Day of no laws

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Amid the arson and looting last May, one Australian makes a strange discovery. Jakarta is still worth calling home.

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Vanessa Johanson

It was a day for the flaunting of all laws. There was considerable glee in it, the giddiness of leaping through shattered shop windows hugging electricals. Electricals you could never have afforded even the electricity for, and couldn't even resell these days.

Then the ripping reckless arson of the very same shops afterwards. The torchers and petrol-pourers - who only a few hours before had been mere bajaj drivers and unemployed builders with no claim to fame or power - said afterwards that they'd found hoarded goods in these shops, which belonged to Chinese traders notorious for heinous practices such as hoarding, especially in times of economic strain.

My household helper's husband said the same thing about the shop which he had helped torch, but when I asked him what the difference was between hoarding and keeping stock out the back of the shop, he didn't know.

Wasn't it the president who first used the word 'hoarding' when prices of everything started their upward spiral and people rushed the shops to buy like there was no tomorrow? Wasn't it he who linked it subtly with Chinese traders and suggested that it was a subversive act?

Iwan and I drove past the colourful bonfire of a Golden Truly supermarket on the way home from my office. It was Truly Golden as it threw flames and debris. Teenagers threw stones back at it, their waifish waists extending as they leapt like thin fleshless puppets into the air.

I shivered in fear inside the only motor car on the road. 'You catch bajajs from now on!' said Iwan, referring to the noisy little orange three-wheeler taxis of the poor. 'It's what the people use so it's the only safe way to travel.' Two long- haired boys jiggled madly at my car window. 'Hallo mister!', they yelled hysterically and ran away laughing. Just like any other day.

Glee

Around the front of the cigarette and lolly shop on the bend in our street on that Thursday 14 May, the day of no laws, there was the usual collection of neighbourhood folk coming, going, and those with nowhere really to go at all. Telling each other that they had been at home all day, anxious under an acrid brown sky, a sky plagued by pyromania along with the usual excess of flatulent vehicles. Anxiously waiting for their children on their way home from school.

The glint of glee in their eyes and a few white shiny-new bits of gadgets by their feet told it was only partly true.

For Iwan and me it was not the laws of property that shed us that day like clothing shed in a public place. It was the laws governing affection in a Muslim land. To be more precise we Came Out, publicly flaunting the laws which we had flaunted privately for ages by living together as best friends and friends only, a single man (Muslim) and a single woman (Western).

We walked out the door for the first time a duo, hand tightly gripped in hand. Morally immune as we walked up the bend past a couple of friends from the kampung, also hand-in-hand in a threesome with a heavy basket full of the spoils of the looting orgy, their faces starting to betray guilt and bemusement at the enormity of their actions.

Later we found out that in lots of neighbourhoods stolen goods had been carried back to their place of origin, after the protest was over, after the hate had been extinguished. And later again that some of the goods had been taken by police and soldiers with rank.

Friends on the phone told us that the law had gone out like electricity over the entire metropolis, resulting in thousands of shops and banks gutted and burnt in the sudden, momentary freedom to protest. Like a major shutdown the law stopped, blew out. We didn't think to ask the question till later: did someone flick the central switch to off? Who paid who to slice the wires of the superstructure, to cut the security grid that had buzzed through the city day and night for weeks before the Trisakti shootings?

Home

Iwan was taking me up the narrow street to find a bajaj, to find a People's Vehicle for the first leg of my trip which would end in a special government-chartered 747. The Embassy had finally used the words 'mandatory evacuation.' I decided that they must really mean 'get the hell out' because they knew something that we didn't know.

Which was odd because we felt safer at home than anywhere else. Iwan and I had both been home the night before. We'd cooked corn and tempeh and made pecel and talked passionately about where the reformasi should be headed. We could sense that the president's days were numbered - three months maximum, we gave him. Iwan supported the replacement of Suharto with Habibie because Habibie was brilliant, a civilian, and because he mixed with the Muslim intellectuals, some of whom were good community leaders and 'clean'.

I demanded that Iwan have more imagination than that. I argued that we shouldn't be so individualist in our discussions of the succession, expecting that Indonesian democracy and prosperity was all going to be embodied in the right leader, and that that noble saviour would make everything all right. The problem with that argument is that any real leadership talent has been repressed for three decades or more, I said. Not to mention the political structure which needed to be completely dismantled and a constitution which was long atrophied.

Iwan lay on the couch as we talked. Great machines thundered out on the main road - tanks, helicopters, trucks, planes - but we felt safe as fire-warmed cave men well-hidden from the predatory dinosaurs.

So when the embassy rang and said the words 'mandatory evacuation' we were sure that the West's superior intelligence agents had gotten wind of a coup attempt, an assassination, or something worse. I had an hour to pack two small bags of what turned out to be useless clothes and objects, and ring five or six friends.

Evacuees were told to gather at the American Club at midnight. I left Iwan outside the gate in the bajaj and it was like I'd climbed a gigantic wall into the West, never to return as far as he was concerned, never in the form of a true and loyal friend of him and his country, who stuck around through thick and thin.

Breaking another unwritten law, we hugged. He said: 'This isn't necessary'.

'It's for my family, they're dying of worry,' I replied, knowing that family unity was a good reason for doing all kinds of odd things in Indonesia, having been asked a million times why on earth I lived so far from my own - just for experience and work.

