CHARACTERS

KRISHNAMOORTHY – 25 years old
ROSNAH – a waitress, about 20
RENGASAMY – a businessman, Krishna's father, about 55
LETCUMI – Krishna's mother, about 50
SALLEH – Rosnah's step-father, about 45
HALIMAH – Rosnah's mother, about 40
RAMLI – about 35
LILIAN WONG – a waitress, about 19
KUPPUSAMY – Rengasamy's friend, about 50
RANI – Krishna's sister, about 16
SUBBAMAH – an old lady gossip
AH CHOO – an old lady gossip
TOWKAY CHANG – a bar-manager, about 40

A Hindu deity
Waitresses
Customers at Hibiscus Bar
Boys

Late night in the house of Salleh and Halimah. It is a typical kampung house in the suburbs of Georgetown in Penang. It is obvious that the occupants are of a lower income group. When the curtain rises, Salleh is at prayer in his sparsely-furnished living-cum-dining room. The Adhan has already been sounded at a nearby mosque. Salleh is in his mid-forties though looking somewhat younger. Halimah is about forty.

Adhan: Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar
Ashhadu Alla ilaha illallah ... etc.

SALLEH (at-prayer): Allahu akbar ... Allahu akbar
Allahu akbar ...

Suddenly there is the loud noise of music – a modern Western pop number. Salleh continues to pray until he has completed his prayers, and then shouts out.

SALLEH: Hey, Limah! Limah!

HALIMAH (off-stage): Yaa, Abang. (She comes hurrying in.)
What's the matter, Abang?

SALLEH: What's the matter? What's the matter? Can't you hear?
What's the matter, it seems. Huh!

HALIMAH: Oh! The noise. Its ...
SALLEH: What's this place coming to, Limah? One can't even pray these days without competition from the devil himself. What does she think she's doing? I'm fed up, you know. Really fed up.

HALIMAH (trying to interrupt): Abang... 'Bang...

SALLEH: Where are all the manners in this house? Where's the simple respect we deserve and have a right to? (Shouting out) 'Hey, Rosnah, engkau ini gila kah?' Rosnah! Oh damn these children.

HALIMAH: 'Bang, don't shout, please, 'Bang, I'll go up and see... The neighbours...

SALLEH: The neighbours! Huh! What do you mean, don't shout? Why don't you ask your daughter to shut up that noise? We'll soon be chased out of this neighbourhood at this rate. (Shouting) Rosnah!

ROSNAH (upstairs): What did you say? I can't hear you.

SALLEH (shouting): How can you hear, with all that noise you're making? Has the Shaitan got into you?

ROSNAH: Wha...?!

HALIMAH: Rosnah, stop that music.

ROSNAH (upstairs): Wha...?!

SALLEH (shouting): Aiya! 0 damn it, I'm going crazy. First, there's that son of mine. That good-for-nothing. He goes and gets entangled in politics. Why can't he stay at home and live quietly like everybody else? (Halimah tries to interrupt, unsuccessfully) And then... there's this girl of yours. God help them or they'll both end up in jail or something, one of these days.

HALIMAH: I'll go up and see to it. Rosnah... Rosnah! Halimah shakes her head in desperation and goes upstairs. Salleh watches her intently, his arms upon his hips.

SALLEH: The crazy lot.

Salleh begins to clear up his prayer-mat and other things, muttering to himself. He sits down and lights a cigarette.

HALIMAH: Rosnah, what's wrong with you?

ROSNAH (fed up): What, lбу?

HALIMAH (stopping the music): Couldn't you hear us? It looks as if you're going deaf or... or something, behaving the way you do.

ROSNAH: I heard... I heard! I don't know what's wrong with you two, anyway. Screaming like that at the top of your voices. The neighbours must be thinking everybody in this house is going mad.

HALIMAH: The cheek of you to say that. With all the noise you were making, playing that... that stupid thing over there. (Silence.) Your father was praying.

ROSNAH (derisively): Oh, praying. I see. So what?

HALIMAH: What do you mean "So what?" How insulting can you be?

ROSNAH: Now...

HALIMAH: Stop doing that, Rosnah. You're no longer a child. You must learn to show respect to your elders. He's your father.

ROSNAH: Some father. Step-father, you mean?

