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Postcard  
FROM ZAHARAH

UNEXPECTED CIRCUMSTANCES

# A STORY OF TWO STROKES

A shared albeit tragic experience brings two families together in a foreign land



ZAHARAH OTHMAN

LONDON

IT was too uncanny for words. Last week, walking from Hammersmith Station to Charing Cross Hospital with my friend Sri Rahayu carrying some nasi lemak takeaways to give to people we hardly knew, I felt a sense of déjà vu.

It was as if we had done this before.

Sri and I were visiting a fellow Malaysian who had suffered a stroke attack after arriving in London. There on the hospital bed in the Intensive Care Unit was Tenaga Nasional Berhad (TNB) retiree, Sahrom Ahmad, who had flown in from Malaysia to attend his daughter's graduation ceremony in Loughborough, but the stroke attack left him unaware that the big day had passed.

Oblivious to him, in the outside world, a debate was raging over medical bills and the question of repatriation back to the home country. And unbeknownst to him too, in what is popularly known as crowdfunding on the page of Gofundme, the amount of money to contribute to his medical bills and repatriation was steadily growing.

Hadn't we read this somewhere before?

It was all too familiar; the proud father, the expectant and jubilant daughter waiting at the airport, the stroke attack, the issue of travel insurance and Gofundme.

Yes, indeed we had because this

was what happened to Mohamad Sahar Mhd Noor, then 57, chief clerk at the Kolej Kemajuan Tinggi Mara, Negri Sembilan, two years ago. He came with the expectation to see his daughter Atikah receive that piece of scroll, to see that satisfaction on her face after all her hard work. But it was not to be.

Thus, when I first met Nur Amalina Sahrom, 28, I saw in her, not only Atikah but also her brother Fadhli and sister, Amirah; a combined face of resilience struggling with hope which at times was ebbing away, the face of having to deal with unexpected circumstances that happened in a foreign land where they hardly knew anybody.

When I saw Salmah Semail, Sahrom's wife, I saw in her Awiayah Ahmad, Sahar's other half — a face of resignation and acceptance that all these had happened for a reason and they would see it through as a family. When I met them, the tears had all dried and determination was fast growing to bring back their loved ones.

However, unlike Sahar who arrived without travel insurance, Sahrom had bought one online. So, like others who heard about the family's predicament, I sighed a sigh of relief and thought there was not much to worry about, financially. But like everyone else, I was wrong to assume that for Sahrom's case now is a grim reminder of the importance of reading the fine prints in insurance covers.

"When I first heard that Amalina's father had insurance cover, I thought it was going to be all right," said Fadhli when I contacted him. He thought Amalina would not have to go through the nightmare he and his siblings had gone through before.

"I cried when Amalina contacted me because I was there and I don't ever want this to happen to anyone," he said.

However, Amalina had indeed reached out to the right person. With his experience and the wisdom that comes with it, Fadhli, while advising her on what to expect and how to handle enquiries, hospital procedures and generous but sometimes overzealous offers of help, will be with the



Mohamad Sahar Mhd Noor surrounded by his family, two years ago at Charing Cross Hospital. PIX BY ZAHARAH OTHMAN

team receiving Sahrom when he returns.

This shared albeit tragic experience had brought these two families together.

Indeed, last night watching Amalina and her aunty, Norehan Desa, in deep discussion with Dr Sharifah Faridah Syed Alwi and Dr Fahja Ismail on the final preparations for the repatriation of her father, it was again a similar scene repeating before my eyes.

Indeed, Sharifah, a lecturer at a local university here and Fahja, a medical doctor, and Dr Najmiah Ahmad, were among many other volunteers in London, who were instrumental in helping Fadhli and his family in contacting medical teams and hospital in Malaysia.

Now, the same team in London is working with similar enthusiasm with the same team of medical doctors in Malaysia, who will be flying in to accompany Sahrom home.

"They are members of Malaysian Aeromedicine. They will arrive in London, go to the hospital and assess En Sahrom and discuss with doctors treating him for the handover and they will look after him on the flight," said Sharifah, who admitted that she will only relax when she sees Sahrom on his stretcher on the specially equipped flight back to Malaysia.

For Amalina, she is beginning to smile more. She even breaks into fits of giggles now.

The memories of seeing her father going through what must have been the initial onset of the stroke attack, seeing him looking lost without his shoes on outside their hotel room, banging on the wall and stumbling badly while reciting the Surah Yassin, will probably remain with her forever.

Like Atikah, she will never have that picture of her proud father by her side clutching the scroll on her graduation day. But God will



(From left) Norehan Desa, Nur Amalina Sahrom, Salmah Semail and her sister, Rosni Semail, at the hospital.

ing, she will have her father back and they can have that banter they used to have between father and daughter.

Watching her by her father's bedside, I remember Atikah showing her father her graduation picture, while urging him, "Bangunlah Ayah, Adik dah graduate". It is not an experience you would wish even on your worst enemy.

However, both families will remember that their tragedy had brought together Malaysians and non-Malaysians alike in their support.

"It was a truly Malaysia response," said Sharifah.

There was a Malaysian Chinese echoing a Malaysian Indian in wishing Uncle Sahrom to quickly recover. It was the donations of £5 and £10 that were fast trickling in that was making the difference topping up the big generous amount from the Queen of Johor, which was recently matched by Battersea Power Sta-

tion Development Company. TNB had been quick to offer help financially to Amalina, who was also a TNB scholar when she was doing her first degree and her mother who retired as a technician with TNB.

"We are so touched. Malaysians are so generous and kind," smiled Amalina as she announced that she will soon stop receiving donations on the Gofundme page but will keep the page open for updates.

I visited Sahrom again yesterday. The sight of him moving his arms, opening his eyes; simple gestures that we take for granted, brought tears to my eyes — the same way it did when I saw Sahar scratched his arms.

This is not the kind of déjà vu I would want to experience again but the spirit of wanting to help, the fostering of friendship in times of tragedy when strangers become friends, is certainly something that will forever warm my heart.