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FROM

*Memoir of a Radical  
Homosexual*



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*Memoir of a Radical  
Homosexual*

**Arozak Salam**



Some names and identifying details have been changed to protect their identity.

First published in 2023

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That Unicorn

Perth, Western Australia

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We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the Country on which we live and work. We pay our respects to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders, past and present.



A catalogue record for this book is available from the National Library of Australia

ISBN 9780645843606 (paperback)

ISBN 9780645843613 (ebook)

Cover images: Deric Martin

Cover design and book format: That Unicorn

To the lost souls.  
Somewhere out there,  
your tribe is waiting for you.

Everything will make sense.  
You are just imperfectly beautiful.

All this time.



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About the author







# 1 THE CLUE

Neon lights, confetti, low-lying fog, and the intro of “Crazy in Love” by Beyoncé. I like a grand entrance to begin my show as a unicorn burlesque performer. But that is a story for later. I am going to start my opening chapter with a confession instead. When I was five years old, I used to play a Power Ranger character with my friends. I liked to untuck my shirt, turn it into a crop top showing my belly button, and push the boys as I walked, “I am a Pink Ranger.”

Being a Pink Ranger in the biggest Muslim population in the world, Indonesia, meant I had to endure being called *bencong* in my childhood. I was just a boy who liked to express my creativity in a brightly coloured outfit, but I was already being labelled as gay before I knew what it meant. Not until I was in junior high school did I understand the same-sex attraction after having a crush on my classmate. What I saw was an imperfection. My sexual orientation brought down on me a guilt that emanated from my raw interpretation of a page in the Quran saying that gay men belong to hell. I blamed my five-year-old self for choosing a Pink Power Ranger character. It made me gay, I thought.

Throughout my adolescence, I wondered who I would be if I were not a Pink Ranger. But my rebellious inner voice often provoked me to think that maybe I was meant to be a Pink Ranger. I was trapped in my own battles to find such answers, which left me contemplating as I approached my early twenties. Maybe the Pink Ranger was a major life clue. Maybe it was a sign leading me to discover the core of my identity and explore the part of me outside my society bubble.

There I was, deciding to pursue life's clues. After finishing university, I went solo backpacking through Southeast Asia for five weeks while my freshly graduated peers were busy looking for jobs. This was 2010, and the idea of travelling alone overseas was uncommon for Indonesians. My itineraries were filled with exploration of gay bars and meeting up with local gay people in every country I visited. I let myself be the Pink Ranger I had always wanted to be and embraced every moment of soul-searching. I did not tell anyone about my first gay adventure as I was still in the closet. To my family and friends, I was adventurous. To me, I was adventurously fabulous.

"How were the girls in Thailand?" my friend asked me while he stroked his beard.

"Did you end up with a ladyboy?" He winked.

Backpacking around Southeast Asia was a breakthrough as I encountered plenty of Pink Ranger boys out there while I got to know myself even more. I hoped to become a new me after graduating from my adventure, but I could not deal with the reality I knew I would face once I returned home. I came back to living as a discreet gay man—my sexual orientation was a burden due to societal and religious pressures in my circle of

family and friends. I still could not fully embrace my inner Pink Power Ranger.

“Any luck with job hunting?” My mom was checking on me at my study desk before she went to bed.

I gave her a half-shrug as my default response. It would be too bitter to say there was nothing new to report, and I did not want to disappoint my mom every time I looked at her. I wished she could see through my eyes that I was dealing not only with job hunting but also identity searching. Any sign from the universe would help, as I had been jobless for months amid invisible life directions. Many of my friends had gotten jobs right after graduation. If it was a race, I was still tying my shoelaces while they had already started running. My self-confidence was dissipating day by day. I wanted to avoid socialising and dodging the questions from people about my life after the Southeast Asia backpacking trip. During one sleepless night though, I found what I believed was a clue as to what my next journey might be.

*“Are you the chosen one?”* was advertised on the website.

\*\*\*

The Ministry of Youth and Sport of the Republic of Indonesia launched a prestigious youth exchange program allowing the nation’s youth to represent the country. The initial selections were conducted at the provincial level. The government of West Java, where I lived, organised three stages of selection covering administration, a judging panel and quarantine to accommodate approximately 500 applicants.

*“Please rank your preference for the youth exchange program, with country destinations as follows: Canada, Japan, Malaysia, Korea and Australia,”* read the instructions on the form.

