

ANGSANA
By Nadia Khan

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Diana stepped into Angsana boutique with a heavy heart. Outside, a sea of people waited for the store, owned by her employer Madam Liliana, to open. It was a “special” day—a day of sales exclusively for Angsana boutique card holders.

But unlike two years ago, the gaggle of well-mannered and soft-spoken women couldn’t descend into pushing and shoving one another to grab hijabs knocked down from RM400 to RM150. This year, because of Covid-19, they had to line up and keep a distance. A few had already slid their face masks below the chin—it was suffocating. Diana smiled wryly. She couldn’t fathom their willingness to put their lives on the line just for a few supposedly exclusive hijabs. Where could they wear them to anyway?

“Hi, Diana. Ready for World War Three?” Diana’s colleague Wani teased her from behind the counter.

Diana could only manage a feeble smile. It was going to be a long day. She often asked herself; considering the profits her employer made, wouldn’t she be able to afford more staff? Why was it that each time the chaotic day arrives, it was only Diana and two of her colleagues in charge of the store? Without any overtime or extra pay, at that.

But who was she to complain. She should be grateful for the monthly salary to cover her daily expenses, which was more than what many others had. Her friends also looked at her with envy, because of the special discounts she enjoyed at Angsana... even though she never flexed the privilege even once. She’d much rather wear cheap hijabs than sacrifice her water, electricity, internet or Netflix.

Diana looked up at the sea of people outside; most were young women around her age. As she raptly observed their choice of outfits, she didn’t notice there was somebody else keeping an eye on the crowd from a distance...

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Hasnan sat at a coffeeshop across from Angsana boutique. His roti canai drenched in gravy was long gone; he had ordered plain water so many times, the mamak gave him a pointed stare when he ordered another glass.

Hasnan wiped his sweaty palm on his pants. He stroked the pouch on his waist for the umpteenth time—just to make sure its contents were intact, although he knew what was inside wasn’t going anywhere.

Hearing some commotion from outside Angsana, he looked up. The crowd was barging their way in and forgot to socially distance—if Hasnan were on duty, he could

easily slap each of them with a fine. *I could make some pocket money from this*, he said to himself. But it wasn't worth it. He was there for a larger reward.

Last week, his daughter was hysterical when the internet at home was cut off. His wife, who herself was sulking with him because their kitchen had been missing a few items for a while, didn't try to keep their daughter in check when she shrieked loud enough for the whole barracks to hear. His son took no notice while playing with his latest iPhone—it occurred to Hasnan: where did his son get the money to buy it? Hasnan never asked because the thought of the answer was too frightful.

Hasnan's financial situation had been shaky for a while. His salary was no longer enough for his family's needs that kept piling up. Because he didn't qualify for a bank loan, he had to resort to other sources. The kind that was sweet sailing at first, but got hideous fast. The ugly side reared its head two days ago, when he was attacked by a group of burly men outside the sundry shop where he bought groceries. It was no surprise, since attacking him at the barracks or workplace was out of the question. Splashing red paint wasn't the right *modus operandi*. But come to think of it, Hasnan would have preferred a splash of paint over the grisly encounter from two days ago...

Hasnan looked at his left pinky finger, which was wrapped in a bandage. The tip of his finger had been cut off—with what, Hasnan was unsure but the pain reached the bone. The Ah Long's men gave him a warning—if the RM50,000 debt wasn't settled by the end of the month, it wouldn't be his fingertips but both hands that they'd feed to their boss's dog.

Hasnan's phone lit up, signalling an incoming message. Thankfully Hasnan hadn't lost both his hands...but when he read the message, he figured it would have been better to have a few fingers missing, so he couldn't press the buttons on his phone.

'Divorce me.'

It wasn't the first time his wife had sent him that message. For the past six months, the request had dropped from her lips time and again. When he paid no heed, she sent WhatsApp messages every day, for the past month.

Hasnan sighed. Just like the others, the message would be left unanswered.

