

THE LONG ROAD HOME

This book by award-winning photographer and essayist Sim Chi Yin tells the intimate stories of Indonesian women who work overseas as domestic helpers. Some fall prey to sadistic bosses, while others are luckier and work for kind employers. But all suffer the loneliness and frustrations of living far from their loved ones, unsure if their sacrifices are really helping their families—and especially their children—escape their fate. Told with great sensitivity and empathy, *The Long Road Home* is a story at once specific to South East Asia but universal in the migrant's tale of loss and hope.



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Sim Chi Yin

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Journeys of Indonesian Migrant Workers

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*In memory of Alison Des Forges,
who inspired with her life.
And to migrant workers around the world.*

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A group of six women, likely migrant workers, are standing in a line in a room with wooden bunk beds. They are wearing matching green polo shirts and white or black skirts. The room has a polished wooden floor that reflects the women and the bunk beds. The background is a plain white wall with a ceiling fan visible on the right.

FOREWORD

INDONESIA IS THE second-largest country of origin of migrant workers in South East Asia after the Philippines. According to estimates by the Ministry of Manpower and Transmigration some 700,000 documented migrant workers, of these 78 per cent working as domestic workers, leave the country each year for work abroad, primarily in countries in East and South East Asia and the Middle East. In 2009, around 4.3 million Indonesians were estimated to be working abroad. If undocumented migrant workers are taken into account, the total number of Indonesian migrant workers abroad could be 2 – 4 times higher.

Migration for employment entails tangible benefits for migrant workers and their families, as remittances boost disposable household income and enable other members of the family to get an education or invest in land or household equipment.

However, Indonesian migrant workers, who are predominantly low-skilled, face considerable challenges and hardship during the migration process, both while in Indonesia and when in destination countries. This is particularly true for Indonesian migrant domestic workers, who often endure a lengthy and cumbersome recruitment and pre-departure process. Indonesian migrant domestic workers are frequently charged about 33 – 50 per cent of their salaries in placement costs by recruitment agencies, whereas international conventions clearly state that employers should bear the costs of placement of migrant workers. In Indonesia, migrant domestic workers are required to pay expensively for placement paper work, tests and technical training, yet often find themselves saddled with false passports and work permits, fake tests results and sub-standard training. Furthermore they are routinely detained



for months in training centres while waiting to be placed, unable to leave. Indonesian migrant domestic workers, who are recruited at the village level and only have few years of education, receive little or no information from recruitment agencies about their rights and contractual obligations. As a result problems often ensue, once the domestic workers arrive in the destination country without the requisite knowledge and skills.

The Indonesian Government limits contracts for Indonesian migrant domestic workers to a maximum of two years, while many migrant domestic workers and their employers would prefer a longer contract. As a result, domestic workers are required to return to Indonesia and repeat all placement procedures and payments in case of extended migration. This two-year change of employment contracts is in the interest of placement agencies in Indonesia and destination countries, for which it generates substantial revenue. However, this requirement deprives Indonesian domestic workers of hard-earned income and adds to their indebtedness.

In most destination countries, domestic workers are not covered by national labour laws and social protection provisions. As a result migrant domestic workers' salaries, working hours and work conditions are among the worst of all workers, and migrant domestic workers often find themselves working for large families for 18 – 21 hours a day, with limited provision for resting time and days off. Because they are working behind closed doors in private households, they are frequently subjected to regular harassment, violence and rape, even murder, without any possibilities for escape, as the employer is authorised by law to hold their ID and confine them in the household.

Because of the lack of labour protection in destination countries, migrant domestic workers are frequently exploited economically and often do not receive a major part of their contractual salaries. Indonesian embassies and consulates do not always have sufficient resources and manpower to monitor the conditions of the domestic workers in the households, or to provide adequate legal and other

assistance, once the domestic workers experience problems. Furthermore, access to justice for migrant workers is fraught with obstacles, some of which are the lengthy and costly legal procedures and the difficulty of obtaining a work visa for the duration of the trial. As a result, migrant workers can at best hope for a fraction of their salaries as a "settlement", whereas the alternative is years of fruitless legal processes which too often results in acquittal of the employer. As a result, economic exploitation of and violence against migrant domestic workers is common in destination countries.

The requirements and procedures for filing a claim under the mandatory insurance for Indonesian migrant domestic workers are cumbersome. As a result, too many migrant workers and their families are not able to obtain their rightful compensation for unpaid salary, criminal abuse, accidents or untimely death.

When returning to Indonesia through Jakarta Soekarno-Hatta airport, Indonesian migrant workers are required to enter through the isolated terminal 4, where they are frequently subjected to harassment

and extortion by officials and agents who are well aware that many migrant workers hand-carry their saved earnings. Migrant workers are likewise often harassed and extorted by bus drivers of licensed, overpriced transport services which migrant workers are required to use from the airport.

When migrant workers finally return home, they are celebrated as "pahlawan devisa," or "exchange heroes" by their families and communities. For most families of migrant workers, the remittances are their main source of household income. This also means that when the migrant worker returns home, the main source of household income dries up and household savings eventually run out. However, as few income opportunities are available in migrant workers' communities of origin, most Indonesian migrant workers have to return overseas for work repeatedly, in order to keep the remittances flowing into their poor households.

For Indonesia, migrant workers' remittances are the second-largest source of foreign income, and the primary source of income for many provinces

of origin. The Indonesian Government would benefit from institutionalising programmes for local economic development which provide effective access to micro-credit, financial education and livelihoods and entrepreneurship training for migrant workers and their families. Experiences from other countries of origin, such as the Philippines and Mexico, demonstrate that boosting productive use of remittances in migrants' communities of origin has a strong positive impact on local development and poverty alleviation. Institutionalising such programmes would also mean that more people would be able to find productive employment in Indonesia, instead of having to migrate overseas.

If well-protected and financially empowered, migrant workers and their families can catalyse local economic development in marginal communities of origin in Indonesia, where few other economic opportunities are currently available.

The Government of Indonesia continues to promote labour migration in its national strategy as a means of tackling high unemployment and boosting national income. However, more

attention needs to be given to migrant workers' vulnerabilities, which result from inadequate policy and implementation frameworks in Indonesia and destination countries. It is essential that all efforts are taken by these governments to ensure that migrant workers are effectively protected and fairly treated throughout all stages of the migratory cycle.

In 2006 ILO member states adopted the ILO Multilateral Framework on Labour Migration, a document which compiles international standards relevant to the protection of labour migrants, as well as examples of good practices of these standards' implementation at the national level. Guided by this framework, Indonesia, with assistance from the ILO, aims to promote decent work opportunities and conditions for its migrant workers.

In its most recent National Mid-term Development Plan, RPJMN 2010 – 2014, the Indonesian Government explicitly recognises that reform of national policies, legislation and implementation frameworks is required to effectively protect and financially empower Indonesian migrant workers, for the benefit of national employment creation and



economic development. It also states that Indonesia plans to ratify the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (1990).

Indonesia has furthermore voted in favour of the International Labour Conference's adoption of ILO Convention 189 and ILO Recommendation 201 concerning Decent Work for Domestic Workers (2011) in order to strengthen the international framework for labour rights and human rights protection for domestic workers in Indonesia and abroad. Indonesia is in addition negotiating with destination countries to strengthen protection provisions entailed in bilateral memoranda of understanding regulating the placement and protection of migrant workers and migrant domestic workers.

Meanwhile, growing numbers of Indonesian women and men continue to opt for overseas labour migration as the best way of securing an adequate income for their families and escaping poverty. However, the social and economic costs of migration to the workers and their families are many, but are often poorly understood and documented.

The Singaporean journalist and photographer, Sim Chi Yin, has therefore compiled this unique and unprecedented publication in order to document the lives and migration experiences of Indonesian migrant domestic workers.

Chi Yin went on a personal journey to visit the families and communities of migrant domestic workers who graciously opened their homes and their hearts to her. In their own words, these women and their families speak to us through the publication's text and photos documenting their daily lives, intimate moments, difficult migration decisions and everyday heroism in the face of financial struggles and adversity while migrating.

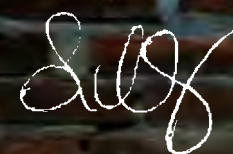
This publication is commissioned by the ILO Project Combating Forced Labour and Trafficking of Indonesian Migrant Workers, which is funded by the Government of Norway.

The ILO trusts that this unique depiction of the lives and migration conditions of Indonesian migrant domestic workers and their families will raise awareness and a sense of priority in the public and among decision-makers in Indonesia and destination countries in Asia and the Middle East. ILO believes that such awareness will aid the development of the required labour and human rights protections, as well as targeted economic community development initiatives, which this large and growing group of poor migrants and their families so urgently need.

Jakarta, July 2011

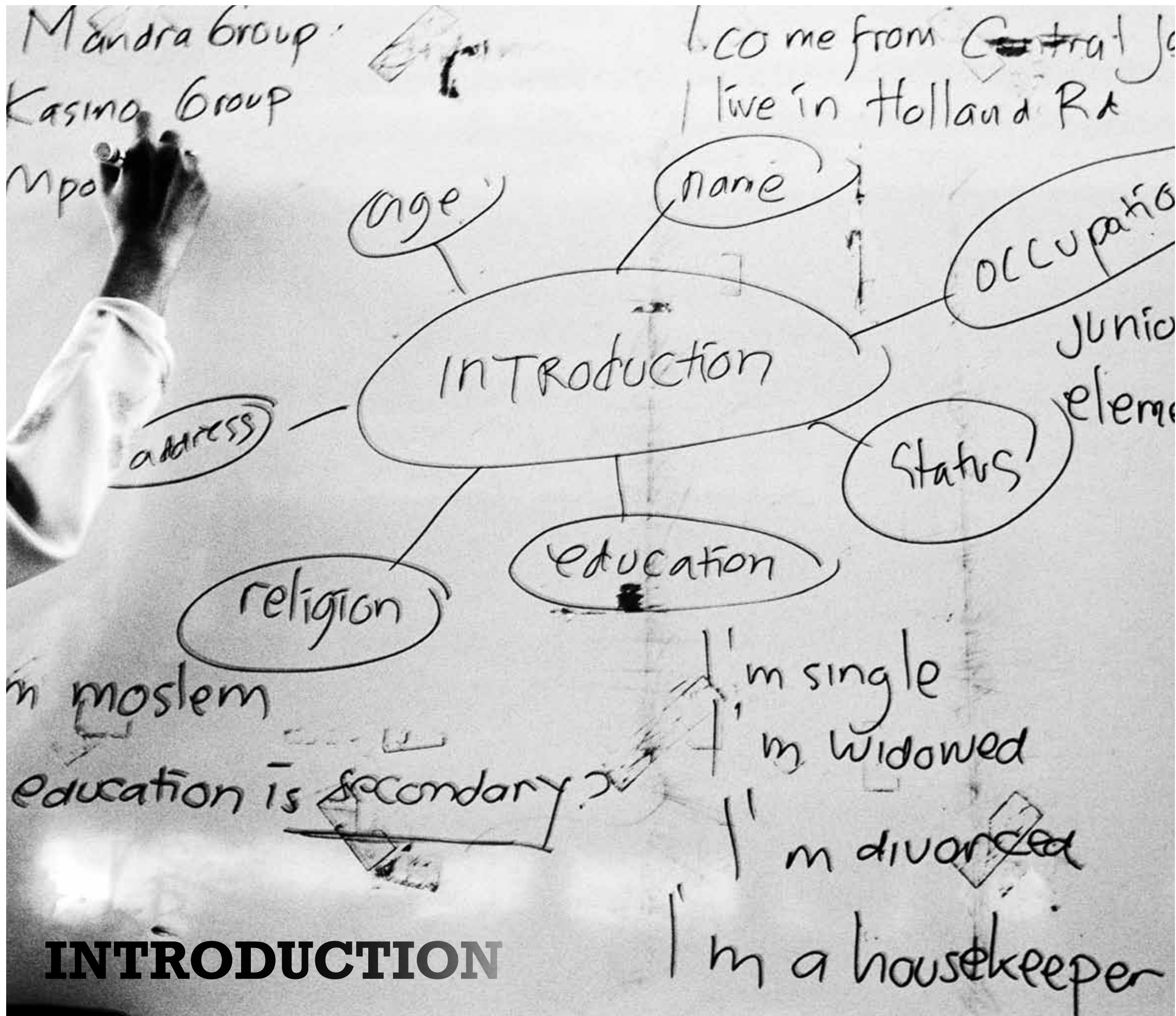


Peter van Rooij
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BY THE TIME I got there, all I saw was a limp body on the concrete at the foot of a block of flats in central Singapore. A crimson puddle oozed from her black hair, pooling by her brown skin. Minutes later, the police covered her with a blue tent.