I ignored the application for days because I did not have standout academic and extracurricular achievements. I thought about failing even before the selection started. But I flashed back to being a Pink Ranger and how I'd felt liberated unlocking myself as an openly gay traveller during the Southeast Asia trip. This youth exchange program could be my jackpot as I continued exploring my identity. I had to do something to flip my destiny, as no one would do it but me.

"Hello, everyone! I would like to discuss the impact of social media on youth nowadays..." After passing the administrative stage, I delivered the presentation to the judging panel based on the script I had prepared beforehand. My English was not fluent at that time. Speaking for three minutes was the accumulation of a week of effort to memorise the words and rehearse in front of the mirror. I created simple traditional dance choreography for the cultural performance assessment and presented it as a flash mob where anybody could follow my lead, like in an aerobics class. During the interview, solo backpacking through Southeast Asia became my selling point to prove I could be flexible in new cultures.

"I will always have the option to go to other parts of the world as a tourist. However, to go abroad representing Indonesia as a youth ambassador under the Ministry of Youth and Sport of the Republic of Indonesia will be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity." I made eye contact with the interviewers.

"Besides, I believe having an endless curiosity for a new adventure is contagious. I want to share this spirit with the people around me so that every youth can be inspired by the adventurous tales of others. There are more stories in life than

being born, studying, getting married, having kids and dying,” I explained. My heart was beating fast.

Only 25 candidates were invited to the final round. I had previously failed in the very first round of the *Indonesian Idol* auditions. Progressing to the last stage of youth exchange selection was already a big achievement for me.

“Welcome to the final leg of the youth exchange program selection.” A man with a *Batik* shirt—an Indonesian technique of applying wax-resistant dye to cloth—spoke to the candidates on the opening night of quarantine. “As part of the assessment, you will face different challenges. You should be ready for a focus group discussion, talent performance, in-depth interview, and written test.” He pointed his finger to remind us that we would face a tough selection process.

Some people were eliminated on the first night, and I was humbled to survive until the day of the announcement. There were 15 high-achieving and talented candidates left. Some spoke four foreign languages, played various musical instruments, and had won sports competitions. We gathered in the room waiting for the final verdict. It was a dead silence, but my mind screamed out loud, wanting to end the suspense.

“All of you are the future of the youth movement. You have shown us your best efforts during the quarantine,” said the head officer of Youth and Sports Affairs of West Java at the closing speech.

“This year, our province received the quota from the Ministry of Youth and Sports Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia: one male for the Australia Indonesia Youth Exchange Program (AIYEP), one male for the Canada Indonesia Youth Exchange Program (ICYEP), and one female

for The Ship for the Southeast Asian and Japanese Youth Program (SSEAYP).” His eyes focused on the piece of paper in his hand.

Every year, the central government organises a quota system for each province to send their representatives. Depending on the designated youth exchange countries, the Indonesian contingent consists of between 18 and 26 delegates, half male and half female. Canada was my first option because it had the longest exchange duration, about six months. Australia was at the bottom of my wish list. I did not know much about the country, despite it having the most prominent gay pride celebration in the southern hemisphere, Sydney Mardi Gras. Australia was a mysterious country to me.

“For the AIYEP delegate, congratulations to...” He paused briefly. “Arozak Salam.” His voice boomed across the room.

The silence converted to the explosion of clapping hands. The candidate beside me tapped my shoulder to signal that my name was being called. I could not hide my smile, but deep down, I giggled incredulously. “Australia?”

\*\*\*

AIYEP was established in 1981 as an initiative of the Australia-Indonesia Institute Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. Since then, the alumni of AIYEP have always arranged the national pre-departure training in Jakarta to share their experiences and help the newly selected delegates bond as one solid team.

“Remember that you are still a candidate, and we can send you back to your province if there is any misconduct.” The alumni coordinator stood before us, looking so vibrant with her red skirt and lipstick.



“No one is guaranteed to go to Australia until the day we send you to the airport,” she added.

The pressure was on, but my excitement kept me alive as I believed I was on the right track, following life’s clues. There was this déjà vu feeling when I sat in the conference room. I could sense something big was about to happen. It felt like I was in my own movie scene, and all the surrounding people were there to convince me that I would get through the upcoming puzzling plots.

“You will spend two months in Australia and two months in Indonesia with the Australian representatives. We will discuss various topics this week. All the presentation materials are tailored to minimise the problems that usually occur during the program. We do not want to hear of unnecessary drama later on.” She looked at me.

I smiled back at her to be polite while adjusting the black feather brooch that I’d pinned on my white shirt. I wanted to look fabulous, even at 2 pm.

