirt, and
silver-coloured shoes. I was suddenly overcome by a strange feeling; there was something familiar about her. When she had finished at the washbasin, she turned around and looked at me briefly, saying, “Thank you,” then walked out without uttering another word.

When I stepped out into the corridor, I felt I ought to feel better, my face repowdered, my hair bouncy again, and I no longer smelled like mouldy laundry. But a sense of unease lingered and I couldn’t quite shake it off.

The kitchen was warm and inviting. “Ah, you’re here,” Nurella said cheerfully, a tray of dishes in her hands, “you look much better! Here, take this will you, and I’ll get that big one. Let’s go to the living room and you can meet people!”

Nurella introduced me to her new sister-in-law and those I hadn’t met among the other guests, then left me chatting with Firo. Two or three old friends came to join us. A feeling of overall weakness made me look around for a seat.

“I think I’m going down with a head cold,” I said to no one in particular, when I quietly collapsed into a lounge chair near the space heater. My vision blurred slightly before slowly becoming clear again.

“Are you OK? You were caught in the rain,” a soothing voice came from beside me. “Yes,” I replied automatically, then turned to look for the source. I smelled the fragrance and saw the sky-blue outfit even before seeing the sympathetic face. Questions were forming in my head but somehow I felt it would have been intrusive to articulate them. I wanted to ask her, why she was sitting here instead of milling around near the table where the food and drinks were, like most of the guests.

Was she feeling unwell like I was? Where had I seen her before? Who was she? “Can I get you a drink or something?” asked the woman, already halfway up, “I’m going to get one myself.”

“Well, in that case, yes thank you,” I replied. My body felt stiff and aching. “A warm one, if that’s not too much trouble.”

“Not a problem,” she said, and disappeared in the direction of the kitchen.

I closed my eyes. Her voice and her fragrance reinforced my belief that we had met before. Despite the headache, I tried to think. Obviously what she was wearing did not necessarily prove she was from Malaysia, after all I had several baju kurungs myself, but she had a slight accent that I associated with people from Malaysia. Had we met in Malaysia?

She returned with a glass of something and a mug wafting of hot ginger, then sat down beside me again. “I found packets of teh jahe in the kitchen. I hope you like it. I believe it is good for restoring body warmth,” she said, carefully handing the mug to me.

I thanked her, cupped the warm mug with both hands, savored the aroma and began to sip it. “Arh, beautiful,” I whispered and looked up at her face.

Then I remembered.

We had met at Tina’s wedding in Singapore. Not quite at the wedding, but in the building. That was some five years ago. I felt faintly happy for recalling the occasion.

The reception hall in Jurong was on the third floor of the big building. Having never been there it took me more than ten minutes to find the entrance, all the while thinking that I could hear the music and people’s voices. When I finally
found it, I paused before walking in. I leaned against the wall, closing my eyes, to get over the dizziness from my panic attack.

“Are you OK?” suddenly a soft voice, seeming to have come from a haze of fragrance I associated with flowers, made me open my eyes. I had expected to feel my heartbeat quicken again, but instead I felt curiously comforted.

A woman was standing in front of me. She was wearing a peach-colored baju kurung with intricate lacy borders around the collar and the sleeves. No handbag was visible on her. Her neat face was pale, but she was smiling.

She repeated her question.

“Yes, thank you,” I said, “I was a bit flustered from rushing around looking for the entrance. I’m all right now.”

Moving away from the wall I patted and smoothened my dress. “Are you going to the wedding too?”

She mumbled something, which I presumed was “yes,” so I said, “Shall we go in together?”

The woman looked momentarily undecided, then replied, “I’ll go in later. I need to freshen up a bit.” I was going to say I could wait for her, but she had slipped away and disappeared round the corner.

All evening during the reception in between chatting and eating, I looked about the room for her. However I must have somehow missed her.

“We met in Singapore at Tina’s wedding, remember? Five years ago?” I said to her, putting my mug on the low table beside me. To my astonishment she went pale. “Tina’s wedding? I … I couldn’t have been there,” she almost whispered.

I noticed that she went home not long after that, leaving me feeling that I had offended her.

“Who was she?” I asked Nurella, when most of the guests had left and she had eased herself beside me with a sigh, “who was the woman who sat beside me briefly earlier in the evening? She was wearing a sky-blue baju kurung…”

“Oh, you mean Kalsom? She’s a student in my course. Why?”