I followed the trail of policemen up the stairs and saw officers in a living room interviewing a Chinese man—presumably the dead Indonesian domestic worker’s employer. He gestured listlessly at a metal railing right outside the flat, seeming to suggest she had scaled it before falling to her death. In a corner of the living room, an elderly man—whom she had presumably cared for—sat under a whirring ceiling fan, his eyes glued to a television programme as if it were just another humid afternoon.

For three years before I started working on this book, I had reported on migrant workers’ lives in Singapore for the local press, covering cases of physical abuse, unpaid wages, illegal and grimy dormitories, injury and, sometimes, death. A recurring story at the time—and often unreported in the press—was that of domestic workers falling to their death from high-rise apartment blocks. Sometimes, cleaning rags or bamboo clothes poles and bedsheets were found beside the body.

Official statistics do not tell us if they fell by accident, committed suicide, or were performing

...

During an English lesson at the Indonesian embassy on a Sunday morning, workers were taught to introduce themselves. When asked what their job is, many of them used the words “housekeeper” or “domestic worker” rather than “maid”.

A somewhat smug retort that was often heard: “If things are so bad in Singapore, why do they keep coming?”.

dangerous work their employers ordered, but they show that more than 150 domestic workers fell from buildings to their deaths in Singapore from 1999 to 2005. I was told by an official source that about 90 per cent of those who died that way were Indonesian. Why, I wondered, were Indonesians, who make up just 45 per cent of the 200,000 migrant domestic workers in Singapore, so disproportionately represented in this grisly statistic? Rural Indonesians are unfamiliar with high-rise living, some observers reason. But by that logic, the Filipino, Indian, Sri Lankan and Burmese domestic workers in Singapore are just as vulnerable. Were there deeper roots to the Indonesian worker’s predicament here? And if so, why were they worse off than their fellow migrant workers from other countries?

These questions pushed me to take my first trip to central Java in 2006 and drive around villages for days with a ragtag bunch of local middlemen, or *calo*, who were hunting for “fresh blood” to recruit.

I was also pushed by another question. With one in five households in Singapore relying on these workers, press reports on their mistreatment or lack of rights often spark defensive reactions from regular Singaporeans and the authorities alike. A somewhat smug retort that was often heard:

“If things are so bad in Singapore, why do they keep coming?”. I wondered: what does keep them coming back?

On trips to several villages in the heart of Java between 2006 and 2009, riding with more middlemen and meeting many workers and their families, I found some answers that I expected and others that surprised me. Most women come to try to escape the trap of poverty; that was something I expected. But others left to escape abusive relationships. Some even came because village life was boring and the future seemed elsewhere.

Those who die or are injured while working overseas might be the extreme minority but their plight hints at broader problems in the migration chain—from recruitment in the village to placement in a home abroad. Zealous Indonesian recruiters make no bones of their practice of sending underaged women (below Singapore’s minimum age of 23) with forged or tampered travel documents. Sometimes, the problem is that the workers get insufficient training before being sent abroad, or they are overwhelmed by their new environments or worn down by the huge debts they owe their recruiters by the time they land a job. Others were victimised by the men back home whom they had come to support. Many husbands spent the money

freely; few seemed to try as hard as the women to push their families forward.

In the time I spent with the women who generously let me into their lives, I heard many stories—happy and sad, of super employers those workers wished to return to work for and appalling ones they hoped to forget. But almost without exception they recounted stories of loneliness, homesickness and guilt at leaving their families behind—as are told in the following pages. Some accounts, like those of Muslim workers being made to cook and eat pork with their Chinese employers, or of workers not being allowed to perform their daily prayers—deemed too politically sensitive to have made it into the local press—are recorded here.

My own journey with them also provided a window into how they viewed us—their employers and hosts. Some workers who had returned from overseas sang the praises of the modern, comfortable city life they had had, and of the caring Singaporean boss who showered them with Giordano clothes, chicken *bak kwa* (barbecued meat) or *hongbao* (gifts of money). Others, like a 27-year-old woman who had worked for an unhappy two months in Singapore, declared sceptically that I was “too gentle” to be a Singaporean, whom she had come to associate with “fierce”.

Time and again, after hanging out for a while, the women would ask with cheerful hope if I would take them home as my domestic worker. A sales pitch with a laundry list of their skills would follow: “I can boil Cantonese soup”, “I’m very good at Indonesian massage” and “I can take care of old people just like I cared for my grandma”. They had a zeal to land a safe and good place to work in while away from home. Like all of us, they work and live, as a slogan plastered on the window of a Jakarta employment agency put it, “For a better life”.

This book is a stab at documenting vignettes of the journeys that hundreds of thousands of Indonesians embark on each year, leaving their homes to work far from their families. It is an attempt to record the lives they go home to after years of working for us—which we, as their temporary hosts, know little about. I have focused on the stories of Indonesian workers who work in Singapore. But the triumphs, trials and tribulations of migration are universal.

PART I

LEAVING





CHAPTER ONE

SAYING GOODBYE ONCE MORE

ROLA SAT ALONE, gripping a black transistor radio, in a corner of a neighbour’s tiled verandah. The seven-year-old toggled the knobs until it began whimpering Indonesian pop tunes. The clock was closing in on her mother leaving her side—to play mum and maid to another family in a country that seemed so far away to Rola.

Sugiyani Waryomiharjo called out for her daughter to come inside. Not looking up, Rola answered with a pout, and cupped her head in her hands.

Defeated, Sugiyani retreated to her husband’s side, on a quilt thrown in front of their 14-inch TV set. Warsun wrapped his arms around her waist as they watched a news programme, like it was any other evening. Except, every now and then, he would glance at the clock above the TV, or at the digital display on his battered Nokia phone.

Behind them loomed a brown and white chequered cabin-size trolley bag, filled to the zipper with T-shirts and trousers, toiletries, washing powder and instant noodles. It was a constant reminder of her imminent departure. It also held her hope—that this fourth stint overseas would provide some certainty for her family’s future. In the short term, it would prevent them from falling into debt again.

Sugiyani’s decision to go to Singapore had been four months in the making. The sum her family had borrowed from relatives for household expenses had crept beyond three million rupiah (about US\$300

...

Hours before Sugiyani was due to leave for Singapore, her daughter Rola retreated to a corner of their neighbour’s verandah, clutching a black transistor radio in her tiny hands. Rola ignored her mother’s calls to go back into the house and continued to sulk. Later that evening, Rola went to bed and did not wake up to bid her mother goodbye.



...

So this is farewell? Sugiyani and her husband Warsun cuddled the night before she was due to leave for Jakarta. A thirteen year age gap stands between the affectionate couple, but “she keeps me young”, Warsun said with a laugh. In their private moments, Sugiyani said, her husband told her he was worried

she would meet someone new while she was working in Singapore. In turn, she told him: “Don’t play so much when I’m away.” He replied: “Don’t say things like that. Don’t worry about it.”

at exchange rates then). They could no longer count on Warsun’s occasional earnings of 30,000 rupiah a day as an ad hoc construction worker or farm help.

The couple took stock and sold the motorbike bought with her earnings from the two years she had worked as a maid in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. With the five million rupiah from the bike, they paid off their debt. The remainder was allocated to renovating the well-worn kitchen in the single-storey brick house they shared with Warsun’s mother and her second husband. The house was built with the older woman’s earnings as a domestic worker in Saudi Arabia for six years.

Sugiyani had been home from Jeddah for barely seven months when she found herself toying with the idea of heading for Singapore. She went to her regular recruiter and took the first steps to a new life as one of 90,000 Indonesian domestic workers in Singapore. “The only way is for me to work in Singapore,” the 24-year-old said. “My husband does not have a stable job. And with the price of rice being very high now, he doesn’t earn enough money to feed us.”

Migrant workers the world over struggle with this mix of hard-headed calculation and complex emotions. In Indonesia—as it is elsewhere—poverty is the key push behind its army of six million migrant workers spread out across the Middle East and Asia. Almost 70 per cent of them are women in low-skilled jobs, yet they sent home 120 trillion rupiah in 2008, a key source of foreign exchange for Indonesia, next to oil and gas revenue.

Sri Palupi, head of the non-governmental Institute of Ecosoc Rights in Jakarta, has done research on Indonesian migrant workers. She said: “Most who work overseas come from families who do not own land or have only very small plots. Also, there is a

lack of jobs outside the agriculture sector. And when there are jobs in agriculture, they pay very little. All this while the living cost keeps rising.”

While some academic studies have noted that women migrants leave home for a mix of motivations—family pressure, a desire to escape soured marriages or the humdrum of village life, or even a wish to see the world—poverty gives the fundamental push. An Asian Development Bank survey in 2006, done in five major Indonesian provinces which many migrant workers were from, found that most of them left home “to be free from poverty” (37 per cent) and because of “the lack of employment opportunities in the country” (37 per cent).

In contrast, pastures further afield look lush with promise. Jakarta-based Albert Bonasahat, national coordinator of the International Labour Organization’s (ILO) project on migrant workers in Southeast Asia, said: “Would-be migrant workers see that their relatives or neighbours who are working abroad are able to change their lives—new houses, motorbikes. So, they too think that working overseas is the only way to have a better life.”

In Indonesia, where unemployment stands at about seven per cent, the export of workers has been a state-backed policy since the 1980s. Jakarta, which wants to increase its labour export numbers, openly acknowledges the twin benefits of sending workers out: it reduces non-employment and brings in remittance money.

Walking through a village in Temanggung, central Java, the benefits of working overseas were plain to see. Pointing at some of the smarter-looking houses, a recruiter rattled off: “That one, wife in Hong Kong, husband in Malaysia. This one, wife in Saudi Arabia, husband at home. Five years already. And that



...

The moment they had been dreading had come. Sugiyani held on to her husband's hand for just a moment longer before she went down the sloping porch into the recruiter's waiting van. The vehicle was already almost full with eight other women heading for a training centre in Jakarta. Her father-in-law Munarji (left) looked on. The whole family had been

on tenterhooks for five days. Sugiyani's recruiter had twice postponed—at the last minute—her departure. It was almost 10pm when the van rattled through the sleeping village to collect Sugiyani. Warsun, her husband, had been running a fever for three days, worrying her as she left his side.

house there, she's working in Taiwan." It was the same story at many more villages in this agricultural heart of Indonesia. Somehow, the vast rice terraces of Temanggung, the chilli and tapioca plots in Banyumas, and the ocean catch of coastal Cilacap were just not enough to keep people at home. In some villages, there were few women in their 20s left.

Young women are often the ones to leave since they are the most in demand as domestic workers and caregivers in the Middle East and Asia. Official data shows that in 2007, almost 80 per cent of Indonesians working overseas were women who left behind husbands, children and elderly parents. The men who do not go off to work in South Korea's factories and on Malaysia's construction sites stay home to earn a meagre wage tilling other people's land or selling food off a cart.

Sugiyani needed the fingers on both hands to count the number of her extended family members who had found work across three countries. Her mother and mother-in-law had both worked overseas, before she took the same path at 18 and went off to Saudi Arabia to be a domestic worker.

A third generation might go the same way. One night, Rola, learning to count in English for her homework, blurted out that she wanted to learn Mandarin. "I'll go to Taiwan," she told her mother. "To be a maid?" asked Sugiyani, her eyes wide with horror. Rola shrugged.

On a Thursday morning at the government's Manpower and Transmigration Department in Purwokerto city—a 10-hour drive east of Jakarta—would-be migrant workers milled around waiting for documents that would let them leave for a job overseas. Department coordinator Handoyo Pramudhito said that in 2006, women made up



...

In her village life, Sugiyani woke at 4.30am each morning and started her day by giving their well-worn kitchen a good sweep and doing the laundry, before moving on to other chores. Her family shared a well and shack toilet with their neighbours. The single-storey village house she lived in was built with money her mother-in-law had earned as a domestic worker in Saudi Arabia for six years.

95 per cent of the 945 migrant workers from the area who went through his office for jobs overseas. “They just want to improve their families’ lives,” he said.