HALIMAH: What's the difference? I'm married to him.
ROSNAH: He doesn't think of me as a daughter.
HALIMAH: Rosnah! How can you say such a thing?
ROSNAH: Do you really want to know what he thinks of me?
HALIMAH: I'll have none of this nonsense. Shut up.
ROSNAH: Okay-lah. Okay. Okay. But remember I'm doing this just for you.

Halimah is silent for a moment, not knowing what to make of this; she then reacts tenderly.

HALIMAH: Give him a chance-lah. It's very bad, you know... (Embracing Rosnah,) especially while he's praying. I know you love me too much not to listen to me.

ROSNAH: Yes; Bu: I'll listen to you... you alone. And I know... I know he sure needs to pray. Yes, pray... a lot.

HALIMAH: Rosnah, what are you trying to say? I don't understand you.

ROSNAH: Nothing.
SALLEH: Halimah?
HALIMAH: Yes, Abang?

Halimah comes downstairs and remains standing near where Salleh is sitting.

SALLEH: Where's Azman tonight?
HALIMAH: He'll be back. He went out for a meeting at the UMNO building.

SALLEH: Meeting, meeting, meeting. What does he think he's doing. Halimah? Is he planning to become the Prime Minister or something? Well, tell him he hasn't got the slightest chance. There are many better than him... and richer ones too.

HALIMAH: I don't know these things, Abang. I don't understand politics.

She sits down.

SALLEH: Why can't he leave these things to other people -- people who have all the time in the world, and the money? They can afford to be at meetings while at home their servants do their living for them.

HALIMAH: Yes, 'Bang.

SALLEH: You know this year the harvest was bad. The rains...

HALIMAH: Yaalah, Abang. But... but there was nothing we could do about it. It was God's will...

SALLEH: Well, it may have been God's will. But we need to eat. We must have enough to live on. We can't live on prayer and hope alone. You know that as well as I do. Something must be done. Azman must do his share. Even you are doing your bit, taking in some washing and ironing.

HALIMAH: B... but I can't go on forever. I'm beginning to develop aches and pains in my body.

SALLEH: Yes, exactly. We can't go on like this. Azman must look for a better job.

HALIMAH: B... but he can't do anything else. He's asked his towkay for an increase several times this year. He'll probably get ten or twenty ringgit more from January.
SALLEH: I know that, but it's ridiculous. Do you know, Limah, the Chinese man he's working for owns about a dozen shops in Kuala Lumpur, Ipoh and here in Penang? In addition, he has two factories. He's a millionaire. And all Azman gets is a lousy $120.00 and occasional tips when he goes outstation. And you know, on such trips our son has sometimes to sleep in the car, to take care it doesn't get stolen. It's criminal, Limah.

HALIMAH: (sighing): Yes. At that time we feared the English school. But it's forbidden to us to fall back upon. These days many young Bumiputera have become rich overnight. Surely Azman.

HALIMAH: (sighing): Yes. At that time we feared the English schools. But what can Azman do? He doesn't have any kind of special training or any money to go into business. You know he's only reached standard five in the kampung school.

SALLEH: That's how we are being robbed, Limah. All the wealth in this country is in the hands of other races. And we, we are the so-called Bumiputera, the sons of the soil. It's a tragedy that some people can have so much while others get barely enough to live on.

HALIMAH: Its God's will. We should give thanks for what He gives us, and not complain. Its our rizki. Its what, God thinks we deserve. We'll get along somehow on that.

SALLEH: Stop saying that, Limah. There must be something more than just God's will for us to fall back upon. These days many young Bumiputera have become rich overnight. Surely Azman.

HALIMAH: But what can Azman do? He doesn't have any kind of special training or any money to go into business. You know he's only reached standard five in the kampung school.

SALLEH: (sighing): Yes. At that time we feared the English schools. But what has been done cannot be undone. He must look for a better job; that's the only way. I have a few friends in the city who might be able to help, and with his interest in politics he must know some people of the right sort in the right places. Why doesn't he take advantage of his connections? So many politicians are making money these days. (Silence.) And Limah, talking about jobs, I... I feel Rosnah should also do something else. I... I feel so ashamed, you know, about her working as a waitress...

HALIMAH: But...

SALLEH: You know, when I go to the mosque on Fridays and people ask me "How's your family, Salleh? How's Halimah? How are the kids?" I... I don't know what to say to them. I feel they are mocking me. I imagine them pointing their fingers at me and muttering under their breath: "His daughter is a waitress, his daughter is a waitress!" and... and worse things than that. Ya Allah.