I decided quickly. “Nothing important. Just that we didn’t have time to talk that much. I had this terrible headache, and she …”

“She felt unwell, yes I know. She left early,” Nurella interrupted me, picking up a piece of cake from a platter on the table, then ate it hungrily. “I didn’t have much opportunity to eat, you see,” she said with her mouth full.

“So she is from Malaysia then?” I speculated.

“Originally. She’s lived in Australia for over ten years though. Used to go out with a handsome young executive.”

“Then what happened?”

“Don’t know. Didn’t work out, from what I heard. She is not a chatty sort of person. Keeps very much to herself.”
The incident kept bothering me, so I looked up Tina’s phone number in Hong Kong, and called. A housekeeper answered, saying that “Ma’am” was visiting her parents in Australia. I then called her parents’ house in Sydney and caught her there.

There was a distinct unhappiness in her voice, though I pretended not to notice. “How long are you visiting? Are you coming to Melbourne?” I asked casually.

“I might,” she replied non-committally, “but at the moment, I just wanted some peace and quiet with Tracy.” Tracy was her daughter’s name.

When she didn’t offer any more information, I didn’t press on, but continued with small talk. That seemed to put her at ease. Then I asked, “By the way Tina, do you know Kalsom Rahman?”

After several seconds of silence, Tina’s voice came back on, “I know of her. She was James’ girlfriend before he married me. Why’d you ask?”

“Did she come to your wedding?”

“Highly unlikely. I heard she was extremely upset when she learned that James was marrying me. He said she was still seriously carrying a torch for him. I don’t recall sending her an invitation. And I don’t remember seeing her there.”

I told Tina that I had seen her recently, and was wondering whether we had met before.

“Very likely. She lives in Melbourne.”

I was intrigued, but my intuition told me I should stop there.

Tina had met James when she had been working in Singapore. She had emailed me the following day high with excitement, believing she’d just fallen in love. “I just met my soulmate! He’s goorgeous! Drop dead handsome! And we fell head-over-heels in love with each other on the spot! OK, I know it sounds corny. But believe me this is the real thing!” she had written. I’d smiled at the impersonal screen, and had typed in, “Seeing that he lives in Melbourne, is this going to be a long-distance romance?” To which she’d replied, “He says he’s going to be posted in Hong Kong soon. Hong Kong is not that far from Singapore, is it? It will work out. Trust me! I’ve never been so sure of anything as I am about us now.”

Two days later another email from Tina had startled me. “Fid, he’s proposed! We’re getting married in September then moving together to Hong Kong.”

“What about your own work?” I’d asked, quietly breathless.

“Am I worried? It’d be easy to pick that up later. I just wanted to make sure I didn’t let this incredible, incredible thing slip out of my fingers. Besides Fid, I believe we were fated, predestined to meet and to be together. Otherwise how could we spot each other in such a busy conference center?”

I’d been tempted to write, “Nothing to do with the fact that you were both good-looking and probably unconsciously homesick?” but deflected. Besides, I didn’t know he was good-looking. That was what Tina said.

Fortunately my work was highly demanding that time of year, so it was not practical to do anything further.

Almost three months after Nurella’s party and the phone conversation with Tina, though I had not forgotten Kalsom, the urge to burrow deeper into her mystery had subsided, and I had pushed her into the back of my memory.
One afternoon, however, I was walking toward the spot where I’d parked my car when I suddenly realised someone had been walking alongside me for some time. I turned and saw Kalsom’s face. In a charcoal-grey pantsuit she looked completely different. Businesslike and self-assertive.

“How are you?” she asked, as if nothing had happened last time we had seen each other.

I was tempted to keep walking, ignoring her, but I did not. “What happened to you that night? Why did you suddenly get up and leave? What did I say?” I didn’t know what came over me to blurt out like that.

“Come to my place. I have a townhouse in the next block,” she said simply.