Stashed in recruiter Machsun Imron’s office desk drawer was a log of his daily efforts driving around Temanggung, central Java, in his four-wheel drive hunting for women to be domestic workers overseas. He repeated his sales pitch again and again: “Singapore is very good. Don’t worry, Singapore government will take care of you. If you meet with bad employer, newspaper will report.”

He recruited 20 to 30 women a month, persuaded their husbands or fathers to let them go, and delivered them to an employment agency and training centre in Jakarta. His hardcover log book held page after page of passport photographs of young women. Inked next to their pictures were their names, ages, education level, date of departure and destinations—Malaysia, Taiwan, Saudi Arabia, Hong Kong, Singapore.

Machsun would not let on how much he was paid for each woman he produced, but his house was the grandest in his village—complete with a landscaped garden and pond, verandah, oil paintings and decorative items. Other village recruiters interviewed in 2006 said that they received 1.5 million rupiah for every hire—part of a sum the women themselves had to pay back through deductions of their salary once they started working overseas.

Tini, a staff member at PT Mitrakarya Sarananusa, an employment agency an hour’s drive from downtown Jakarta, said in an interview in late 2008 that the asking price had gone up. Her company paid village recruiters (known in local parlance as a *calo*, which means middleman, broker or pimp) three to four million, or as much as five million rupiah for



...
A log book in the drawer of a village recruiter has page upon page of the personal details of women he had sent overseas from the area: their passport photos, departure date, destination and educational qualifications. Recruiters lament that the supply of “fresh blood” was running low—because so many village women were already working overseas.

Growing up, Sugiyani knew her family was poor, but like any other child, she never aspired to become a domestic worker. “We didn’t have dreams. We always felt, ‘What can we do?’ I just wanted to have a good job,” she said.

each woman worker. This was clearly a lucrative trade—one that the Indonesian government has struggled to rein in and regulate in recent years.

These days, village recruiters grumble that with so many young women already exported, there is not much fresh blood left. That also pushes up the price commanded for each woman they harvest—which in turn results in higher costs to the worker. “There’s a lot of competition now to get the women,” Tini said. “That’s the situation. There are so many more *calo* now.” James Loing, who owns an employment agency in the port city of Cilacap in central Java, said: “Sometimes, up to 10 recruiters try to get the same woman.”

It is not difficult, though, to convince the women who have previously worked abroad to go overseas again. As Sugiyani did, many often seek out the recruiters themselves. They are labelled “Ex”.

“Ex-Malaysia, ex-Singapore and now going to Hong Kong,” a recruiter said, introducing the smiling Inah Suraji, 32, who was seated at a provincial employment agency, waiting for her papers to be processed. She was saving for her two teenage daughters’ education, she said in simple English learnt from four years in Singapore. “The money I earned, no more already. Get money very difficult, but use very fast,”

the bone-thin woman said with a laugh. Like so many other migrant workers, she appeared caught in a cycle of departure and return.

The money earned abroad runs out in no time. After building the smart family house, buying a new motorbike, and covering food and daily necessities, it is soon time to go out to earn again. Walk by the most lavish village houses, complete with Roman pillars, floor-to-ceiling windows and a coat of fresh paint and, chances are, they belong to villagers who slogged for many years in Hong Kong or Taiwan, where the pay is higher than in Singapore or Malaysia. In some villages, every family has several women working overseas.

Lotte Kejser, the chief technical adviser of the ILO’s project on migrant workers in Southeast Asia, said: “If they are required to earn a livelihood to support their extended family, the family may put pressure on them to go overseas again to continue this support. The workers themselves might find it increasingly hard to reintegrate into their villages and there’s no well-paid job for them there.”

Growing up, Sugiyani knew her family was poor, but like any other child, she never aspired to become a domestic worker. “We didn’t have dreams. We always felt, ‘What can we do?’ I just wanted to have a good job,” she said. “But now

that I’m married, we need the money. It’s fate. Poverty forced me to become a domestic worker, and now I’m used to it.”

Her parents harvested other people’s rice fields and could not afford to let her continue beyond secondary school. “Yuni passed all her exams but we didn’t have the money,” her mother Warsini, 44, said, referring to her daughter by her pet name. At 16, straight out of school, Sugiyani married Warsun, who was 13 years older. Two years later, when their baby girl Rola was just seven months old, Sugiyani left the village for her first plane ride that took her to Medina, Saudi Arabia. Recalling how she came to that decision, she said: “I saw other women in the village who came back from Saudi Arabia and it seemed they had a lot of money for their families. They bought land, motorbike, a house. I thought instead of doing nothing at home, I should go too.”

That first trip ended badly. For seven months, she put up with her male employer’s advances. When she finally complained to the wife, she was promptly sent home. She had earned only enough to cover what she had paid the agents. After seven months at home, she was off again, this time to Abu Dhabi, in the United Arab Emirates.

Her employer treated her well but Sugiyani claimed she was not paid for the two years she

spent there. She returned home for five months before going to Jeddah. This time, she was paid—600 riyals (about US\$160 at exchange rates then) a month—and sent home at least half of all she earned. The money paid for a new motorbike, a barn, farm equipment, furniture for Rola’s room, as well as her brother’s wedding party. And there were savings set aside too.

But when she got home, she discovered that her husband had spent the money she had put in their bank account. It was all gone. “*Habis!* (finished!) I got so mad,” she remembered. “I felt like I had worked for nothing.”

Her absence was costly in other ways too. “When I’m here, my husband is very good, he even helps me with the cooking,” she said. “But when I’m not here, when I call home, he’s often out. Most women who work overseas, their money is used by their husbands for leisure. My husband might do the same, he might get very lonely.”

If she questioned his faithfulness, she did not dwell on it. Her guilt centred on their little girl, Rola. The first time she returned home, the child did not recognise her. “She didn’t want me to carry her, or be anywhere near her,” she said, aware that she had spent only two of her daughter’s seven years at home with her. “Every time I come



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Used to having her mother away from home, Rola does her homework on her own in the family's living room, leaning against a threadbare sofa set. In a few days, Sugiyani would again leave her side to work overseas.

“When I’m not here, I think my husband often leaves Rola by herself,” Sugiyani said. “It’s not how a mother would care for a child.”

back, Rola is different.” Sugiyani would treat her to trips to Mall Moro—the biggest shopping centre in their nearest city, Purwokerto. There, she would shower the child with clothes, games, chocolates and her favourite Tango wafers. When Sugiyani was out of earshot, her 47-year-old father, Waryomiharjo, let on: “When Yuni is home, Rola always pesters her for money to buy snacks instead of eating meals, and Yuni always gives in. When she is away, Rola eats whatever we eat.”

Rola’s room had a pinewood child’s study desk with drawers and shelves, and a wood-frame bed with a purpose-built ladder. On the desk sat a pink Nutcracker Barbie haversack, which she used for school. While at home, Sugiyani saw to her daughter’s everyday needs. She bathed Rola by the well shared with their neighbours, saw her off to school, fed her lunch and helped her pump her bicycle tyres.

“When I’m not here, I think my husband often leaves Rola by herself,” Sugiyani said. “It’s not how a mother would care for a child.” When she was away, her parents travelled by motorbike from their neighbouring village to see Rola almost daily. Sugiyani’s mother-in-law, who kept the household going with a small business selling deep-fried *tempeh* (fermented soybean cake), beancurd and

vegetables at the back of their house, was too busy to give Rola much attention.

When the time neared for Sugiyani to leave again, there were no tears, only subtle signs that the child was affected. “On good days, Rola tells me to just bring home lots of presents,” Sugiyani said. But one morning, her daughter told her, “there are floods in Jakarta, Mama. You’ll get wet. Then you can’t go to Singapore.” “That’s what she says when she doesn’t want me to go,” Sugiyani said.

For two days in a row, village recruiter Selamat had told Sugiyani she would be leaving that very night for Jakarta, her first stop on the way to

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ABOVE RIGHT

Sugiyani pumped the tyres of her daughter Rola’s bicycle. The 24-year-old mum has been home for a total of just two of Rola’s seven years. When she is around, she mothers her, scrubbing her by the well, seeing her off to school, feeding her and playing with her. Her guilt at being away speaks through Rola’s room—the most well-furnished in the house—and the snack money she hands to her little girl every day.

BOTTOM RIGHT

In the limited time she spends at home, Sugiyani tries to be the typical mother, seeing to Rola’s every need, including seeing her off to school with her new, bright pink schoolbag.



Singapore. Both evenings, he called to cancel, saying the paperwork was not done.

Sugiyani was anxious to get the 800,000 rupiah he had promised her in return for using his services and choosing Singapore. Unlike those heading to Hong Kong and Taiwan, most women heading for Singapore and Malaysia need not pay a fee. In effect, they take an upfront loan from their agents to cover the cost of medical checks, paperwork, training and travel.

The chain of village recruiters share a cut of the provincial branch agent's fee of three to five million rupiah for each worker. The Jakarta head office, which pays the branch, in turn charges its Singapore counterpart agent. The going rate in 2006 was about S\$1,300 (about US\$900 at exchange rates then) for each worker, a Jakarta agent said in an interview then. By late 2008, it had risen to about S\$1,700 a worker, according to Wibowo Tanjung, owner of employment agency PT ABCD in Jakarta.

Indonesian domestic workers in Singapore start their work stints owing at least S\$1,500. It can take them some seven to nine months to repay their debt, which means they get no more than S\$10 or S\$20 of their pay each month for that time. That's after having spent about three months in an Indonesian training centre preparing for their job, also without pay.

Tini, a staff member at a Jakarta agency, said: "Many people ask, 'Why so many deductions?' But there are so many recruiters involved. We have no choice. If we don't pay the *calo* so much, we really cannot get workers and cannot do business."

A survey in late 2008 by advocacy group Transient Workers Count Too showed that newly-arrived Indonesian domestic workers in Singapore now typically take eight to nine months to repay



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While Sugiyani is away working overseas, Warsun and his mother will take care of Rola. But Sugiyani says: "It is not how a mother would care for a child."

their debt. Tini noted: “It’s different from 10 years ago when the salary deductions were for only three months or less.” At that time, employers footed the bill for their worker’s training and travel. In more recent years, while the expenses incurred in the worker’s migration have grown, the fee that Singaporean employers pay their agencies has not. In fact, from around the time of the 1997 Asian financial crisis, Singapore agencies started to advertise the “\$0 maid” or “\$88 maid”. With that, they started to charge the employer much less and the worker herself increasingly bore the cost of going to Singapore to work.

Wibowo said: “It was better before 1997 when the employer paid for the whole cost of migration. I don’t know why things changed. You’ll have to ask the Singapore people.

“The current system does create problems. The worker knows only that she needs a job. Some recruiters and agencies will tell her here’s a job in Singapore and this is how much she can earn and quite naturally the worker will just say ‘I want’.”

When workers run into problems with their employers early on and ask for a change of workplace, their agencies at times compound their debt and the women have to continue to work without pay for months on end—sometimes for more than a year.

Selamat, the recruiter, had prepared Sugiyani for the months of salary deductions, but she knew little else about her new life. “How much is the salary in Singapore? How big are the houses? Do people have many children, big families?” she asked me, recalling how she once laboured for a 16-member household in Saudi Arabia.

Employment agency owner James Loing, who has been in the business for more than 15 years, blamed



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Days before she left for Jakarta, news travelled around the village of her imminent departure. Neighbours went up to her to wish her good luck and to say goodbye.

“Sometimes, the women go not because they really want to be a domestic worker, but because they need money instantly to solve their problems.”

village recruiters for not giving the women all the facts about what lies ahead. “The recruiters don’t tell them the truth, they just tell them about the salary and the sweetness of working in Singapore. They never tell the real conditions of work,” he said.

Sugiyani’s neighbour—a woman fond of showing off a giant teddy bear her Singapore employer had given her—told her that Singaporean children were well-behaved, and that domestic workers received *hongbao* (red packets) at the Lunar New Year.

But Sugiyani was aware of the flip side. “There was a woman from this village who died while working in Singapore. She fell from a tall building, I think,” she said. That woman might have been one of more than 150 domestic workers—the bulk of them Indonesian—who have fallen from buildings to their deaths by accident or suicide in Singapore between 1999 and 2005. No figures have been released officially in recent years.