HALIMAH: But she's been working for so many years. It seems alright to me.

SALLEH: You know its forbidden by Islam. Its haram.

HALIMAH: But... but there are other Malay girls too...

SALLEH: I don't care about other girls. Imagine her serving liquor to all those orang kafir in the dimly-lit bar... to those drunken animals. I... I'm ashamed even to think of it.

HALIMAH: Maybe its not as bad as you think, Abang.

SALLEH: What do you know about these things, Limah? You're only a housewife. Do you know what goes on inside those places? It's sinful. Surely there must be other things that Rosnah can do. I've told her several times...
before to look elsewhere.

HALIMAH: Yes, I know, but it's not easy. Besides, we need the money.

SALLEH: No! Not that kind of money. Have you gone crazy, Limah, to think that we can be happy on such money? I'd rather go and beg on the streets. Thank God I'm still able to support you with my own small but honest income.

HALIMAH: Jobs are hard to come by. She may have to go far away from Penang. I couldn't do without her.

SALLEH: Why doesn't she try one of those factories that are coming up all over the state? At Bayan Lepas, Perai and I don't even know where else. Everybody is talking about them. Surely there must be something for us in the New Economic Policy we hear so much about these days.

HALIMAH: I'll speak to her again, if you say so.

SALLEH: Or she can become a parking attendant. Yes, even that is better than working in a bar. (Silence.) Halimah, perhaps we should get her married off.

HALIMAH: But she's only twenty.

SALLEH: That's old enough. How old were you when you got married?

There is no response. Halimah is embarrassed.

SALLEH: My mother -- why, she had three children before she was twenty.

HALIMAH: Yaallah. But it's different nowadays. Young people want to be self-supporting before they get married. They don't live off the land anymore. It's the cities that attract them.

SALLEH: And look what the cities have done: my son dabbles in politics when he has no business to do so, and your daughter works as a waitress. That's what the city has done for us. The city is a big, faceless monster that sucks human blood like a pontianak. (Silence.) In my day it was different. There, on the land, we had the whole world before us at our feet. Life was easy though we never became rich. The smell of rain-drenched soil was enough to keep us healthy and happy.

HALIMAH: But how long can one go on dividing the land, generation after generation? Besides, things are changing.

SALLEH (sighing): I suppose you are right, Limah. The land won't go very far. But let them look for better jobs so that they can live more decent lives. Let Rosnah get married so that her husband can contribute to our family's income, or at least be able to support Rosnah, so that she can stay at home like a good Muslim woman should. After all, a woman's place is in the home. (Silence.) You know, Limah, I was really upset last year when you turned down the proposal we received from Kampung Sungei Dua.

HALIMAH: But that boy isn't earning enough. He's only a City Council labourer.

SALLEH: Yes. What a pity. The family is very pious, though.

HALIMAH: Insha-Allah. God willing, everything will turn out right for the children. Our time has already passed.

SALLEH: Hm.
There is a long uneasy silence, with both Salleh and Halimah not knowing what to do next. Salleh picks up an old magazine. Halimah watches him, and after a little while gets up and goes towards the door.

HALIMAH: Abang, (Salleh looks in her direction.) I'm going over to collect some washing for tomorrow. I'll probably stop over at Latifah's place for a few minutes. It's already two days since her baby was born. If you need anything ask Rosnah for it, yah?

Salleh merely nods. Halimah goes off. Salleh has a moment to himself. He goes to the window and looks outside, as if in a trance, at the moon. He then lights a cigarette. Rosnah enters, but Salleh does not notice her. She is dressed in an almost see-through night-dress which is very revealing for an average Malaysian situation. She places a tray of tea-things on the table, and watches him intently for a while.

ROSNAH: Mother asked me to give you your drink.

SALLEH (turning around and utterly taken aback): Rosnah! How can you come in like that?

ROSNAH: What's the matter with you? Why are you so afraid?

SALLEH: Rosnah, please go back and change.

ROSNAH: Relax. No one is going to come in here for a long time.

SALLEH: But suppose . . .