Wondering whether it was just for my family or whether an apocalypse really was nigh.

Then I crossed the Wall and saw what I never thought I'd see: American refugees.

Club

Big heavy expensive cases, heaped messily and black like the debris of a big blaze. The Club bar, bubbling with beer and the latest coup theories. Fashionable teenagers excited and speaking their International School gang's slang, flirting, and smoking at the dark end of the humming chlorine swimming pool. Someone on a megaphone in the Kijang-and-Mercedes-packed car park, telling the hundreds of us to move inside, outside, over here, over there.

Little plump blonde kids rubbing their eyes, running, and crashing out on aerobics mats in the aerobics hall.

I mooched. Chatted to a Kiwi who worked in the US Embassy. The only other non-American I could find. Would they let us on without a US passport, I asked? 'Yeah', he replied, breathing beer, 'Ye know, we do work for 'em'. 'So do a few thousand Indonesians,' I replied. 'Stick with me', he said. And I didn't.

At three a.m. the megaphone moved to the aerobics hall and announced, above the sprawled bodies, that tonight's flights were full and that we'd have to come back in 24 hours. There was a massive groan as a hundred anxious coup theories - the only thing now keeping the adults awake - sank a few metres. Maybe this was all just an outrageously tedious and expensive precautionary evacuation after all.

I stayed the night at a colleague's, knowing Iwan had gone off to a political meeting which would probably go all night, and not wanting to go home to an empty house and a tense neighbourhood.

Friday 15 May 1998

The city was silent the next day. My colleague and I had no cash or petrol and went out to search. The skies were blue, protected from pollution by a tank on every street corner which deterred most everyone from taking out their cars.

A few plumes of smoke danced like cobras against the sky.

Empty

Blok M had been, if anything, busier than ever since the collapse of the economy. Even the expensive department stores and supermarkets had been increasingly crowded every week. Did people go there to take in the magic show that was inflation, the unbelievable daily disappearance of prices and their replacement by new and preposterous ones? Or did they really come to buy things, to consume while they still had a little cash and a skerrick of security?

Blok M that Friday was eerily empty, the department stores chained up and guarded. Only a few orange People's Vehicles puttered through gaping empty intersections belching smoke at the tanks. As we sailed through the intersection in our bajaj we wondered about the latest chilling rumour -

which already, at 9 am, had been corroborated by six phone calls with friends -that some of the tanks were controlled by Wiranto's men and some of them Prabowo's. That the two generals sought to battle it out in the dusk of Suharto's control. I looked past the tanks at the vast empty tracts of black bitumen and imagined the footpaths heaped with the terror of 1965.

Over the course of an hour we found out that ATMs all over South Jakarta were kicked in, torched, and empty. One burnt one had a polite sign on the door apologising that this ATM was out- of-service today and indicating where the nearest ones were located. Now that's service, we laughed.

We tried looking in Jalan Fatmawati. Why were Fatmawati's small side streets barricaded with bamboo and old chairs like the fences of village goat pens?

Then we saw Mitra supermarket. Or what had been Mitra and was now an enormous black fossil, burnt back to its cement bones. Dead black, no flames. No smoke. People wandering around, tiny below the black horror. They carried small white plastic-covered boards holding crumpled piles of carbon. Too small. Too small for the tiniest corpse other than one already cremated. Too small for the nightmare of the day before.

We gave up on the idea of cash.

In the light of that day, head aching from the late night at the Club, I decided on a different escape route. Plan #2 was on the Australian government. At least, logistically speaking.

'No more money for Tutut!' cried the triumphant taxi driver as we sailed through the three airport toll gates without paying. But I was glad the toll gates had been abandoned not just because the president's daughter would lose our Rp 7,000, but because I didn't have a spare Rp 7,000.

'Welcome Home!'

The Qantas chartered flight turned out to be the same as any other - except that it was 'fly now, pay later'. They made us sign a letter to promise we'd pay them a hefty sum of money, and that we wouldn't attempt to leave Australia

again before doing so. Sounded like a dodgy deal but rumours were buzzing again in the neon-lit terminal and there was no bar to help make them seem funny.

The flight attendants grinned at us extra hard and treated us like we were all rather frail. Rather than saying 'thankyou' as we got off the plane in Sydney, they cried 'Welcome Home!'

Home was left behind me in Jakarta. And ahead in Melbourne. But I was too confused by the orderliness and space at Sydney airport to correct them.

Two hours later there were three people, three generations of my family, sooner than expected in the Melbourne airport. Looking a million times more relieved than I felt.

And a week later the president resigned. Three weeks later the Mandatory Evacuation order was lifted and I went home. To Jakarta.

Iwan came to get me. Jakarta seemed calm and the traffic was light. Leaving the airport we made way for school boys riding on the roofs of four speeding buses, brandishing banners. Iwan didn't even turn his head at the demonstration. These days you go past more demos than bakso vendors, he said.

At Radio Dalam he played porter, carrying on his small wiry shoulders my bag full of kilos of powdered milk for friends, and the bottle of port to celebrate my homecoming. Of which he'd only drink a little because it wasn't allowed (for a Muslim); while I'd smoke only one of his clove cigarettes because that too (for an Australian) was also in breach...

Vanessa Johanson is a writer living in Jakarta. Other names have been changed to protect their privacy.

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