Researcher Sri Palupi, who in 2005 studied the problems Indonesian domestic workers faced in Singapore, noted that there was insufficient regulation on the recruitment and placement process and the women were fully at the mercy of private individuals—from agents to employers. The lower wages in Singapore and Malaysia meant that the poorest women or first-time migrants chose

these destinations, whereas the more experienced and street-smart headed for better-paying Hong Kong or Taiwan.

Facing keen competition, some recruiters offered the women up to one million rupiah each in “pocket money” to entice them, agency owners let on. “Sometimes, the women go not because they really want to be a domestic worker, but because they need money instantly to solve their problems,” said Loing.

Recruiters were also known to sometimes stretch the truth about the women’s ages and education

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ABOVE RIGHT

Days before she left for Jakarta, Sugiyani’s paternal grandfather Tamiarji, 80, and her father Waryomiharjo, 47, prayed with her at the cemetery in the village where she grew up and where her parents still lived. They sought blessings and protection for her before each of her journeys.

BOTTOM RIGHT

Sugiyani’s father Waryomiharjo, 47, gave her apples for her journey to Jakarta. As she left in the darkness of night, he hugged her and kept repeating: “Hati hati, Yun” (“Be careful, Yun”, in Indonesian). A few nights earlier, he said: “I don’t want her to leave, if I could give her enough money. But I can’t. She needs her own money to buy bike, build a house. If she doesn’t work overseas, she can’t do all that. I can only pray that she will be fine, safe.”





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Just hours before her mother will be picked up for yet another long trip away from home, Rola tucks herself into bed and does not wake up to say goodbye.

qualifications. Everyone heading for Singapore was automatically aged 23—the legal minimum age in the country—or older. A central Java agent said: “As long as we know the worker is qualified, age is not so important. If she’s just 21 but has already worked as a maid for five years in Jakarta, she will be better prepared than a 23-year-old who is new.”

In any case, Sugiyani felt ready for Singapore. “I’m not afraid,” she said. In the days before leaving home, she prayed about her new life. “I ask for protection, for a good employer and that I will complete the contract, that I will have no troubles, that I will have money for Rola,” she said. “I just want her to be able to finish high school.”

On the eve of saying goodbye, she fretted about her husband, who had been running a fever. Warsun, on the other hand, appeared more pragmatic. “When she’s not here, I will have to wake up at 6am instead of 7am to wash dishes, clothes, help my mother with the business, help Rola,” he said. “If my wife worked in Taiwan, I could have a better mobile phone. I could have two mobile phones.”

Before her 10-hour road trip to Jakarta, Sugiyani’s parents arrived with homemade *lontong* (rice cakes) for the journey. The recruiter had said the van would come by at 7pm.

It was 6.45pm. Rola was still sitting outside, fiddling with the transistor radio. Sugiyani and her husband retreated to the privacy of their room and shut the door.

An hour later, a van rumbled down the narrow, pot-holed road in front of their house. Warsun emerged from the bedroom, but it zoomed right past. He returned to his wife. Rola made her way to her bedroom and tucked herself into bed.



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The door of the van slammed shut with a finality that hit home for Sugiyani. It was the start of a 10-hour drive to Jakarta where she would spend the next few months preparing for her job as a domestic worker in Singapore. Her husband Warsun squatted by a drain in front of the house, away from other family members who tapped the side of the van and called out

“Yun, Yun” (Sugiyani’s pet name) as its door was shut. Like the other eight women in the van, Sugiyani was leaving home in the hope of pulling her family out of poverty. Going to Singapore was “jalan satu satu” (the only way). Soon after she got into the van, she pulled the hood of her sweatshirt over her head and shut her eyes.

The village was mostly asleep when a van and a car arrived at the house close to 10pm. Warsun bolted out of the bedroom, followed by Sugiyani, rubbing her eyes. She had fallen asleep waiting. He picked up her suitcase and headed for the door.

Her parents and in-laws were on the porch; her next-door neighbours stood around. Sugiyani reached for Warsun's face and leaned into him gently.

She walked down the driveway. Her father curled his arm around her neck. When he finally let go, she took her place in the 10-seater van. They called out her pet name "Yun, Yun". But nobody shed tears.

Sugiyani sat stony-faced and silent, ignoring the others in the van. She reached into her handbag for some strawberry-flavoured candy, and fingered a keychain with her daughter's name on it. Then she pulled her sweatshirt hood over her head and shut her eyes, going to sleep as the van tore towards the capital city.

By the time Rola awoke the next morning, we had arrived in Jakarta's crawling traffic. Sugiyani appeared to have left her cheery giggle at home. She looked for her mobile phone and sent an SMS message, before glancing out at the skyscrapers.

There were eight other women in the van who were heading overseas and they started conversing. "Where have you worked before?" "Can you speak English? Cantonese?"

At 8am, the van pulled up at the walled compound of a migrant workers' training centre on the outskirts of West Jakarta. This was where the women would spend the next two to six months learning to cook, clean, look after babies and the elderly, and studying English, Cantonese (if heading for Hong Kong) or Mandarin (for Taiwan).



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Hours after getting to the Jakarta training centre, a 10-hour overnight drive away from her village, Sugiyani sat on the cement floor of the dormitory—which sleeps 200—trying to reach her mother and husband before she had to surrender her mobile phone. Trainees can use a pay phone but

are not allowed to use their mobiles because "their husbands will call and they will be distracted", explained Narti Yani, the centre's marketing assistant. Many such training centres confiscate workers' mobile phones and do not allow the workers to leave the compound.



...

Sugiyani and other newly-arrived workers were unimpressed with the hot, humid and bare dormitory of the training centre they were taken to in Jakarta. They would spend three months here before being sent overseas.

Sugiyani was sent to a dormitory for Singapore trainees. A seasoned trainee showed her where the lockers, showers and canteen were. Sugiyani chose an upper-deck bunk and unpacked her suitcase.

The dormitory was large and clean, filled with double-decker bed spaces for 200. But the bare wooden desks in the classrooms and the naked cement walls failed to impress the new arrivals. Squatting outside the canteen, they shook hands on a plan to complain to their agent and ask to move to a better centre. They repacked their bags and sat on a bench outside, refusing to join the language classes.

At 1pm, agent Handoyo Widiyanto arrived and bought them a round of iced tea. One at a time, he took them into the office for the paperwork. Sugiyani emerged from that meeting, with brows furrowed.

Handoyo and the boss of the training centre had taken turns to persuade her that given her past experience, she would not be staying for long. They reminded her that she had signed an agreement, and if she were to quit the centre now, she would have to repay three to four million rupiah. “It’s really not so bad here. Don’t worry,” Handoyo told her, smiling. Resigned to stay, Sugiyani joined the other women.

As at other training centres, they would not be allowed to leave the compound. “They will run away if we let them go out,” explained the earnest Narti Yani, the centre’s marketing assistant. To deter the women from going out, some training centres were ringed by barbed wire and had security men standing guard.

Tini, a staff member at another agency in Jakarta, said: “Those who are Christian, we allow them to go to church on Sundays, but with a minder from our centre. Our experience shows that if the women



...

Hours after arriving in Jakarta, Sugiyani was interviewed by an agent who would prepare her file to market her to employers in Singapore.

can keep going out, they will make boyfriends and when their visas are ready, they will have a positive pregnancy test.”

But the ILO’s Albert Bonasahat countered: “Every time I visit such training centres, they always use that same excuse: that the women will run out and get pregnant. But these are people, not cats! The real reason is that they feel these would-be workers are their investment. It’s like they’ve already paid for the women’s lives and don’t want to lose money.”

Veteran agency owner Wibowo was more upfront about it. He said his workers-in-training could go home to their *kampung*s (villages) if a family member was sick or if there was a crisis at home, but only if their village recruiter left a “guarantee”—by signing away the worker’s family motorbike or something similar as collateral. “We already spent money to bring her here, lah,” he said, explaining that it cost him about seven million rupiah to recruit one worker from the village, train her and send her to Singapore. It cost about the same to send one worker to Taiwan or Malaysia, and about nine million rupiah for Hong Kong.

While at the training centres, workers were often barred from holding their own mobile phones or using them. “Their husbands will call and then they will worry,” said Narti. At Sugiyani’s centre, phones were confiscated upon arrival but trainees could use the centre’s pay phone, after their daily lessons which ran from 8am to 4pm.

Three days later, Sugiyani was in a class of about 30 women. Seated in the second row, her face was scrunched up in concentration as she used her fingers to count aloud in English. Like all the women training for Singapore, she wore an oversized pink T-shirt.



Before each worker was a thick wad of photocopied sample questions to help them practise for the skills and language test they must pass when they arrive in Singapore. They burst out in laughter as the teacher instructed them in conversational English: “Say, ‘May I go to the toilet, Ma’am?’ . Not ‘I want to urine, Ma’am’ .”

On her part, Sugiyani seemed a little more settled and her smile had come back.

She reported excitedly: “I can speak some English now.” Looking at me, she tried out a phrase: “Have you lunch, Miss?” It would take a few more drills, and she would have to learn 40 new words each day. Then, she might be ready for Singapore.

Author’s note:
Sugiyani arrived in Singapore to work in mid-2007. When contacted, the Singapore agency that found her work said her employer requested that she not be contacted by the author or the press.

...

Three days into her new life at the training centre in Jakarta, Sugiyani had picked up some English. She rattled off a list of vegetable names and asked, “Have you lunch, Miss?” Her ready giggle was back and she said, “I’m okay here.” But she

had not been able to reach her husband and still did not know if his fever had subsided or how Rola was. The trainees were given coordinated shirts to wear—different colours for trainees bound for Singapore, Hong Kong, Malaysia and Taiwan.

CHAPTER TWO

GOING,
GOING, GONE

HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS of young women like Sugiyani leave their families and the farming life every year to become what Indonesians—with their penchant for acronyms—term “TKI” or “TKW” (*Tenaga Kerja Indonesia*, meaning ‘Indonesian migrant worker’ or *Tenaga Kerja Wanita*, meaning ‘migrant woman worker’). Among the almost 700,000 Indonesians who became migrant workers in 2007, women outnumbered men by more than three-and-a-half times, according to government data.

Plucked from the village life by local recruiters, the women are taken to a training centre in Jakarta or Indonesia’s other big cities, where they stay for months to prepare for their job abroad. As the women learn to iron, speak English, Cantonese or Mandarin, and to cook the Chinese herbal soups and steamed fish their ethnic Chinese employers might like, those leaving home for the first time are plagued with doubts and dilemmas about what lies ahead.

Sugi Yani Prayitno, a trainer at the PT ABCD employment agency on Jakarta’s outskirts, does her best to provide soothing stock answers to the workers’ anxious questions. Sugi, who specialises in training workers heading for Singapore, said: “I tell them that if the employer requires them to cook pork and taste it as they’re making the dish, it’s okay. God will understand. We hope, lah. And we tell the workers if their employers won’t allow them to pray five times a day, accept it. I think God accepts it.”

On the wings of that hope and prayer, the women go to their new lives.

...

Bumping into two women they had previously sent overseas as domestic workers, recruiters Sun (right) and Iwan (second from right) stopped to chat. Arina (second from left), 24, had recently returned from Singapore because her employer ran into financial difficulty and could no longer pay her. Her shy older sister, who declined to state her name, had worked in Saudi Arabia for three years. So many women in the area had gone overseas to work that along village roads and at bus stops, local middlemen recruiters picked out this and that woman and said, “This one ex-Singapore, ex-Taiwan.”

.....
RUMI ISWATI, 22

Single.

Had worked in Langkawi, Malaysia for two years.

Heading for Singapore.

Temanggung, central Java.

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After eight months at home, it was time to go out into the world again. This time, Rumi was aiming for the top choice among most Indonesian migrant domestic workers: Taiwan—“for the big money”, as she put it. Her wages would help her parents, who are tobacco farmers, and 13-year-old brother get by.

Just before she left her bare-brick, single storey house and climbed into the recruiters’ four-wheel drive, her mother pushed a clutch of rupiah into her hands. Rumi’s family stood on the steps outside her home, watching and waving. To dispel any tension or sadness, recruiter Iwan cracked a joke. Rumi giggled shyly.

By the time she got to the Jakarta agency—a 12-hour drive from her village—she was tired out. And then her Taiwan dream ended before it even began. Agency staff told her—rather dismissively—that with just two years’ work experience in Malaysia, she was “not qualified” for Taiwan, “because you don’t speak English and you’re too short.”