ROSNAH: You know I couldn't help overhearing all you said to Ibu just now. So . . . so you want me to behave myself, do you? (Laughs.) Ah, I almost forgot. How do you like my new night-dress? (Turning around lithely, modling the dress for him. He looks at her, stunned, embarrassed, and interested at the same time.) It's a present from one of my admirers.

SALLEH: G . . . go in and change, Rosnah. It's not proper.

ROSNAH: You haven't answered my question. How do you like it?

SALLEH: It's pretty. Very pretty, but . . .

ROSNAH (coming closer to him): No, I won't change.

SALLEH: Then . . . then put on something else over it. Something more decent.

ROSNAH (teasing): I'll dress as I like. If you don't like to see me like this . . . you can turn away, or . . . or close your eyes. (Laughs.)

SALLEH: Rosnah, I beg you. Please . . .

ROSNAH: Don't worry. I won't tell anyone I came to you in . . . in a state of semi-undress, if that's what you're afraid of.

SALLEH: Rosnah, you'll ruin me. Your mother . . . Azman. Someone may come in. Please, please don't do this to me.

ROSNAH: Do what? I'm not doing anything. I was just feeling lonely. I wanted to talk to someone. After all you never asked me to go away before. What's wrong with you tonight? (Silence, while she watches him. He avoids her glance.) You know Salleh, it amused me, the way you pretended to be mad with me just now. The "noise", as you called it. I did it deliberately, you know. Yes, deliberately. To tease you. I knew you couldn't do anything. Yes, you could do nothing but yell at the
top of your voice, without really meaning it... just, just to keep the pretence. (Laughing:) It was so funny.

SALLEH: What was so funny about that? I was praying. Why are you laughing?

ROSNAH: The hypocrisy of it. Your hypocrisy. Yes, the whole thing was so funny. So very funny.

SALLEH: What do you mean, my hypocrisy?

ROSNAH: Yes, your hypocrisy, and the hypocrisy of others like you. The way you pray five times a day and pretend to be pious before my mother and all those so-called friends of yours. But the moment their backs are turned...

SALLEH: Rosnah!

ROSNAH: Yes, scream, you poor schizophrenic devil, scream. You're an angel in public, like all the rest of them, but...

SALLEH: Rosnah, do you know what you're saying?

ROSNAH: Just now, when you were telling me I should give up my job I wanted to laugh. Yes, I almost burst out laughing. Yet, at the same time, I wanted to cry. I wanted so badly to cry. Yes, those drunken animals I serve, those hideous monsters of Halfway Road you abhor so much, they're just like you, the poor devils, unprotected and lonely souls looking for the comfort of embrace... all childishly reduced to hypocrisy.

SALLEH: Shut up, Rosnah.

ROSNAH: Don't forget you're one of them, despite your pretensions to piety and your public image. Inside you are a dirty, lonely, bastard like all of them who crawl on bleeding knees in the back alleys like leeches. I have seen hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands of them...

There is no need to pretend, Salleh. Hamidah has told me everything. The poor soul. She had been waiting for you all these days. She cried when I told her you had married my mother.

SALLEH: Rosnah! I'm old enough to be your father. Show me some respect.

ROSNAH: Yes, old enough to be my father, but young enough for Halfway Road. I have seen old and young alike walk like zombies along those dark streets, and my heart has cried tears of blood -- for them, and for those like my mother.

SALLEH: Rosnah, I feel so ashamed, so afraid.

ROSNAH: No, don't have any fear. I won't tell Ibu, though I feel sorry for her. I couldn't stand her suffering.

SALLEH: Please don't go on like this. I'll be ruined forever.

ROSNAH: I can't ruin you anymore, and I don't want to. Your reputation has already gone to pieces at the hands of Hamidah Cheng at the Black Cat. Why didn't you consider all these things before indulging yourself, huh? If anyone in this kampung finds out, that's the end of you, you and your mock piety.

SALLEH: I... I don't know what to say, Rosnah. We... we can't all go naked in the world.

ROSNAH: And so you put on this cloak of hypocrisy, and make a mockery of religion. (Silence.) Why? To please the world? To give it what it expects, I suppose.

Extended silence.
ROSNAH: Salleh, do you remember, you once told me you find me attractive?

SALLEH: I...I didn't know what I was doing then, or...or saying. I...I...

ROSNAH: Come, come. I'm just asking you. Why are you afraid? Or is this another of your walls of respectibility behind which you hide?