Their 20-year marriage wasn't always like this. Hasnan wasn't a man without dreams or ambition – he wanted to see his family live in comfort. Outside of his day job, he had tried different things—selling vegetable chips, signing up as a tongkat ali agent, driving Grab...even joining a pyramid scheme. He wasn't like his friends – their extra income came from selling pills confiscated from nightclubs and getting donations from negligent road users. Even they were in a squeeze—since nightclubs couldn't open and not many people were out and about in these times.

So today Hasnan was resolute, he was going to do something more drastic. He was convinced that the planned action wasn't wrong. After all, weren't those blessed with more wealth supposed to share with those in need?

Hasnan got up, paid for his breakfast, put on a face mask and headed to the alley next to Angsana boutique.

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"But you know, this hijab is a bit torn."

The complaint came from one of the customers. Diana tried her level best to suppress a smirk. If she remembered right, this was the same customer who'd pulled the hijab off the rack so forcefully, its edges had a slight tear. And now, she wanted a discount.

"If Miss doesn't want this hijab, you are welcome to put it back and choose others. But I'm sorry, I cannot reduce the price further." Ever the dedicated worker who knew her employer's rules like the back of her hand, Diana didn't budge.

"Do you want me to go viral with news about this torn hijab? Then everyone will know your hijabs are low-quality!"

"Miss, we have CCTV here," Diana replied abruptly.

That shut the customer up, and put a grimace on her face. She placed the hijab on the counter while whining, "Ok, I'll pay even though the hijab is damaged. You're lucky I have a good heart."

Diana didn't say a word, until the customer pulled out her debit card to make payment. Diana had to point to the sign on the sales counter—*Cash Transactions Only*.

"Hah?! What kind of business is this, where you can't pay with debit cards!" the customer grumbled.

"There's an ATM at the block across the road," Diana quipped.

"Such a pain," the customer muttered. "Set this hijab aside! Don't let anyone else take it!" Her request sounded more like a threat.

Diana felt the urge to laugh out loud, but before she could even smile, she and the entire store were shocked by the roar of a gunshot.

The situation erupted in chaos. Some people were shouting, a few caught in a latak frenzy, while some others just froze. Diana saw a man in a concealing face mask and all-black garb holding a gun he'd just shot at the boutique ceiling. Bits of ceiling fell to the floor.

The Nepali security guard seated by the door was stunned—maybe he never thought the day would come when his services were indeed needed. And maybe he realised he actually had zero skills to face such a situation...so he ran away. Yes! He ran out of the store as fast as he could.

The man pointed his gun at Diana.

"Close the shop," he barked his first instruction.

Her hands shaking, Diana pressed the button that pulled down the automatic shutters outside the store. Slowly, Angsana boutique was shrouded in darkness.

"If you value your life, line up in front of me! Now!"

Folks ran helter-skelter and in just a few minutes, everyone had lined up in front of the masked man, as frightened as they were.

Nobody had asked the kind of line the man wanted—it was like they simply connected telepathically and lined up like children at a school assembly.

Everyone was told to throw their cell phones to the side and squat. The debit card/torn hijab customer from earlier found herself at the front of the line on her way out...and now, the masked man's gun was pointed at her.

"You go first...and the rest repeat! Take out all the cash in your pocket!" were the next set of instructions from the masked intruder.

In a voice close to tears, the customer answered, "I...I don't have cash."

Although the man had a mask on, Diana could tell from his body language that he was confused. "This place accepts cash only, right?" he asked.

Once again, the urge to laugh loudly filled Diana's chest, but she held it in. Even the robber knew they were a strictly cash-only establishment!

"I—I was just on my way to the ATM," the customer replied.

"Get up!" the man growled.

The customer got to her feet and the man took her hostage—he pointed his gun at her head. "Who doesn't follow what I say will be responsible for this one's death!" he threatened.

While the customer cried in fear, everyone else took out cash from their wallets. The man handed a bag and asked his hostage to fill it with all the cash handed over. Diana saw him not just grab the money—sometimes he paused, gave people the once-over and interviewed them!