The agency's operations manager Khamidah Noerroestam (known as Ma'am Mida to the women), 28, interviewed her, speaking tersely and jotting notes in a spiral-bound notebook. Rumi was grilled on her work experience and why she wanted to go to Taiwan. She was asked to speak some English. When she could not, Khamidah declared her new destination Singapore, where she would earn a much lower wage. The disappointment finally wore down Rumi's stoicism. She cried.





.....
UMI HARIYAH TRISNO, 28

Single.
Had worked in Ipoh, Malaysia for two years.
Heading for Singapore.
Temanggung, central Java.
.....

Umi Hariyah Trisno's passport stated she was born in 1978 but she admitted that she was several years younger. The recruiter who helped her get her passport inflated her age so that she would meet the minimum requirements.
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A chatty wisp of a teenager, Umi owned up to being a fan of Korean drama serials—a penchant she picked up while working in Malaysia. She said she liked being a domestic worker—the only job she had known in her life. “I like to clean at home.”

The money she earned and sent home was the main source of income for her farmer parents, elderly grandmother and three siblings. This time around, she also planned to save some money for herself to get married.

Two days before she left for Jakarta, the local recruiter went to her house with the papers her father needed to sign to grant her permission to work away from home. Her father, Trisno Yogo, 48, was matter-of-fact about it all. “It’s okay for Umi to go because she wants to make



money,” he said. “I’m not worried because God will always bless her. When she was in Malaysia, no phone call and no letter for two years but she came back...” Interjecting, Umi explained in simple English: “Boss no give.”

She seemed hopeful that she would find better employers in Singapore. When we arrived at the Jakarta training centre, Umi repeatedly asked me: “Singapore is okay ah? My boss good ah? Can SMS ah?” Pointing to a pile of folded prayer gowns on a bunk bed in the dormitory, she asked: “In Singapore, can take this ah? Can pray ah? Five times, one day, can?”

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Domestic workers in training are drilled on polite greetings in English, Chinese and Cantonese before they are despatched to Singapore, Taiwan or Hong Kong. They are often given uniforms to wear while in the training centres and are taught to be “obedient” to their employers. They are also taught to do household chores with electrical appliances they may not have used in their village homes, and some basics of caring for

babies and the elderly. Many training centres do not allow workers to leave their premises or use mobile telephones, but offer some time for recreation and daily prayers. Among Indonesian migrant domestic workers, most of whom are Muslim, a common worry is whether their employers will allow them to perform their daily prayers.

.....
SITI CHOLIFAH, 27

Married with a daughter aged two.
Worked in Singapore for two months, followed
by two years in Saudi Arabia.
Ketangi, Semarang, central Java.
.....

*Siti planned to go to Singapore or Hong Kong to
work once her daughter was a little older.*
.....

It was a matter of time before Siti packed her bags and left home again. She hoped her third trip abroad would also work out.

Her first overseas experience—in Singapore—lasted two months. She had to work in two houses and take care of a baby as well as her employer’s elderly mother who hit her with a cane. She asked to be moved to another employer but because of the 2003 SARS outbreak, her agent sent her home. After returning home for a month, she decided to try her luck in Saudi Arabia. “I wanted to pray five times a day and, in Singapore, I wasn’t allowed to pray,” she said. And I had to cook pork for the baby—though I didn’t eat it.”

The stint in Saudi Arabia of just over two years worked out well. Now home, she planned to leave again once her daughter was a bit older. “It’s for my child’s future. And our house is not even completed,” she said, sitting on a worn sofa in her home of bare cement floors, walls and roof beams.

It is a well-trodden path in her family. Her mother left home when she was 10 to work in Saudi Arabia.



And when Siti grew up and became a domestic worker too, she and her mother were working in the Middle East at the same time. Siti's only option if she stayed home was to go back to her old job in a nearby garment factory where she earned 800,000 rupiah (about US\$80 at exchange rates then) a month. "I want bigger salary," she said.

After she leaves, the plan was for her husband Tohir, 35, and her mother Fatimah, 50, to look after her child.

"At first I didn't agree for her to go to Singapore to work because there they have a different religion. But we discussed it and I agreed. I hoped she would meet a good employer." Tohir had worked in a plywood factory in Malaysia for three years previously, and now earned 200,000 rupiah a month cutting grass and sweeping the grounds of the local primary school. "When our child is a little older, I will let my wife go overseas to work again because we need the money," he said. "I will look after our child. I will try to love her just like a mother would."

The couple hope that the third generation in their family will not have to make the same sacrifices. Siti said: "I want my child to be a teacher or a nurse in a hospital—just like what I thought I'd be when I was growing up. I want her to be better than me. *Pembantu* (domestic helper) is no good."



.....
TOYIMA, 34
Married with two children, aged 10 and three.
Husband vetoed her plans to go to Singapore to work.
Temanggung, central Java.
.....

Selling snacks outside a school every day for 3,000 rupiah a day was not putting enough food on the table for Toyima and her family. Their bamboo and wood shack up a dusty slope had a bare concrete floor. Two goats and a handful of birds shared their kitchen. Their electricity supply was tapped off a line pulled from a neighbour’s house.

With her husband away selling *bakso* (meat balls) from a street cart in Jakarta, Toyima wanted to go to Singapore to be a domestic worker and contacted a village recruiter for help. “I want to go and earn money because we have no money,” she said. “I’ve been married for 10 years. We’re poor like this every day. Nothing has changed... I see others who have gone to Singapore. They come back and build nice big houses with bricks, not bamboo. So, I also want to go.”

She had heard and seen news reports of domestic workers being abused in Singapore and elsewhere. The recruiter, who dropped in at her house, reassured her that “Singapore is very good”. There was no need to worry, he said, because if there was a problem, the “government in Singapore will take care” and if she got a bad employer, “newspaper will report”. She was all set to leave.

Some weeks after she got the recruiter’s help with the necessary paperwork, her husband came home from Jakarta and stopped her from leaving for Singapore. He was worried that she would end up with a bad employer.





.....
RUBINAH SOBIRIM, 28

Married with one son aged two.

Preparing to go to Hong Kong.

Bekasi, east of Jakarta.

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With deft hands, Rubinah made the bed like a professional chambermaid would. She was being trained for Hong Kong where she has since been employed as a domestic worker. She had worked in Singapore for three-and-a-half years, first for a Chinese, then a British expatriate household. After returning home to get married, she gave birth to a son and now needed to go overseas again for money.

Her husband worked in a *rotan* (cane) factory, and sometimes as a driver. While she was at the Jakarta training centre for three months, he visited her twice a week, spending a couple of hours with her each time, and pleasing her with treats like her favourite *ayam goreng* (fried chicken) and eggs.

.....
SRIWARTUTI, 31

Two children aged 12 and one.
Worked in Singapore for two years,
trying to get to Taiwan.
.....

Clutching her baby to her chest, Sri rode pillion on her husband’s motorbike for two hours to get to an employment agency in the city of Banyumas, central Java.

“No sponsor (agent) near my village,” she explained. For two years, Sri worked in a Bukit Timah apartment for a doctor and his family. After two years at home, the money had run out and her husband’s occasional 50,000 rupiah (about US\$6 at exchange rates then) a week selling chicken at a market was not enough to get by on. She was trying to go to Taiwan as a domestic worker, but had so far failed her medical tests. She said she had heart problems and diabetes, and was awaiting treatment before taking the tests again.



PART II

LIFE ABROAD, LIFE LEFT BEHIND





CHAPTER THREE

HOME AWAY
FROM HOME

ONCE ABROAD, domestic workers live as part of their employers' families, sharing their home and food, and taking care of their young and old. If they get days off, they build a new social life for themselves, going to the mosque or karaoke, taking hairdressing lessons, or playing sports.

Whether employers should grant their workers a rest day a week has been a controversial topic in Singapore for as long as foreign domestic workers have been around—since 1978. While a regular day off is now recommended by the authorities, employers still can pay their workers in lieu of that, and the government has resisted legislating a weekly rest day. Many first-time Indonesian migrant workers are in fact told “no day off” would be the deal in their initial contracts.

Some migrant women's families feel Singapore's “no day off” clause is a plus, said Tini, a staff member at PT Mitrakarya Sarananusa, an employment agency an hour's drive from downtown Jakarta.

“Sometimes the husbands and families in the *kampungs* (villages) feel ‘safer’ if the woman goes to Singapore, because they know the employers are very strict, don't let the maid go out and also don't give day off. Hong Kong and Taiwan give high salary but the husbands feel anxious when their wives go there. Jealous lah.”

For the domestic worker—often the main breadwinner in the family—the aim, ultimately, is to make a pot of cash to take home. But there is a cost for being away from their own husbands and children. Stories of marriages breaking down while the woman is working overseas are commonplace—as are tales of left-behind children who go astray or are unable to recognise their own mothers after years apart.

...

On a Sunday morning, Indonesian domestic workers on their day off warmed up for a game of volleyball at a sports day for migrant workers.



For the domestic worker—often the main breadwinner in the family—the aim, ultimately, is to make a pot of cash to take home. But there is a heartrending cost for being away from their own husbands and children.

Mutmanah Witono, 38, who worked in Singapore for nine years, said: “Children of TKI (Indonesian migrant workers) usually become naughtier, because they don’t have enough love from their mothers. Fathers are not the same; they always go out. At first when we come back, the children are not close to us. Sometimes it gets better after a while.”

But more often than not, there is just no way to turn back the clock.

Many of these left-behind children become troublemakers, said Lisin Muhamad, 30, a former migrant worker in South Korea who is now an advocate for migrants’ rights as leader of a migrants’ and farmers’ alliance in Indonesia.

Singling out a few such children as he cast his eyes on a group playing on a football pitch in his home village of Ketangi in central Java, Lisin said: “When their mothers go away, they can become hard to control. They play all the time and, since their fathers work, there’s no one to even remind them of, or take them to, the *madrasah* (religious school) classes which all village children attend. Grandparents can do only so much.”

About three in 10 of the 2,000 families in his village have at least one parent away, he estimated. And it is almost always the mother.

For some children, understanding why their mothers go away is as difficult as accepting them when they come home.

Muhammad Eko Wahyu Pamuji, 11, was barely two years old when his mother left for Saudi Arabia. When she returned home two years later, she was a stranger to him. He said: “I didn’t know who she was. I just cried. And then Dad and Mum cried too.”



...

ABOVE LEFT

To unwind, some Indonesian domestic workers take to the stage. They leaf through albums of Indonesian karaoke video CDs, select their favourite songs and take turns to entertain a small crowd of locals and Indonesians having their afternoon tea.

BOTTOM LEFT

On their day off, hundreds of Indonesian domestic workers in Singapore flock to the iconic Sultan Mosque for prayers. Many also take English, computer and dressmaking lessons or spend their day with friends at local parks and malls. Only about half of all domestic workers in Singapore had a regular day off, according to a poll by the local newspaper Sunday Times in 2003. Many Singaporean employers said that if they gave their workers a day off, they would “do naughty things” or “go and get pregnant”.

.....
RUSNIATI, 30

Married with a three-year-old son.
In Singapore for her third stint as a domestic
worker, leaving her son with her husband
Dedi Priyanto, 32.
Sumber, Semarang, central Java.
.....

Whenever his son asked “Where’s mum?”, Dedi
Priyanto would be at a loss for words. “He knows
she’s working in Singapore, but he still asks,” said
Dedi. He used to help run a business setting up sound
systems for weddings and events but had been jobless
for months now. “We have no land to farm. So we
need a way to earn money. It’s easier for women to
get a job overseas, more difficult for men.”





.....

SITI HIDAYATI, 34

Married with a 13-year-old daughter.
Has been away from home for six years.
Worked in Singapore for two years, in Taiwan for three years and now in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.
Sumer, Semarang, central Java.
.....

For years now, Siti Hidayati had been filling the void of her absence by sending a stream of long-distance gifts to her daughter Febriana Rahmaningrum, 13. The bedroom of the chubby only child was filled with pretty pink bags and toys. A pair of gleaming new rollerblades rested at the foot of a shelf in the living room of the handsome house built with Siti’s earnings from Singapore.

The presents provided some comfort to Febriana, who wore dangling earrings, peeling red nail polish and pink Mickey Mouse pyjamas. “Sometimes I think I need my mum. But it’s mostly okay and I miss her only a bit. And she buys me lots of things,” she said, showing off her mobile phone.

Febriana used to give her mother a wishlist of gifts to take home from Taiwan and Singapore. Siti was now in Saudi Arabia, on her third stint overseas.

