

The Boy from Bussorah Street

Matchmaking in the early 1900s was the usual practice, dating being unheard of in those days. Many discovered love only after marriage. Young marriages were prevalent especially for girls, who often would already be married in their teens. Without a formal education and employment, marriage seemed like a natural transition in life. After 15 years of age, the girl would be considered as *anak dara tua* (an old virgin).

Nenek had plenty of suitors. Haji Yusoff received many proposals from prominent Muslim Peranakans (Muslim men who came from Indian or Arab descent), Arab traders and some Malay businessmen who wanted to marry off their sons to Nenek.

“Why not Haji Yusoff? We are after all Muslims!”

“Yes, we may be Muslims, but our ways are different.” Haji Yusoff answered solemnly.

Haji Yusoff was cautious. He was aware there were many people out there who wanted to marry Nenek in the hope of taking over the family’s business and wealth. People in those days were especially suspicious of the Muslim Peranakans, who were perceived to have cajoled Malays into selling off their prime land which they then occupied whilst the Malays were forced to live on the fringes of urban society. Furthermore, the *kacukan* (impure) Muslim Peranakans were characterized as unscrupulous opportunists who were on the look out to get rich quick by marrying into wealthy Malay families. Haji Yusoff had heard stories of prominent businessmen whose wealth disappeared in the hands of their sons-in-law. He wanted someone who was sincere but then again, how could he ascertain the sincerity of someone’s heart?

It so happened that Haji Yusoff met a 24 year-old man named Jofrie at the Sultan Mosque one day. Frequent subsequent meetings at the mosque made Haji Yusoff interested to get to know the soft-spoken and good-mannered Jofrie who lived two streets away from Gedung Kuning. A neighbour told Haji Yusoff that Jofrie’s family who was of Javanese lineage came from Muar in Johor, Malaysia, and that Jofrie worked at the Harbour Board.

Over a period of several months after that initial meeting, Haji Yusoff asked his driver to park his Austin 6 quietly outside the harbour. Some days, it would be in the mornings, other days in the evenings; Haji Yusoff was discreet. He wanted to make sure Jofrie was really employed as the accounts clerk they said he was. Nenek told me Haji Yusoff investigated Jofrie’s background thoroughly before deciding that Jofrie was good enough to marry his eldest daughter.

Like every girl in that era, Nenek accepted her father’s choice of husband without argument and so, in 1928, at the age of 17, she was wed. Many people were surprised as to why Haji Yusoff chose Jofrie to be his son-in-law, see that was from a relatively humble background, but status and position did not matter to Haji Yusoff. He believed Jofrie would make Nenek happy and as if to make

his point, he threw a grand wedding celebration for the couple at Gedung Kuning. Everyone at Bussorah Street rejoiced and turned up at the wedding of their beloved *anak buah* (relative).

Throughout the years, Jofrie had proven his trustworthiness. Haji Yusoff suggested that Jofrie become the estate's trustee and help him with his business, but Nenek told her husband not to accept Haji Yusoff's proposal, saying, "*Nanti musuh banyak, nanti mati kena racun*" ("You'll have lots enemies, you'll be poisoned to death"). Nenek was aware that Jofrie was the only outsider in the family; Haji Yusoff's other sons-in-law were related by family ties. Nenek was afraid others might be jealous if Jofrie were to take over Haji Yusoff's business and she did not want to lose her husband prematurely. Jofrie who loved Nenek, took her advice and remained as an accounts clerk at the Harbour Board (today's Port of Singapore Authority) until his retirement.

According to Wak Lah, Haji Yusoff loved Jofrie. He would always ask Jofrie to accompany him to wedding lunches, and the two would go off together, Haji Yusoff in his pants, sarong, Western coat jacket and *songkok*, while Jofrie would be clad in the traditional *baju kurung* and *kain sampung*. Haji Yusoff was proud of Jofrie, his gentle son-in-law who was once an active Boy Scout; Wak Lah once remarked to me that he was not surprised that his brother was also active in scouting, while my cousin and I later became Girl Guides.

Nenek and Datuk were married for 53 years before death took him away from her. I remember observing my grandparents. There was a quiet understanding and love between them, a kind of serene existence that became the envy of some. They were not just partners, they were soul mates. Nenek once whispered to me that she never regretted marrying Jofrie, the boy from Bussorah Street.