“Tomorrow you will learn how to handle the culture shock in Australia, and reverse culture shock when you return here.” She read the rundown of the pre-departure training on the projector.

“The rest of the week, you will learn public speaking for a courtesy call with the Australian and Indonesian governments, and how to interact with the Australian delegates when they join you. This is the most serious part; we will discuss how to organise community development in rural areas in Indonesia, setting the host family’s expectations, internship and cultural performance at the schools in Australia and Indonesia. You all got it?” She clapped her hands once to grab our attention.

The room was silent. I looked at the candidate beside me, who struggled to open his eyes. I was not the only one who needed a double shot of coffee that afternoon.

The main challenge in uniting all 18 delegates was eliminating our individual egos as we came from different provinces and walks of life. We went through various group simulations to bond, like in military exercises. There was a blindfolded session for a half-day, so half of the group took care of the other. There was a session where we walked across two metres of burning coals and wood embers to overcome our internal fears. We spent sleepless nights practising for the *Saman* dance, where we lined up, sat on our heels and knelt in tight rows to create a fast-paced rhythm and collective group harmony.

The most anticipated activity during the training was when we got invited to meet Andi Mallarangeng, the Minister for Youth Affairs and Sports of the Republic of Indonesia. My pride as a civilian skyrocketed at having the opportunity to meet government officials.

*“Take a picture with him,”* my dad texted me, as he and Andi Mallarangeng come from the same province, South Sulawesi.

After two hours of waiting in his office, he finally showed up to give us a send-off speech.

“Please remember that each of you will represent Indonesia, and you are the agents of change. Use this opportunity very well.” He shook our hands one by one before taking a group photo.

After one week of pre-departure training, all 18 Australia Indonesia Youth Exchange Program delegates gathered on the inauguration night. The Indonesian flag was erected in the

middle of the meeting room, and we walked past to kiss it one by one as part of the ceremonial procession.

“It’s your turn.” My friend Putri from Borneo Island pointed her finger.

I stepped up to the front and paused as I looked at the red and white flag. It reminded me of all the struggles I had been through. After returning from backpacking, I was hiding my identity as a Pink Ranger, had been unemployed for months, and had participated in a long youth exchange selection process. There had been no shortcuts to finally reaching this life’s clue. It had started with one click to upload the application form, and there I was, standing in front of the national identity.

My right hand reached gently for the edge of the flag, and I held it to my lips. My vision started to get blurry, holding my emotions at the edge of my eyelids. I blinked, and tears fell on my cheeks. I felt honoured to be representing my country, Indonesia.

At the airport the next day, we all wore formal uniforms and a *peci*, the type of cap worn by the first president of Indonesia, Soekarno. The Indonesian national symbol, *Garuda*, was pinned on the left side of the *peci*. The outfit reminded us that we flew as youth ambassadors, not just travellers.

The alumni coordinator walked us to the international departure gate. “I am proud of you all, and please take care of each other in Australia. We can only assist you up to this point, and you are the ones who have the power to write your bilateral history during this program. We will see you again in two months here, together with the Australian contingent.” She waved as the Indonesian contingent prepared to leave.

I looked at the sky from the plane window as we took off. Seeing Jakarta from the cloudy horizon was surreal. Looking back, I was flying not only to mark the new adventure that had just begun, but also to fetch my serendipity. It was calling me on a subtle frequency, and would lead to stories of broken-hearted immigration survival, a unicorn alter-ego, the world stage spotlight, and a reconciliation between religion, family and societal oppression. I did not know those remarkable events were waiting for me. My part was to take the first leap, boarding the flight that carried my life's clue.

I was wide awake on the plane, stomping my foot every now and then, realising I was about to spend two months in Australia. It was a country I had never thought I would ever visit, but Australia was about to change my life, from up above to down under.

## 2 THE FIRST SIGHT

“G’day, mate!” I tried pronouncing “mate” in an Australian accent just before the plane landed.

“Say M and 8 altogether. *M8!*” Putri, who sat next to me, moved her lips.

It was the spring of 2010 when I arrived in Brisbane, Queensland. My first impression of Australia was beautiful in purple. The blooming jacaranda trees welcomed us, and the purple leaves were scattered all over the pavement. It was an exotic sight for a tropical boy like me.

The Indonesian contingent spent a month in Brisbane as the initial phase of the youth exchange program. The first week of city orientation was a honeymoon. Coming from a developing country, simple things about Australia felt like a luxury. Tasting the fish and chips. Cycling around the botanical gardens. Enjoying the city view from the Wheel of Brisbane. Taking a boat trip along the Brisbane River at Southbank. My only mistake was spreading too much Vegemite on my bread, thinking it was a chocolate jam.

