

Circumcised Heart

by Miriam Adeney

Here's some paper and a pencil," the interrogator told Hilmy. "Write down any questions you want to ask."
A salesman for the national oil company, Hilmy Nor was in prison for witnessing to his Christian faith. He is Malay.

When his interrogator asked him to write out his questions, Hilmy's "immediate reaction was to scream my heart out on paper. What a surprise to see a poem flowing from my pencil..."

Eventually not only a poem was born from this imprisonment, but also a book. Published in 1999 by Kairos Research Centre in Malaysia, the 100-page *Circumcised Heart* remains in demand.

At first the book was only a gleam in Hilmy's eye.

"Can he write? His main claim to fame is demonstrating 20 ways to use a sarong," muttered some fellow students at Regent College, where he had enrolled after his release.

A rule in the college bookwriting program was another hurdle: "We do not allow any autobiographies written by people under age 60."

Dreaming and rewriting spanned three years. We checked chapter drafts in my Vancouver college office. The aroma of soup drifted up from pots simmering in preparation for the weekly lunch following chapel. Around us, students paced the halls, practicing Hebrew recitations of Psalm 23. Above us, a great green roof filtered light onto round coffee tables below.

Sometimes Hilmy wrote in the apartment he shared with his wife May Lee. There might be snow on the doorstep, but there were wonderful spices and mouthwatering Asian cuisines inside.

Sometimes Hilmy and I met in places like Warm Beach campground. He lugged his manuscript along to a college retreat. There, amid mist and fern spirals and tall evergreen trees and seagull cries, we polished the pages.

A very human book is the result. Hilmy writes about having to walk blindfolded to interrogations so often that even now, whenever he leaves a room, he automatically extends his wrists for handcuffs. It is a gesture he will have to unlearn. He writes about watching May Lee recede into the distance. He writes about losing 35 pounds.

One Christmas, when he is in solitary confinement, someone down the corridor sings "Silent Night." Hilmy closes his eyes and imagines what May Lee is doing. He pictures the church festivities. He smells the curry at one open house, and tastes the special buns at another. It hurts too much. He curls up to sleep.

Yet God walks with him through the pain. As a result, after he is released he hosts a lunch for his two interrogators. "How could I forgive them?

Love them and pray for them? Ridiculous. Yet the Lord taught me how."

When Hilmy wrote his poem, a prison guard approached him. "Not bad. You have talent. Could you possibly compose a poem for my mom's birthday?"

"I'm not a poet," Hilmy answered. "I just wrote from my heart. You can do it too. Write something for your mother from your heart." ❖

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