"You're going to finish two thousand bucks in this place?!" the man asked an elegantly dressed customer. It occurred to Diana that the customer's platform shoes could be used as weapons, if she had the guts.

The customer could only nod softly, and Diana noticed the man shaking his head. Another customer, dressed up so-so and looking in her late 40s, handed over RM200.

The masked man looked at her. "Only RM200? That's enough for just one hijab here, you know?"

The customer gathered the courage to look up and respond, "I...want to buy it for my daughter's birthday. She really wants one."

"What's your job? How much do you make a month?" the man asked.

The customer looked a bit embarrassed to respond, but in order to put the hostage out of harm's way, she finally said, "Cleaner. I earn about RM1,800 a month."

"How many children do you have?"

"F—four."

"You husband? What does he do?"

The lady just shook her head.

The man let out a heavy sigh, and then returned the RM200 to her.

Noticing that the robber showed some sense of compassion, there were those who pleaded and offered sob stories of their own. Some said they had saved up for

long; others wanted to buy the hijab to cheer up their mothers who didn't get to perform the haj this year. But none of them had the same luck as the cleaner lady.

After collecting cash from everyone, the man pushed his hostage towards the cashier, and he looked Diana straight in the eye. "You're one of the staff, right? Empty the register, and make it quick!"

Diana did as she was told. As she placed the cash in the thief's bag, she wondered if her salary would be deducted because of what happened. It wasn't unthinkable—her employer was notorious for deducting her staff's pay for reasons she alone thought reasonable.

After stuffing the bag, the man asked Diana to show him the way to the back exit. Again, she went along. He would definitely be able to make off just like that, since her employer never thought to install an emergency or panic button in the boutique. Maybe because the insurance on the store was enough.

Who knows. What mattered was, Diana's own money was safe in her wallet, and her life was out of danger. Diana gazed emptily at the man, who had run far from Angsana boutique and then disappeared into the back alleys, while her colleague Wani called the emergency line.

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"Madam, you have to make a press statement at 4 in the afternoon," Raisa, Madam Liliana's personal assistant, told her. They were seated at the back of Madam Liliana's Vellfire while the driver brought them to the location of the next meeting.

"*How much did we recover?*" asked Madam Liliana in English, the language she was more fluent in.

"RM20,820, Ma'am."

"Oh, not that much," Madam Liliana replied, distractedly.

"Do you still want to press charges against the robber?"

"*Of course! I have no mercy for thieves.* They're a bunch of lazy folks. They want everything handed to them. I cannot accept that. *I work hard to get where I am, you know?*"

Raisa nodded, agreeing.

Madam Liliana's phone rang. Raisa was just about to answer on her employer's behalf, but Madam Liliana took the cell phone once she saw her father's name flashing on the screen.

"*Hello, papa? Yes, yes. I'm on my way,*" Madam Liliana said into the phone.

Raisa looked at her watch—she hoped they wouldn't be late to Tan Sri Jamal's office. Tan Sri was a disciplined man who didn't like people arriving late, even his own daughter. Raisa knew it was an important meeting for Madam Liliana because Tan Sri Jamal was going to pass her RM3.5 million to go toward her new boutique in Tokyo.

"Oh, Madam Liliana, before I forget...I've disabled the comments on your Instagram post about the trip to Maldives during MCO," Raisa said.

Last week Madam Liliana's social media team made a big mistake, earning their employer a huge public flogging. The thing is, these netizens didn't understand that Madam Liliana wasn't like any other person—she needed rest after working so hard and toiling to grow her company.

Raisa fully understood her employer's predicament. She once attended a forum where Madam Liliana spoke about her success. She said the secret to success is diligence—we must always strive to identify solutions and work hard.

Yes, Raisa wanted to be successful. It wasn't impossible that one day, she too could be like Madam Liliana. Her employer was only two years older than Raisa, which meant Raisa had a chance of catching up in a couple of years.

The secret to success is diligence, right?