Each delegate stayed at local family houses to allow for daily cultural exchange with Australians. We gathered every

Monday at different Australian schools for cultural performances. The work placement filled our schedule for the rest of the week, allowing us to gain local job experience that matched our educational backgrounds. All these activities were designed as part of people-to-people diplomacy, an interaction between regular citizens of two countries at various levels to establish communication and understanding. The grassroots of cross-cultural exchange are basically in everyone's hands.

"We might not be born to perform, but we will conquer the stage!" I said to the team at our first cultural performance at Harristown State High School.

"Yes, we can!" Our hands were on top of each other as we yelled the performance's mantra backstage.

I had been chosen as the cultural performance coordinator for the Indonesian contingent. None of us were professional performers. Most delegates were students; the rest worked as accountants, flight attendants, engineers and scientists. But we wanted to make permanent memories, as our time in Australia was temporary. Apart from the official Monday schedule at the schools, we also thrived on performing at additional gigs. We dared to exchange our stage fright for the excitement of promoting Indonesian culture to the Australian audience.

"Hi, guys! Have you heard of the concept of busking before?" I put a guitar case out while we gathered in Southbank Park.

It was a spontaneous idea to spice up the rehearsal. A few pedestrians started to pay attention as we made loud vocal sounds during the *Saman* dance. Some of them stood next to the guitar case and dropped coins into it. The money had

pumped our performance's adrenaline that afternoon. We danced, following the percussion with a much faster tempo than usual.

"How much money did we get?" I asked Putri at the end of our rehearsal.

"Just \$13!" She gave a bitter laugh. "There's 18 of us; not even a dollar each!"

"Oh well! After all, it's the Australian dollar, not the rupiah!" I recalculated the coins.

"Let's put it on a frame!" She grabbed my wrist. "For the memories we've earned by using our talent!"

On a separate occasion, the Indonesian contingent also performed a *Saman* dance for a fundraising event at Park Ridge Baptist Church, located 30 kilometres south of Brisbane. The dance itself actually contains a moral message of Islam and is typically performed to celebrate an Islamic event, such as the birthday of the prophet Muhammad.

"*Assalamualaikum,*" said our lead singer at the start of the *Saman* dance, wishing peace to the audience at the church.

The crowd went silent when the dance commenced. Some guests sitting at the circular tables shifted their bodies to observe the performance on the stage. They clapped as we delivered the fast-paced choreography. A few even forgot to turn off their camera flashes when taking photos. That night, we proved that art performance knows no boundaries, and bridges the differences between people from different backgrounds.

\*\*\*

My host family in Brisbane was originally from New Zealand. As a 23-year-old guy from Indonesia who had never lived

abroad before, I immediately encountered culture shock at the beginning of my stay with them. It took almost an hour by bus from where I stayed in Kenmore to get to my internship location in the city centre. After I did the morning prayer, I usually used the early hour to have breakfast with no rush and to get ready. One day, my host mum interrupted me in the kitchen.

“Do you know what time it is?” she whispered.

“Oh, it is 5.30 am,” I answered with a smile.

“I know! Keep the noise down then!”

I thought she was genuinely asking for the time. Apparently, I had made too much noise when I’d washed my dirty cereal bowl. After that, I used a plastic spoon to avoid the clinking noise of metal tapping the bowl. I tiptoed around the house like a thief. I kept my time in the bathroom to under five minutes, brushing my teeth and splashing my face. My morning routine in Australia taught me to be a proficient silent ninja trying not to wake up the dragon.

The second culture shock I had was because of the rice. I craved it badly that I attempted to cook it by myself for the first time. As a result, I burned the pot.

“I bought something for you.” My host mum handed me a rice cooker.

“Oh, wow!” I jumped off the floor.

“Thank you!” she quipped. Her tone of voice changed. I immediately realised she was being sarcastic, as I had not thanked her. I did not mean to be ungrateful. Quite the opposite; I was too overwhelmed.

“Thank you... Linda.” I fixed my posture and spoke to her in a flat tone.



I looked at the rice cooker feeling guilty. In a split second, I remembered what the alumni had said during pre-departure training: “There are three magic expressions you should not forget in Australia: ‘sorry’, ‘please’, and ‘thank you!’”