“Now I don’t ask mum to bring me presents anymore,” Febriana said. “I just want her to come home soon with lots of money for my university studies.” The teenager dreamed of becoming an architect one day. Would she ever want to be a migrant worker like her mother? “No,” she said shaking her head as her doting father Suharjo, 40, a soft drinks salesman, looked on. “I want to be *pintar* (clever) girl.”



.....
KUSMIATUN PARDJAN, 25

Divorced.
From Semarang, central Java.
Had been working in Singapore for five years.
Tampines, Singapore.
.....

Kusmiatun dreaded the questions her daughter always asked on her weekly phone calls home. “She’d want to know who the two children she can hear talking in the background are. She’d get very jealous and ask me: ‘Why don’t you care about me, carry me, feed me?’ and then she’d cry, cry, cry,” Kusmiatun said with a quiet sigh.

The seven-year-old girl left in Semarang, central Java, knew her mother was cuddling other children to sleep and she did not like it.

“My daughter would ask me: ‘When will you come home?’. I’d have to tell her: ‘Not so soon, not enough money yet. When I go back I will buy you anything, okay? And you can go to high school’,” said Kusmiatun, who had not gone home for over three years. The reassurance rarely soothed the girl, who had been in her grandparents’ care since her father left the family to take another wife, a year after her mother began work in Singapore.

“I pity my daughter,” she said. “I wish she could have at least one parent around.” In Singapore, she took solace in playing surrogate parent to Nurin Izza



and her brother Muhd Izzudin, 6, taking care of their every need while their mum and dad advanced their careers. Nurin Izza had been in her care since she was just days old. “The girl sleeps in my bed every night. When her parents go out and I don’t want to follow them, she won’t go either. When I say I want to go back to Indonesia, she starts crying and says *bibik* (aunt) must always stay here.”

Kusmiatun looked forward to the day she could go home to raise her own child. “When I’ve saved enough money, I will go home to open a *warung* (stall) selling satay. Then I can send my daughter to school every day,” she said.

.....
SURYATI SUTAMI, 30

Married, with a 10-year-old son.
From Lampung, East Java.
Had been working in Singapore for nine years.
Tampines, Singapore.
.....

Suryati deftly performed her morning routine. She punched in a few numbers and the machine spat out cash. For years now, she had been entrusted with her employer’s ATM card to withdraw money for grocery shopping every morning. Once a month, she also used it to take out S\$480 (US\$330 at exchange rates then) for her own salary.

Over nine years, and counting, Suryati had built up trust with her employer and her family. “She’s just like one of my siblings. It’s just that she works here,” said Noorhawati Abdul Rahman, 48.

As it turned out, her employers were nothing like the *garang* (tough, demanding) people that her agent had warned her about before she arrived in Singapore. Suryati might be more fortunate than many domestic workers, and she counted her blessings. Her husband, who was working in Kuala Lumpur as a construction worker, would visit once every four months or so, staying for up to 10 days each time at her employer’s home. “I’m very lucky to have such a good employer. So many of my friends are not so lucky. Many of their marriages break down. They take new boyfriend or girlfriend. I cannot do that, lah,” said Suryati.



With both her and her husband away, their 10-year-old son had been left in the care of her mother.

Whenever Suryati went home, she took him Scott's Emulsion cod liver oil, Essence of Chicken, Ovaltine, Milo and other such "brain food". During her long absences, she tried to do what she could from afar.

"I send him SMSes to tell him to study, don't play all the time," said Suryati, who learnt to speak fluent English from watching DVDs of her favourite American movies, like *Pirates of the Caribbean* and *The Mummy Returns*.

Her hopes for a better life were pinned on her son, but she had already single-handedly lifted her family's living conditions. Her wages had built a modest two-bedroom house on a plot of her father's land. They had also helped her four siblings pay for university or start businesses. "I had to leave home to come and work here. But there's been a big change in their lives back there," she said.



.....
MUTAMAROH, 28

Separated from her husband, has a seven-year-old daughter. From Surabaya.
Working in Singapore for five years.
Queenstown, Singapore.
.....

Phang Sui Yoek, 78, was Mutamaroh’s family in Singapore. They had just each other for company most of the time.

“Taking care of old people is okay for me. I have had a baby, so this is like the same,” said Mutamaroh.

“I want to work maybe another five years here, so I can give my daughter more chance to study more than me, so she doesn’t have to become a domestic worker like me.”

Madam Phang, a retired bank clerk, had eight domestic workers over the past 30 years. She said: “I feel terrible for them that they left their families behind to come and work for us. But they have no choice. So while they are here, we do what we can for them, give them what we eat.”





.....
DWI NURAENI, 28

Single.
From Semarang, central Java.
Had been working in Singapore for four years.
Toa Payoh, Singapore.
.....

“Annie” was not Nuraeni’s real name, but that was what Goh Guan Keng, 82, called her anyway.

Goh’s few words of Malay were barely enough for her to communicate with Nuraeni when the worker first arrived at her one-room Toa Payoh flat four years ago. They used hand signs to “talk” to each other at first.

Nuraeni later learnt to get by in Teochew, Hokkien and some English.

A cheerful woman with a ready smile, Nuraeni, takes care of Goh’s every need—from showering, feeding her medicine to massaging her. Goh, whom she called “Ah Ma” (for “grandmother”) had weak limbs and had had eight operations.

The pair, who constantly bantered and laughed, went for a walk every day at 6am, with Nuraeni pushing Goh’s 52kg frame in a wheelchair.

Goh said: “I treat her like my granddaughter. I *sayang* (love) her. My children *sayang* her too.” Nuraeni said: “When I first got here, Ah Ma was very quiet. Not joke, joke, like this. Now, I make her happy.

“I like taking care of Ah Ma. She’s like my own grandmother, who passed away a year ago. I used to massage my grandmother, just like that.”



.....
YUNI DWI ANDARI, 27

Single.
From Semarang, central Java.
Had been working in Singapore for 12 years.
Punggol, Singapore.
.....

It was something she had heard on the radio that brought Yuni to Singapore. A recruitment agency’s advertisement—plus the example of many of her neighbours—were enough to convince her she should also go abroad to work. With a passport that overstated her age by 10 years, she took off.

She had worked for 11 years with the same Singaporean employer. “They are just like my own family to me,” said Yuni, who had been taking care of her employer’s grandchildren, Laura, 7, and her brother, Ryan, 5, since they were newborns. Baobao, the family dog, was also part of her daily routine. He was the first to be fed each morning when she woke at 6am.

Coming from a broken home, Yuni felt lucky to have acquired a new family in Singapore. That was not the only thing she gained. She also went from a slender 42kg when she first arrived to a stout 74kg.

She exercised using a “tummy trimmer” whenever she could. “Not good to be too fat, lah. Very fast get tired,” she said with a laugh.



PART III
GOING HOME

CHAPTER FOUR

A PLACE
OF HER OWN

BARELY 24 HOURS after landing in Yogyakarta and driving five hours home, Sri Indarsih Darsan was whipping up spicy *mee goreng* (fried noodles) for her family. Stirring chilli paste into the noodles over a woodfire stove, she suddenly said: “Actually, we shouldn’t eat so much carbo.”

The 25-year-old had been an avid reader of health columns in her six-and-a-half years in Singapore. It began to dawn on her that she would have more than dietary changes to deal with in her “new” life back in the *kampung* (village).

The handsome single-floor brick house, freshly renovated with her earnings, was not quite the air-conditioned three-storey Yio Chu Kang terrace house she had tidied for over six years. The kitchen, with its sandy floor and absent refrigerator, was a world away from the one she was used to.

Her days no longer started with making celery and starfruit juice for “Sir’s” breakfast, or ended with dicing pear and apple for Button, the pet rabbit. Sri now woke up to two goats braying for breakfast, a rooster crowing and the symphony of crickets, birds and lizards.

She had been happy enough in Singapore, but it was time to return home. She had arrived laden with Chinese-style chicken *bak kwa* (barbecued meat), stacks of Giordano clothes and recipes

...

Sri arrived at the Changi Airport to catch her flight home to Yogyakarta, with her employers Lok Poh Lin, 47, and Paul Kang, 50, giving her a hand. The couple and their two teenage children had been Sri’s surrogate family while she had been away from her own.



for her favourite chicken rice and *laksa* (curried noodles). “I’ve been away for too long. My parents are getting old,” she explained in fluent English learnt from reading the newspapers, watching television shows and attending classes at Singapore’s Sultan Mosque.

With her younger sister also in Singapore as a domestic worker for the past year, Sri felt even more compelled to head home. She hoped to find an office job in Purwokerto, the city nearest her village. She had prepared for this by spending S\$375 (about US\$260 at exchange rates then)—more than her S\$350 monthly salary—on a computer course she had attended every Sunday for a year. In her suitcase she had a laminated “Certificate of Computer Literacy: Microsoft Word, Excel, Access, Powerpoint, Internet”.

What she did not ready herself for was living the village life again. “It will take some time to get used to being here,” she said, two days after getting back. Boiling water on the woodfire stove for a bath one night, she blurted out: “I don’t know if I can survive like this, with kitchen like this. I have problem.” The following night, it was still bothering her. “I feel like everything is very dirty,” she grumbled, adding after a pause, “I need to become the old Sri again. I need time.” In the meantime, on a trip to town, she searched the minimart shelves and found some middle-class comfort—a bottle of orange-flavoured liquid hand soap.” I’m not used to washing with bar soap anymore,” she said.

...

While waiting for her flight, Sri opened a present and a note given to her by Michelle, the girl she had watched grow up into a 14-year-old. Sri, who likes to cook and bake, had taken recipes for chocolate chip and Nestum cookies from Michelle’s home economics classes. Sri said: “They were a very good family. I will miss them. I’m a little sad but a lot happy to be going home to my family.”

**“I feel like everything is very dirty.
I need to become the old Sri again.
I need time...”**

In the tranquillity of her home—particularly in the comfortable, new, all-brick rooms built with money she sent home—Sri played with her five-year-old niece and chatted with her mother late into the night.

Every day, she woke in the wee hours to help her father in his cottage industry, making the family’s homebrew brand of *kicap manis* (sweet soya sauce) from boiled black beans, herbs and coconut sugar. Sri’s father, Darsun Darmosumarto, 64, said the house, where he and his wife lived with the younger of their two sons, used to be made of wood and concrete.

Proud of how Sri had made their lives better, he said: “Some people may look down on my daughters because they are maids in Singapore. But we have improved our conditions because of their work. People can see for themselves.”

He also ploughed 17.5 million rupiah of Sri’s earnings into half a hectare of land for her to build a house. On it, he has planted durian and banana trees and dug a fish pond.

“I’m waiting for the person to help me build a house and front garden here, together,” Sri declared in English, with a wink and laugh. Most village women her age were already mothers. When a friend came by to say hello with a two-month-old baby in her arms, Sri said: “One year older than

me, got one baby already. If I didn’t leave, I think I would have many children already.”

With her “ex-Singapore” credentials, Sri was confident that the village’s eligible men would soon be making inquiries. But she was not about to settle for just any man who asked for her hand. “I want to find a partner, but slowly,” she said. “We must know each other well first. It cannot be so easy for the man.”

Brimming with hope, she did not see herself as one of the many Indonesian women who return home only to go away again. “I don’t want to work overseas as a maid anymore. Enough already,” she said.

...

ABOVE RIGHT
As she stepped off the plane in Yogyakarta, Sri seemed thrilled and also a little anxious to see her family after not having been home for three years.

BOTTOM RIGHT
Sri’s family barely recognised her as she pushed her trolley heaped with bags out of the Yogyakarta airport. Her mother Tarsiyem, 61, exclaimed, “Is that Sri?” Sri responded with “Eh!” and rushed towards her. She had not been home for three years. Unsure of who she was, her five-year-old niece shied away.





...

Fresh off the plane from years in Singapore, Sri was overwhelmed by the attention she got from fellow villagers as she made her rounds.



...

A day after she got home, Sri's father organised a prayer session for all the village's men to give thanks that she had returned safely. As a woman, Sri could not sit with the men, but she prayed alongside.



...

Having earned credentials and cash from her stint in Singapore, Sri was now considered a catch, and had to entertain endless enquiries from the village's eligible men on her willingness to marry. Sri said she planned to take her time to pick the right partner. By mid-2009, she was still single.



...