SALLEH: I...I just lost control over myself. My imagination...

ROSNAH (holding his hand): And when you came closer to me, closer and closer...was...was that also your imagination?

SALLEH (withdrawing his hand): Yes, I swear. I was carried away.

ROSNAH: I was frightened, you know. I almost screamed. (Silence.) Now I know why you succumbed into marrying my mother. She's good looking. Perhaps even attractive, and you...you're still a lusty old bastard. (Holds his hand again.)

SALLEH (pushing her hand away): Rosnah, don't tempt me, please. I...I told you I lost my senses. I was possessed...

ROSNAH (teasingly): And you have been praying all these days and nights to get the devil out of your system, have you?

SALLEH: Don't tease me, Rosnah, or I'll cry. (Silence.) I've tried very hard to control myself. I'll give up everything...

ROSNAH: Beginning when? Tomorrow?

SALLEH: Don't poke fun at me, Rosnah. This time I'll give up everything. I have decided. I'm planning to go on a pilgrimage to Mecca -- next year or the year after that -- as soon as I have enough money. I'll take Halimah with me.

ROSNAH: Nah! (Silence.) Tell me, how come you married my mother?

SALLEH: I was lonely after I divorced my third wife.

ROSNAH: Third! I didn't know that.

SALLEH: Neither does your mother. Yes, third. The first one, from Batu Pahat, died in childbirth. Azman was saved. The second one was from Teluk Anson -- a bar waitress, and a divorcée. We just couldn't get along together. Somehow I always felt strange with her. Perhaps she wanted to dominate me, perhaps it was the knowledge that she had been married to someone else before...perhaps, perhaps it was the suspicion that she was being unfaithful to me. And the third one. I had trouble with her too -- serious trouble. She was having an affair with the village penghulu. That really made me unhappy. She was young and beautiful, and the daughter of an imam in Tanjung Piandang. I never could have imagined...

ROSNAH: So you divorced her. You brutes! Just because Islam allows you to marry four wives and the laws are so lenient, you take advantage of us women, marrying and divorcing at will and doing what else God alone knows. (Silence.) Do you know what became of your previous wives?

SALLEH: No.
ROSNAH: I do. I know what happened. They're probably walking the dark streets littered with humans, merely to keep body and soul together. And my mother, what will become of her when you decide to leave her too?

SALLEH: No, Rosnah. Don't say that. It will never happen again. I'll not betray Halimah, I promise you, Rosnah.

Rosnah merely shakes her head. There is a long silence, as they both sit close to each other.

ROSNAH (getting out of a trance-like state): Rosnah, get up. What if someone comes in?

There is no response. Salleh gets up, goes to the window and looks out into the sky.

SALLEH: Its full moon tonight.

Rosnah joins him, and he puts his arm around her.

ROSNAH: Yes. How beautiful. (Silence.) Tell me, have you ever been lonely? I mean really lonely?

SALLEH: Yes. Many times.

ROSNAH: Me too. My heart aches deep inside, and I feel so depressed, so very depressed. I need someone, someone on whose shoulders I can cry. Life seems so hollow, so empty... so without meaning. I... I seem to be running, running, running away from something, and yet, yet I don't know what it is. Or where I'm running to. At times I get the urge to go and drown myself in the sea at Tanjung Bungah. Then... all will be over. Only I lack the courage to do so.

SALLEH: Don't say such things, Rosnah.

ROSNAH: I don't know what I want. Or what lies in store for me.

SALLEH: But you're still so young. Your life lies ahead of you. You're beautiful. There's no need for you to feel that way. Why don't you marry someone? Someone like Ramli. He's well off, and he's interested in you. I'm sure you have other admirers too.

ROSNAH: Yes... yes, lots of admirers -- Ramli, Gopalswamy, Ah Cheng -- lots of admirers....

SALLEH: Whatever happens, marry a Malay.

ROSNAH: They come in every colour, from every race... every religion... but within my heart there is an emptiness that has no end.

SALLEH: I... I think I know what you mean. I too feel the same way. Lonely, like a defenceless baby.

Silence.

ROSNAH: Salleh.

SALLEH: Hm.

ROSNAH: Do you really think I'm attractive?

SALLEH: Yes.

ROSNAH: I'm unhappy...

SALLEH: No, Rosnah. Don't say that.

ROSNAH: So very unhappy.