My zero-cooking-skill disasters did not stop with burning the rice. It was the first time I’d used a microwave. As I stayed with another Indonesian delegate at the house, I once saw her cooking noodles in the microwave. Feeling inspired, I also cooked instant noodles with a bit of improvisation. I added a raw egg to the bowl and put it in for five minutes. I went to my room while waiting for the timer.

*Boom!* I heard an explosion from the kitchen.

I was trembling when I opened the microwave. The egg had burst into pieces and was scattered inside. I cleaned it carefully to make sure there was no trace of the yolk. That egg bomb tragedy traumatised me, and I never went near the microwave again. Thank God I was alone in the house that day. If my host mum had found out about it, she probably would have given me a red card, banning me from her kitchen forever.

Despite the culture shock that happened predominantly in the kitchen, I knew that my host family cared for me. They cooked vegan foods, attended our cultural performance, and took me for a weekend getaway to the Gold Coast. Knowing they treated me fairly as an adult, I did not hesitate to communicate with them about my specific request. I intentionally planned this time as part of my self-discovery while I was in Brisbane.

“Can I go out tonight to check out Brisbane’s nightlife?” I went to the living room where my host parents spent their Saturday nights together.

“By yourself?” my host mum gasped.

There was a silent moment for a couple of seconds. I fidgeted, waiting for her next words.

“As a paramedic, I know the area so well.” She held her breath. “There are lots of drunk people. Are you sure you want to go?” She inclined her head, trying to change my mind.

“Yes! It is part of my cultural observation,” I smirked.

“What if your passport gets stolen or something bad happens?”

“He will be fine,” my host dad interrupted her.

I felt relieved knowing somebody had backed me up. I took a moment trying to convince my host mum. “I will take care of myself, I promise.”

“Well, you are an adult. It is up to you.” She lowered her voice.

“Just be careful.” My host dad gave me the green light.

Besides having a cultural exchange with my host family, I also had a hidden agenda to visit a gay bar. Whilst I had been to Southeast Asia, I also wanted to experience the gay scene in a developed country like Australia. It was an important mission for me, as every step of exploration was progress towards accepting my identity as a gay man.

My venture was a go. I took the train and arrived at Fortitude Valley, only to find out that my host mum was utterly right. I was terrified to see many drunk people screaming and shouting on the street. I was scared that if something terrible happened that night, the youth exchange coordinator would terminate my stay and send me back to Indonesia for misconduct. I rushed to avoid eye contact, raised my chest to toughen my look and pretended I knew where I

was going. It was difficult, as my basic phone was only for calling and texting. Like in the old days, the paper map guided me to the gay bar.

It was called The Wickham. I walked a few laps around the block to make up my mind as I was still reluctant to go inside. I saw people going into the bar one by one, and I decided to follow them. I needed to use the toilet as the temperature outside had dropped.

The remixed pop music welcomed me when I entered. It lifted my mood and reduced my nerves about coming to the gay bar alone. I started to boogie, but did not stop checking out the bar's atmosphere. I stole a glance at the guys in front of me, holding hands and sometimes exchanging passionate kisses. I would not have had a clue they were gay had I not seen them sharing affection with each other at the bar.

I had a parallel vision between what I was seeing and my memories of gay life in Indonesia. At home, there was pressure to be reserved, and no space to show public affection; otherwise, people would spread gossip to colleagues or, worse, to family members. But standing in the gay bar in Brisbane made me realise that affection is supposed to be a blessing and not something to be suppressed. Affection is there to be embraced. It is a feeling and a beautiful thing; without it, life is just monochrome.

That night, I contemplated in the middle of the crowd.

*If I live here, will I be living a double life?*

*Will I still freak out on the way to the gay bar?*

*Will my heart feel guilty if I kiss a guy on the street?*

*Will I be able to bring a guy home casually?*

*Will I ever have a chance to live here though?*

“A glass of orange juice, please!” I said to the bartender, before jumping onto the dance floor. Although completely sober, I pretended I was drunk enough to dance. I kept dancing until the bar closed, as I thought it would be my last time in a gay bar in Australia.

\*\*\*

After staying in Brisbane for a month, the Indonesian contingent travelled to Roma, Queensland. The second phase of the youth exchange program started in a rural area. All the delegates continued the same activities, such as living with a host family, cultural performance and work placement. The only different thing was that we immersed ourselves in the outback lifestyle. Brisbane was already a quiet place compared to my hometown, Bandung, which has a population of 8.5 million. When I found out that Roma only had around seven thousand people, I wondered if I was the only gay in town.