Already bored at being home, Sri grabbed a newspaper she found at the local provision shop and started to send phone messages to her friends in Singapore. It would take her a while to adapt to the pace of village life again.



...

Sri put down her load to catch her breath on a trip downhill to get groceries with her mother. In her first days home, Sri, now used to city life, complained of how “dirty” everything was and hunted for the liquid hand soap that she had grown to like.



...
Sri stood proudly in front of the family home her hard-earned money helped renovate.



...

There would be no more supermarket-ready fresh chicken for Sri, who had returned to the ways of the village. She tried her hand at relearning how to pluck off a chicken's feathers in preparation for a feast to mark her homecoming.

CHAPTER FIVE

DAUGHTERS
OF THE SOIL

AFTER YEARS ABROAD, Indonesia's migrant women go home to varied fates. Most return to their villages with some savings. Typically, they use it to get married and build a new family house, buy a motorbike or set up a mom-and-pop store in their village. Quite often, the women hit the road as a migrant worker once again after the money runs out.

Others return with new skills and move on to other careers. But the story of Siti M, 33, who broke out of the trap of low-skilled work and repeat-migration, is still something of a rarity. She worked in Singapore for 11 years, during which she picked up good English and computer skills. While in Singapore, she got recruited for an administrative job in Indonesia. Going home in July 2007, Siti had since been based in Tanjung Pinang as a staff member of a government office in Riau Islands province, earning 1.5 million rupiah per month.

Siti, who asked that her full name and photo not be included in this book, also recently started on a four-year degree course in English at a local tertiary college. She continued to be an inspiration to other migrant workers.

Those far less fortunate return home injured, broken psychologically or, at times, in coffins. NGO workers and employment agents recount going to the cargo terminal to collect the bodies of workers who died from illness, suicide or accident. Yet others return pregnant or with babies in arms—sometimes as a result of being raped by their employers, a problem more commonly reported in the Middle East. Newborns had been found in the toilets at Terminal 3 of the Soekarno-Hatta airport in Jakarta, where all returning migrant workers used to be channelled.

...

After years away from home, many workers return to their villages with toys for their children and cash to renovate their houses or to buy new motorbikes. But the case of Tumarni, 30, (far right) who also brought home a large teddy bear for her six-year-old son, Galang, was typical: the money ran out quickly and, before long, she felt compelled to leave again.

.....
NINING DJOHAR, 34

Married, with two children, aged 10 and two.
A third child, Kiky, was born in 2008.
Returned after seven years in Singapore and
now works at an Indonesian non-governmental
organisation in Jakarta.
Outskirts of Jakarta.
.....

Seven years in Singapore and one broken marriage later, Nining returned to Indonesia and found new love and a challenging job as an NGO worker. Now an advocacy division staff member of local group Migrant Care, she helps migrant workers in need.

“Being an ex-migrant worker, I know how those workers feel,” she said. She helped set up a 24-hour helpdesk at Terminal 3 at Jakarta’s international airport. That controversial terminal through which, up till 2009, the bulk of Indonesian migrant workers returned, had been constantly plagued by allegations of official corruption and exploitation.

Her second husband, Sargiyono—with whom she had Aribahand Kiky—recently lost his hotel job, and he had just started a small business selling food at their house in the outskirts of Jakarta. Her older daughter, Ayu, lived with her parents in Bandung. Nining and Sargiyono had been building their home bit by bit, extending the back each time they had money, and buying electrical appliances with pre-paid instalments. It took her six months to get her microwave oven.



While she was in Singapore, Nining was part of a group of Indonesian domestic workers who ran a “helpline” by handing out their own mobile phone numbers on slips of paper to workers and employers in need. On her Sundays off, she made house calls where employers had complained of problems with their workers—“she don’t know how to iron, how to cook”—and surreptitiously passed Khong Guan biscuits and Maggie instant noodles to bone-thin workers who said they didn’t get enough to eat and could not go out.



.....
SUKENI, 28

Married.
Worked in Singapore for three years.
Now a housewife.
Tangerang, west of Jakarta.
.....

The pictures in Sukeni’s living room told a story that other migrant women might envy. Shortly before the petite worker left Singapore to go home to Jakarta in 2004, she met Australian David Smith, 40, at a café at the Forum Galleria shopping mall.

Just as she put in the paperwork to go to Hong Kong or Saudi Arabia as a domestic worker soon after she got home, Smith, who worked as a driller on oil rigs, showed up in Jakarta and told her not to leave. He converted to Islam and married her.

As Mrs Smith, Sukeni no longer needed a job, and spent most of the year in Indonesia and Christmas in Australia. She drove around town in a shiny grey Honda CRV four-wheel drive, played golf with her husband for leisure and employed two domestic helpers of her own. She had also taken on some volunteer work, and started attending a part-time finance course.

The couple lived in a 250 sq m, two-storey home with five bedrooms and four bathrooms, in a gated compound just west of Jakarta, and were looking to buy an apartment in the city’s central business district for investment.

They also hoped to be parents, and were receiving fertility treatment at Singapore’s Thomson Medical Centre.





.....
RUBAYAH, 26

Married.
Worked in Singapore for six years.
Banten, West Java.
.....

One-and-a-half years after returning home, Rubayah got what she came back for—her wedding. On the big day, Rubayah and her soon-to-be husband Abdul Manaf, 42, celebrated their union by tearing up a piece of chicken for good luck while a stream of friends and relatives came from near and far to offer their congratulations.

Rubayah, who had worked in Singapore for six years, went home at the end of 2005, after her parents repeatedly asked her to go home and get married. Six months on, she agreed to marry Abdul, whom she had met at the small food stall her mother ran in front of their house. Abdul, a divorcee with two young sons, had asked her parents for her hand.

.....
NGAROPAH ROCHMAD, 27

Had worked in Taiwan for seven months, followed by five years in Singapore.
She was home in Java for a three-month break, before returning to her Singapore employer.
Tempuran, Magelang, central Java.
.....

Ngaropah fancied herself a shopping guru.

She had been to almost all of Singapore’s malls, she said. “Compass Point, Causeway Point, North Point, Hougang Mall. I’ve been to them all!” Back in Java for a break after five years in the city state, she was happy to see her parents but was quickly bored. “This place very *kampung* (village), *kampung*. Very boring. No Orchard, no Marina. Cannot *tahan* (tolerate),” she said, waving her manicured nails.

While she had grown up like any other rural child, taking a cold *kampung* shower—without water heaters—was a problem for her now. “I will get sick if I take a cold shower now. Have to boil water. And the water is *chou chou* (smelly in Mandarin),” she said, using the Mandarin she learnt while working in Taiwan and Singapore. “Very dirty. I don’t dare to wash my face.” Squat toilets—the only sort available in the village—also presented a challenge. “I’m not used to it anymore. My thighs ache from squatting,” she said without irony.

Life in Singapore—where she worked for the same employers and helped raise their young son—was different. “In Singapore, I eat unpolished rice, along with my employer. It’s healthier and won’t make you fat. A lot of vitamin. Here, there’s only



nasi putih (white rice). I don't eat much of it now because it will make me fat."

As we drove past rice fields, she remarked with a laugh: "All this organic you know. In Singapore very expensive."

Her employers had been very good to her, she said. "We eat at the same table, we share soap." They take me and their son to Wet Wet Wild water park or on holiday to Batam, Genting, Bali. At Chinese New Year, Hari Raya and on my birthday, they give me *hongbao* (red packet), S\$100, S\$50. I know other maids tell me their *laoban* (bosses) give them S\$2 *hongbao*.

"Laoban buys clothes for me. Sometimes I feel embarrassed they're so good to me. When the family soap runs out, I buy to replace. Ma'am tease me, 'You very rich already ah?' I say, 'I'm embarrassed because you buy things for me but I'm not anything here, only a maid'."

Her employers' son had grown close to her. "He'd kiss me and not his mama and papa," she said. "They'd get very jealous."

Back in her own village home, her room, filled with soft toys and fitted with Garfield curtains, hinted at the child she still was at heart.

But the years in Singapore had honed her urbane sensibilities. In the village, she spritzed on perfume before heading out in fitted blouses and tight jeans, and braved the lumpy *kampung* paths in strappy heeled sandals. Each afternoon, she whipped out blue blotting paper from her white canvas handbag to wipe oil residue off her face. "Last time I don't dare to be sexy, sexy one," she said in all seriousness.

She might have to return to this "*kampung*, *kampung*" life soon enough. "I will come back here lah. I'm Indonesian, not Singaporean," she said.



.....
AAN KURNIAWATI, 23

Married.
Worked in Singapore for two years.
Went to Hong Kong thereafter but was sent home
by her employer after one month.
Temanggung, central Java.
.....

Within days of getting home, Aan sported a host of scabby love bites on her neck. “It’s my *laogong* (husband in Mandarin),” she confided. “But never mind, lah. [It has been] so long.”

But the usually cheerful Aan—who was excited by the sight of the sea as we drove from Jakarta to central Java days earlier—was far from happy to have “come home with no money”, as she put it. Her second trip away from home ended much sooner than she had expected. Aan said she was sent home by her employer only after one month in Hong Kong, over a misunderstanding because of the language barrier.

For two years in Singapore, she had worked for a Malay-speaking Chinese family in a two-storey bungalow in the middle-class Thomson Road area.

She left Singapore to go home to marry her boyfriend, who had been working in Malaysia. The couple then decided that she would go overseas to work again. She planned to go back to Singapore to be a domestic worker. Patting her stomach, she said: “If no baby, lah. If have baby, then have baby already then go. My mum take care of baby.”





.....
IKA KUMALASARI, 21

Single.
Worked one-and-a-half years in Malaysia,
followed by two years in Singapore.
Returned home in late 2008.
Sumberejo Village, Semarang, central Java.
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Deep in concentration, Ika twirled her pencil-mounted compass set as she sketched dressmaking patterns. Whenever she made a mistake, she looked to her teacher for help.

Ika had returned from working in Singapore just two weeks ago, but was already attending tailoring classes. Almost every morning, she rode a rickety, bread-loaf-like minibus for an hour from her village to town for the lessons. “I felt bored staying at home. So I came here to learn,” she said. “This is fun.” After a month of making pencil drawings of blouses and dresses, she would move on to working the sewing machines. Her teacher, Pita Situmorang, said: “Many returned migrant workers come here to learn to make clothes in the hope of getting a job in local garment factories. That’s better than working overseas.”

Ika hoped for more than that. She wanted to set up her own tailoring business one day. After being a domestic worker for almost four years, the feisty young woman aspired to more in life. “I enjoyed working in Singapore. But I did not renew my contract because I thought ‘why must I always be a *pembantu* (domestic helper)? I want to go home and open a shop’.”



The bulk of the 15 million rupiah she earned had paid for a new house her father was building for their family of five. Their old wooden home—an abandoned, crumpled heap behind their temporary quarters—had been thoroughly destroyed by termites.

As the oldest child, Ika had been the main income-earner at home for years. “I want my younger sister and brother to not have to work as a *pembantu* like me. For me to be one is enough,” she said.

“So many Indonesian women are TKI (Indonesian acronym for migrant domestic worker) because they have no choice. There is no money in the *kampung* (village). The problem is education. Because we have little education, we earn so little money and because we have no money, we can’t get more education.”

It was a cycle she wanted to break. She would not allow her children to become migrant workers like her, she said. “No! My children must be better than me. Must not be a *pembantu*,” she said, shaking her head firmly.

For now, she would have to relearn the ways of the *kampung*. As she struggled to get a strong fire going to boil a pot of soup in her mud and attap kitchen, she said with a laugh: “So long never use, I forget how to make fire with wood... In Singapore, just turn on the gas.

“But it’s okay because last time also like this,” she said. “Singapore kitchen is so different. There’s no microwave or oven here. No fridge also. But also no need. Just buy enough food and then there’s no need to store. If I have a fridge, our electricity bill will also go up.”

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NGATIYAM BINTI RAMELAN, 33
Married with two sons.
Worked in Singapore for four years.
Returned home to the farming life three years ago.
Ketangi, Semarang, central Java.
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“I’m so black now,” Ngatiyam grumbled as she handed over another instalment of cash for the 17,000-rupiah cake of whitening face powder she was buying on credit from the village provision store.

Like most other local women, Ngatiyam was obsessed with keeping her complexion fair. Short on chemical aid, she wore a scarf and cap while working the sun-baked paddy fields from 7.30am to 1pm each day.