As soon as we stepped into the entrance hall she walked ahead of me to welcome me in. Though very faint, a fragrance wafted past me. It was less heady, probably having been dissolved by air-conditioning throughout the day. Then a few moments later in the living room, I knew we were in a single woman’s home. Everything was so unselfconsciously feminine, as if she had successfully cut out anything masculine from her life. There was nothing in the ambience that suggested a man was frequently visiting, let alone living there. And for such a young person, she had a particularly mature and sophisticated taste. The furniture reminded me of my wealthy aunt’s private library in her home in Mount Eliza. There were no posters of pop stars or rock singers. There was instead, a painting of a belly dancer performing in what looked like a private wing of a lavishly ornate palace, surrounded by other women in similar attires to the dancer’s, sitting in a loose circle, their faces suggesting they were enjoying themselves.

“So you live here on your own?” I asked.

“Yes. My sister comes to visit from time to time. But generally speaking, I prefer to be alone,” she said. “Would you like coffee? Or tea?”

“Coffee, thanks.”

“Make yourself at home,” she called out from the kitchen. I thanked her, still looking around, admiring.

When she walked in with a tray, I looked at her, saying, “This place is so, so… you.”

She looked back at me. “Oh? What d’you mean?”

“So self-contained,” I finally said, though it didn’t quite express fully how I felt. Her face seemed to harden. “I see. It took me almost five years to achieve it. I was a mess before then. Real mess.”

I wanted to ask, “James?” but the word was stuck in my throat. If she had succeeded in cutting him out of her life, what right did I have to bring him up again?

She put the tray on the beautiful mahogany coffee table and disappeared round the corner, just like she had, more than five years previously, outside the reception hall in Jurong, Singapore. I didn’t touch anything until she returned with a handful of papers.

“I’ve kept them, to remind me that I finally got over my depression. If you really want to know, you’re welcome to read them.”
She handed them to me as if she were giving something unimportant to be rid of. We locked gazes before I sat down to look at them.

They were email printouts. From James. After a quick look at them, I realized that they were an electronic version of love letters. I was hesitant at first, feeling like I was intruding on her private life. But she insisted. “Read them. You’ll understand why I behaved the way I did when you mentioned Tina, at Nurella’s a few months ago.”

Ignoring the steaming coffee, I read on. The last email was dated a week before his and Tina’s wedding.

“I had been completely unaware about Tina, let alone that he was marrying her. Apparently she was working in Singapore then. I only knew that James had business to do in Singapore, so he went there frequently during the last two months of our relationship. I heard about the wedding a few days before then, from a mutual friend, who had been told by James that we had broken up. Thing is, the night before that, he was still with me.

“I was so devastated I tried to end my life on their wedding day. I put on my peach-coloured baju kurung, James’ favourite, and took an overdose. But my then flat mate, who was supposed to stay away for the weekend, came home unexpectedly. She rushed me to hospital. I came to only the following day.”

“You mean, you weren’t in Singapore on that day?”

“No, I was in hospital. Unconscious.”

I stared at her, uncomprehending, or rather, refusing to comprehend, my hands on some of the letters on the table. When she reached out to touch my hand, I nearly pulled it away.

“I went through what I discovered later is a common phenomenon with many abandoned lovers: a period of self-recriminations. I believed it was my fault that he’d left me for someone else. He was such a brilliant man. At work he was so admired. He couldn’t have done what he had if it hadn’t been provoked by me. Then one day, a friend told me that she knew of many people who were over-developed cerebrally but emotionally they were as underdeveloped as six-year olds. Irresponsible and inclined to seek instant gratification.”

She looked at me as if expecting my comments on what she had just said. But instead I asked,

“Do you still keep in contact with James?”

“No. But a friend told me that he had a new woman in Hong Kong, and that his wife had returned to Australia. You know, it is easy for me to look back now, and feel how grateful I am that I was somehow saved from further entanglement with him.”

I searched her face, and believed that she meant what she said.

“Quite so,” I said, grabbed my tepid cup of coffee and drank it in two gulps. It was sweet. I had forgotten to say that I didn’t take sugar. The shock of the taste made me look at the empty cup as I replaced it on the saucer as if seeking explanation from it.

“Are you OK?” I heard her say. I looked up. She was still there. In flesh and blood.

Dewi Anggraeni, a native of Indonesia, is a widely published author of fiction, essays, reviews and articles. Her latest novel is Snake, (2003), and her most recent non-fiction work is Dreamseekers: Indonesian Women as Domestic Workers in Asia (2006). She is Australia correspondent for Tempo news magazine, Jakarta.
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