I stayed with a beautiful couple who owned a mining business. Every morning when we had breakfast in the kitchen, my host parents shared a passionate kiss to start the day. It was like watching an intense kiss in the war movies when a soldier was about to leave his wife before going into battle. The kind of intimacy that was more than a one-second kiss on the lips. It might have been usual for them, but it was a culture shock for me. Instead of listening to the smooch sound in the background, I learned how to not stare at them and focused on eating my cereal.

My room was located just next to theirs. As the house was built high on the land and supported by a wooden floor, any footsteps could be heard. One time, I woke up in the middle of the night because I could feel the wooden floor shaking, and it

was not an earthquake. I realised they were making love next door when I heard the occasional moan. I decided not to move my sleeping position at all because I was afraid to make a cracking noise from my spring bed, a signal that I was awake. I forced myself to close my eyes and ears, finding my inner peace, thinking it was just another cultural immersion experience in Australia.

Living the outback lifestyle for three weeks marked the last activities for the Indonesian contingent in Australia. Two hours before we left Roma, I decided to do my own farewell procession.

“Let’s bury our secret messages here.” I pointed at the biggest tree in a grassy field.

“You dig the soil first then.” Putri handed me a trowel.

“Sure.” I showed my biceps to her. “Meanwhile, you can start writing your wishes.” I gave her the pen and paper.

“This reminds me of a scene in a soap opera,” she giggled.

“The power of the dream.” I raised both hands as I looked at the sky.

I took a deep breath, feeling content before I walked back to my host family’s house. The box containing my aspirations was planted just a week before Christmas. The first wish was to get a monthly engineering salary of \$5,000, followed by finding a husband before turning forty. Last but not least, I wanted to be back in Australia within five years. I knew that somewhere beyond the seventh sky, the universe would make those wishes come true in a perfect timeline. It would work in an absurd algorithm of life that I could not yet foresee.

Australia had never been in my plan before, but my first impression was profound. I’d met inspiring people within two

months, including government officials, local families, workers, students, and strangers on the street. The people-to-people diplomacy shaped unforgettable moments and built a special place at the core of my heart. My culture shock experiences, from vegemite to kitchen madness, were the additional reasons I fell in love with Australia. And the discovery of the local gay bar in Brisbane inspired me to further explore my identity.

I had experienced the real Australian spirit that is welcoming, laidback and friendly. I was not ready to leave the Land Down Under, as I carried heavy, sweet memories. However, I was at peace knowing I'd left my wishes beneath one foot of Australian outback soil.

### 3 THE COUNTERPART

Two countries across the ocean, two strangers from different borders. Their stories merged into one eventually.

The Indonesian delegates returned to Brisbane to meet the Australian participants for the first time before visiting Indonesia as a whole group. We had a week of joint orientation to discuss the community development plan, cultural performance collaboration, and accommodation arrangements. However, one Australian delegate pulled out of the program due to health reasons. The youth exchange organiser could not find a replacement at the last minute. The male Australian composition became an odd number.

“Can you join our team, please?” Tania, the Australian cultural performance coordinator, asked me. “We need to pair up for our dance formation.”

“You know I love performing.” I strutted in front of her.

“Also, I love your collaboration ideas.” Tania gave me a high five, agreeing with my proposal for a joint cultural performance, which I had prepared long before orientation started.

We sang a medley of “*Burung Kakak Tua*” and the “Kookaburra Sits in the Old Gumtree” song, symbolising the

bird species from each country. It was followed by the second collaboration, a musical instrument jam session using a didgeridoo representing Australia and a set of *angklung* representing Indonesia. We translated the bilateral relationship between Indonesia and Australia through melody and choreography, a soft diplomacy dispatch from the stage to the audience.

The Australian delegates' odd number also impacted the counterpart arrangement. Ideally, a pair of Australian and Indonesian delegates of the same gender would stay together with a host family in Indonesia. One of the Indonesian male participants technically would not have a counterpart, but the organiser had to join him with another pair so as to have a three-way set-up. The arrangement process was conducted through group activities to observe our personalities. It was like a dating show to find the right match. Everyone could propose a wish list to the organiser with their potential counterpart's name, but I like surprises and let them match me instead.

The pairings were announced on the last day of orientation, and I was thrilled to find out which Australian delegate had been assigned as my counterpart. Andrew was a guy I'd spotted sweaty in the hallway after returning from an afternoon run. I had often kept my eyes on him during the cultural performance as his position on stage was next to mine. He was an athletic bloke from Tasmania who had lived in Bali for several months. He was a charming fellow who would change the whole narration of my love life.