At lunchtime, she retreated to the cool cocoon of the handsome home she had built—complete with curtains, bed sheets and ceramic wall and floor tiles in her favourite shade of baby blue. “I chose the colour. My husband just follows. It’s all my money anyway,” she said. “My life is better now than before going Singapore. My house is nicer. Before, it was not nice. Just *kayu* (wood).”

The one-storey house, a rice field about the size of half a football field, and a Honda Suprafit motorcycle which she kept locked in her older son’s bedroom were ever-present reminders of her years of toil in Singapore. The 42 million rupiah she saved up while working there evaporated within a month of her return home.



“Work four years, then in one month, money all gone!” she said with a laugh. “It’s okay lah. Got house already. And I can see the house, so it’s like the money hasn’t really finished,” she rationalised, in a mix of Mandarin and English.

Even so, the lack of money left her in a fix. There was no way she could set up the *lontong* (rice cake) stall she had planned to set up in her home village, or pay for her younger son’s higher education, she lamented. Before long, she was asking in Mandarin if I could help her get another job in Singapore, or give her some cash.

Her 42-year-old husband, Zumri, would like her to stay home for good. “I felt very lonely when she was away. When I came home from work, there was no wife at home. I had to sleep alone,” he said in Bahasa Indonesia.

“I don’t want her to go away again. Even if there is no money, the important thing is that she’s home.”





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MUTMANAH WITONO, 38

Widowed with three children. Worked for nine years in Singapore. Returned home in 2004 to set up a small provision shop beside her house.
Krajan, Surah district, central Java.
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Mutmanah was finally home to make up for lost time. Ten years into their marriage, her husband had fallen from a coconut tree in a freak accident and died. She was left to raise their three children, then just seven, four and one-and-a-half years old. With few skills and little education, she saw a way out in what a “sponsor” (as recruiters are known locally) promised when he called on her home at random: a S\$200-a-month job as a domestic worker in Singapore. Soon after, she got on the bus to Pekanbaru, Riau, and started her nine-year stay away from home.

Her first encounter with a Singaporean employer was unhappy. The Chinese woman objected to her short nightly prayer sessions, complaining that she looked “so scary, like a *hantu* (ghost)” in her white prayer gown. Mutmanah was then placed in an Indian expatriates’ home, which she ran for the next eight years alongside a Filipino domestic worker, eventually drawing S\$550 in salary.

Mutmanah left her children in her mother’s care and later put them in a Muslim boarding school in Solo, a city in central Java. She wrote them letters every three days.

“The children didn’t understand why I went away... My youngest son did not even recognise me when I came back a few years later. He did not want



to hold my hand. I thought it's so sad... How come my own child is like that to me? I tried to get closer to him by buying him toy cars, motorbikes from the stores," she said.

Her youngest son, Khoirun Nadairin, now a strapping, lanky 17-year-old a full head taller than his mother, said: "We had money to use but I had no mum." He was in high school and lived with Mutmanah in the spacious maroon-tiled five-bedroom home she built with her earnings—where each of the three kids had their own room.

But her years of sacrifice did not save her two older children from becoming migrant workers too. When she came home in 2004, her older son—who had twice dropped out of boarding school—left to be a mechanic in a car workshop in Malaysia. That did not work out and he returned empty-handed after one year. Now jobless, he was struggling to raise three children from two marriages.

Her daughter also quit school and joined her friends as a *pembantu* (domestic helper) in Taiwan when she turned 18. Mutmanah said: "I ask God to help her go back to school again."

With her Singapore savings long spent, Mutmanah supported herself by running a *warung* (store) in front of her home, selling provisions like sugar, coffee, snacks, oil, noodles and cigarettes to neighbours.

Having enough to eat was not a worry. "Now I am thin, but want to be fatter. Because people in this place look at thin people and think 'Oh, she has no money'."

As a relatively wealthy returned migrant worker, she had no shortage of re-marriage prospects. She said: "I ask God to help... I'm quite tired of doing everything on my own."

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VALERIA SUSANA, 34

Widowed, with a 10-year-old son.
Worked for one-and-a-half years in Singapore.
Fell from second floor of an apartment block.
Sukanto Police Hospital, Jakarta.
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At the foot of each bed was a clipboard bearing a woman’s name and the three letters “TKI”: Indonesian for “migrant worker”.

This is the Jakarta hospital where the country’s beleaguered TKIs come directly from the airport with cuts, bruises, burns and psychological wounds.

Next to Sofi’s bed was a clutch of coins that a visitor had left in pity. The soft-spoken 23-year-old from East Java had broken a few bones after jumping from the second floor of an apartment block in Saudi Arabia, to escape from her employer’s son’s sexual advances.

A few beds away, 17-year-old Santi from West Java could not move her left leg, but is relieved to even be alive, having fallen from the 15th floor while working in Saudi Arabia.

Worker after worker recounted stories of daring escape, unlucky falls, or brutal beatings. As Valeria Susana put it: “Saudi Arabia, broken. Taiwan, broken. Singapore... All broken!”

She had returned two weeks earlier, from Singapore, where she had tumbled off the second floor of a block of flats while wiping windows. She broke a bone in her spine.

A university graduate, Valeria decided to work in Singapore to raise cash to send her only son to high school. Her husband, a pianist, had died eight years earlier in a motorcycle accident.

She swore to put it all behind her and never to go overseas to work again.





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KENI BINTE CARD A

Separated with a three-year-old son.
Worked for four-and-a-half months in Saudi Arabia.
Sukanto Police Hospital, Jakarta.
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Keni lay in her hospital bed, whimpering in pain. No matter how she lay, the pain wouldn’t subside.

She lifted her headdress and blouse to show me patch upon patch of singed flesh. It had been three months since the 28-year-old came home from Saudi Arabia, her body bearing the marks of the horrific four-and-a-half months she spent as a domestic worker there.

Angry red welts crawled across her back and encircled her neck. Puffy blobs of waxy, burnt flesh lined her arms and legs—the result of repeated scalding with a hot iron. Straggly scars ran beneath her belly button. Her ears were a mess of melted flesh soldered to the sides of her head. Her lips were no longer aligned. Four lower front teeth were missing, severed and ripped out by a pair of scissors, she told me, mimicking the cutting motion with two of her fingers. She was then forced to swallow her own teeth, she said, running her fingers down her throat to her stomach to help me understand. Her female employer also yanked at her nipples daily, causing one to fall off, she said.

Keni pulled out Polaroid pictures taken when she had been sent straight from the airport to the Sukanto Police Hospital, where maimed and mauled Indonesian migrant workers are parked to heal. The



wounds that crisscrossed her body looked the same in the photos. Just rawer and angrier.

Her employer in Saudi Arabia, a doctor later named in Indonesian NGO reports as Wafa al-Khuraifi, had tortured her incessantly over the course of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan in 2008.

Apparently, she had been angry over new employment contracts that had raised Indonesian domestic workers' salaries, and she wanted Keni to work more quickly.

Several times, Keni tried to escape but found the doors locked, she said. In October that year, the employer packed her off to the airport covered head to toe in an abaya and hijab to conceal her injuries. It was only when Keni arrived in Jakarta that airport staff members noticed that she was limping in pain, and sent her to hospital.

I kept firing off shots on my camera as Keni writhed in pain. I did not know what else to do. Then I reached out to hold her hand. She flinched at first, unsure of what I would do with it, but then tightened her grip.

When I asked her for photos of her old self, she instead fished out from her purse a picture of her chubby three-year-old only child. "He's now scared to look at me and calls me *gila* (a mad person)." Her husband had left her, telling her, "You're handicapped now, don't be a long-winded nag", she said.

She then showed me an etched-out picture of herself before she went to Saudi Arabia that fourth, unlucky time. She was a sweet-faced young woman, looking relaxed in jeans.

"I used to have breasts. I used to be a bit plump," she told me.



It was over three months after her return to Indonesia that Keni's case became known to the public. She had been told to hush up by her Indonesian employment agency, she said. She had told no one but a few people around her until I stumbled upon her at the hospital. With her permission and using the pictures I shot, Indonesian NGO workers were able to get the local media's attention and lobbied the authorities to take up her case. Human Rights Watch in New York issued a statement about her and pressed the Indonesian and Saudi governments to act.

Still, it took over a year before the two governments arranged for Keni to return to Saudi Arabia to press charges against her employer. In June 2011, Didi Wahyudi, head of citizen protection services at the Indonesian Consulate in Jeddah told me in a phone interview that Keni was still staying there, waiting justice and compensation. He said: "She has been here for over two years now. We are doing our best to get justice for her, but it is very, very difficult to get justice here. Especially for a maid."

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Deep thanks to the many friends and comrades who have helped or been involved in this protracted project in one way or other.

TC repeatedly went through the text as volunteer(ed) copy editor—after having been my number one cheerleader through the years it took to do this project, along with Al and Dan.

Ian Johnson in Beijing gave the text a sound edit at a late stage and provided crucial pointers. Susan Meiselas in New York offered unstinting support through the years and guidance over the final edit of pictures. Steph, Joyce and Hanguan helped edit this set of pictures at different stages, helping it take shape.

Susan Long and Alan John saw value in this work early on and prodded me to file some of these stories for publication in *The Straits Times* and then edited the pieces with care. They helped me go on believing in the vocation of purposeful journalism.

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Comrades working to improve the lot of migrant workers in Singapore bit by bit have been my

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In Jakarta, Palupi stirred me with her sense of faith and vocation, and timely reminders to push on to tell a slice of her country’s story. Sidney Jones, Geni Achnas, Nisha Varia and Susan Meiselas inspired with their pioneering work on this issue.

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Further back, Cherian George helped the idealistic 18-year-old he hired get a good university education and initiated her into the world of journalism. George Gascon then freed my eyes and infected me with the impulse for visual story-telling.

My family put up with my regular disappearances and my missing umpteenth Chinese New Year celebrations while working on this and other personal projects. Other loved ones provided encouragement, inspiration, prodding or a listening ear.

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But my deepest thanks go to Sugiyani and her family. They let us into their home and lives at an emotional time, and hosted and fed us as generously as they possibly could.

Her story, published in *The Straits Times* as a seven-page spread of words and pictures in March 2007, won local, regional and international journalism prizes. It drew letters, emails, SMS messages and phone calls from readers, who were moved and grateful for the light Sugiyani shone on their own domestic workers’ circumstances and tribulations.

Sugiyani arrived to work in Singapore a few months after our journey together from her village ended with me leaving her at the training centre on the fringes of Jakarta. It is my one regret that I have not been able to speak with her since or share with her the accolades her story won. The employment agency which brought her to Singapore said her employer did not want her to be in touch with me or other journalists.

Thanks, too, to all the other migrant workers who graciously let me into their lives so that I could tell

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This book would have been impossible without all of them, but its many flaws remain my own.

Chi Yin
Beijing
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AUTHOR'S BIO

Sim Chi Yin is a freelance photographer based in Beijing, China. Her work has appeared in *The New York Times*, the *International Herald Tribune* and the *Los Angeles Times*.

She was selected for *Vii* photo agency's Mentor Program in mid-2011. In 2010, she was one of three photographers awarded a Magnum Foundation scholarship for a summer programme in "Photography and Human Rights" at New York University, and did stints at Magnum Photos' New York office and the International Center of Photography.

She was a finalist for the London *Sunday Times*' Ian Parry Award in 1999, with a portfolio of pictures from rural Siberia.

Chi Yin was a journalist and foreign correspondent for *The Straits Times*, Singapore's national English language daily for nine years—straddling words and pictures, and reporting extensively on migration and labour issues—before leaving to return to photography in late 2010.

A fourth-generation overseas Chinese, Chi Yin grew up in Singapore. She graduated with history

and international relations degrees from the London School of Economics and Political Science, where she spent many nights studying Mao Zedong's policies.

While based in Singapore, she did photo projects and exhibitions on migrant workers—the Samsui women who left southern China to become construction labourers in Singapore in the 1930s, as well as modern-day workers who come from the poorer parts of Asia.

Her story and pictures on Indonesian migrant workers' journeys published by *The Straits Times* in 2007 won prizes given out by the Society of Publishers of Asia (Sopa) and Ifra, an affiliate of the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers.

She sometimes dreams in mute black-and-white mode, but in real life is fascinated by colour and light, and is at home in both English and Mandarin Chinese. She continues to work at telling ordinary people's stories.

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