"I will give you new vocabulary daily to improve your Indonesian language." I wrote the first word in his notebook.



*"Bahagia?"* Andrew asked.

"It means happy, the feeling of having you as my counterpart," I told him.

\*\*\*

Wakatobi Islands, located in Southeast Sulawesi Province, Indonesia, hosted the next phase of AIYEP. On New Year's Eve, all the delegates were invited to a welcome dinner at the mayor's house.

"You know, I participated in AIYEP too, back in 1987!" said Hugua, Wakatobi's mayor.

We spent our New Year's Eve having a long, nostalgic conversation with him instead of watching fireworks or attending a celebration with local people on the beach.

After midnight, Andrew and I returned to our host family. We stayed in the same room and shared a bed that perfectly fitted us. It was the first time we'd spent the night together. We lay down talking about what we could have done on New Year's Eve.

Our pillow talks slowly faded into a tranquil moment. The night was quiet, but my mind was the opposite. I tried to close my eyes, but I was far from dreamland. We touched each other occasionally as we adjusted our sleeping positions. The darkness had made us more physically intimate, and we lay hand in hand. Andrew grabbed my thigh to get me closer. The bed had little space, so I rolled my body to be on top of his. We paused while staring closely at each other's lips. Our warm breath was out of control, and so were our heartbeats when both chests were in contact. One, two, and three seconds, then we finally kissed. It started with one short kiss in silence and transformed into long aggressive lips, full of testosterone.

Time froze; it was like having New Year's Eve fireworks in my mouth. It blew me away.

I did not know my counterpart was into men until that first night. The next day, I brought the conversation around to sexual orientation and shared my experiences, including being discreet around my family and friends.

"I've never had frequent intimacy with men. But I always knew I was attracted to them." Andrew lay down beside me. "I mentioned it to my parents before joining the youth exchange program. Some Australian participants know that I fancy men, and they're completely fine with it," he added.

I now had a counterpart and a romance. Sometimes we spent morning time cuddling until our host dad, La Bauna, knocked on the door to notify us that breakfast was ready. He treated us like his sons, talking about his life over a hot coffee. La Bauna's wife always sat separately in the kitchen while we were eating. Later, I found out that she only grabbed food after we had finished, showing respect to the guests, which was a new culture for me, coming from West Java province.

We often hung out with Surya, La Bauna's son. One afternoon, he came up to us.

"Do you want to visit a shipwreck?" he asked.

"Only if we can see the sunset from there," I replied.

"Let's take my traditional canoe!" He took us to the pier.

I have a great memory from our time at the shipwreck, one more beautiful than the orange sky in the dusk. It was when Andrew and I jumped together from the edge of the ship and screamed at the top of our lungs. The first thing I saw when I broke through the water's surface was his curly hair, blue eyes and charming smile.

“Woohoo! I feel so alive!” he shouted.

My head was above the water, but I was drowned by his baritone voice.

The evenings were when we bonded with the kids from La Bauna’s extended family. Together, we were like parents raising children. I played the guitar, and Andrew taught them English. We both came up with new songs every night. Sometimes the kids were too excited. It always ended up chaotic in the living room; they pushed each other to decide who would sing first. They loved to play with us and brought their 15 friends to sing and dance throughout the night. The girls became so enthusiastic when the national broadcasting company documented our English class at La Bauna’s home. They put excessive make-up on, thinking they would become celebrities that evening.

There is a local love celebration in Wakatobi called *Kabuenga*. The ceremony is intended for matchmaking between a male and a female. It was originally for sailors who wanted to meet the local girls and become their partners. “*Kabuenga*” means “giant swing”. The proposed couple sit on the swing, and the people pushing them from behind pray and sing a folklore song. They believe that a couple who attends a *Kabuenga* ceremony is destined for each other.

All 35 delegates from Australia and Indonesia were invited to take part in the *Kabuenga* celebration. Each of us was given a chance to pick our partner from the opposite gender to sit together on the swing.

“Do you want to go with me?” I asked Andrew after I did the ceremony with my Indonesian friend, Putri.

Our host dad and all the kids witnessed the moment we

were swinging in the *Kabuenga* ceremony. They had never seen two men sitting together at *Kabuenga* before and thought we were just playing around to have fun. We both held onto the swing while the kids pushed us from the back. They were laughing as the swing got faster. Under Wakatobi's sky, I sat beside him, wishing for love magic.

The emotional connection between us was getting deeper than ever. But we hid our intimacy from our cohort. I respected Andrew's privacy. But it was hard to pretend nothing was happening, especially during group activities. The intimate time we spent together meant something to me. I wished I could share my romance stories with my friends. I wanted it to be told casually in conversation, without second-guessing whether it would be acceptable.

One afternoon, we were supposed to go to the beach together with La Bauna's son, who had prepared fishing gear and picnic equipment. However, Andrew bailed without any notice and disappeared for the whole day. I had a mixed reaction when he came home later that night. I was carrying the burden of our hidden affection.

"I think it's better if we just stay as counterparts without having any romance between us." My voice trembled as I spoke to him. "Surya kept asking where you were, but I had no idea. He had already prepared for the outing, you know!"

"Sorry. I went to lunch with some of my Indonesian friends." He looked down.

"You could have told me rather than disappearing. Why are you hiding where you go anyway?"

There are moments in life when I say I want to quit, but I do not mean it. Sometimes it is just an impulsive reaction

because I am upset. The conversation with Andrew was like that; it was just friction between two people who had gotten together. Without a doubt, I wanted to keep our romance going. It was hard to keep it discreet, but we still shared physical intimacy, even after our heart-to-heart chat that night.

But things began to change between us. It all started at a program break just before all the delegates travelled to the last phase in Kendari City. The Indonesian and Australian contingents visited a resort for two nights, where I shared a bungalow with Andrew. During the day, I spent time with some Indonesian friends to give him space to hang out with his Australian mates. But we still spent the first night together.

The next day, I took a boat trip to another island to buy a couple of beers for our drinking game. When I returned to our bungalow that night, he was not there. I waited for him until I fell asleep. Meanwhile, the whole island had a blackout due to insufficient generator energy during a storm.

The slammed door woke me up in the middle of the night. I had not locked the door as I'd expected my counterpart to come back at some point. It had been a restless evening, spent wondering where he was. Only the view of the sunrise could calm me down. When the heavy rain stopped, I contemplated at the pier until the boat picked all of us up a couple of hours later, ending the holiday with a heavy feeling.

"Something is not right. Why did he leave me alone last night?" I cried on Putri's shoulder on the ship.

For the first time, I told my romance stories to one of the youth exchange participants.

"He did not even talk to me right now! As if nothing happened!" I sobbed.

“I heard a rumour,” Putri said. “Apparently Andrew stayed over at Adam’s bungalow last night.”

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The youth exchange program continued in Kendari City for a couple of weeks. The Australians commenced the internship program, while the Indonesian delegates assisted their counterparts at their workplace. Staying with a new host family in Kendari was the most challenging period. Although they accommodated us very well, night-time with Andrew was tough. Sharing a bed reminded me of our romance in Wakatobi Islands. There were still pillow talks but minus the physical intimacy.

When Andrew had a shower one morning, I noticed a message notification had popped up on his mobile. My logic told me to ignore the rumour about my counterpart and Adam, an Indonesian male delegate. But my heart burnt. I gave up on remaining sane as my evil side whispered to me to read what was in the inbox. It was an old phone, so I could access it without the passcode.

*“I miss you too! Can’t wait to see you this afternoon,”* read the text from Adam.

I rushed to the veranda to take in some fresh air. What I read had strangled me, and I felt like all the oxygen in the world had gone. I was the one who had told Andrew that we should just be counterparts without romance involved. But I did not expect he would date another guy while he was around me. There were red flags about the day he bailed for the prepared outing in Wakatobi and the night he had abandoned me in the bungalow. And it all made sense to me now: Andrew wanted to be with Adam. I became the one who was left out.

I still did my best at the worst time. I swallowed the pain and tried to be the best counterpart for Andrew during the rest of the program, knowing I had come so far to be a youth ambassador. I pretended that I did not know anything about his romance. I still taught him the Indonesian language and hung out with our host family. I helped him change his internship from a newspaper publisher to the Kendari mayor's office, which was more suitable for his international relations degree. It was my duty to be a helpful counterpart representing my country.

I slept with someone who gave me the sorrow. Every night we shared a bed, it felt like I had drunk a cup of poison. I felt so lonely lying next to him. Andrew did not tell me why he came home late most nights, and I never asked, although I knew he was spending time with Adam. The hardest part was that their romance was known publicly among the group. Meanwhile, the memories I had with him remained in the closet. The rumour circulating said that I was jealous because I could not be with my counterpart. But my peers did not understand how hard it was to create my own safe space while Andrew slept next to me. I smelled of his romance with someone else every night.

*-end of manuscript sample-*