It was seven in the morning on a typical day in the small village town of Molo. The main trunk road from Pasir Putih to Kota Bharu was already choked with the bicycle traffic from schoolchildren wending their way to the three main schools in the village. Long past subuh time, the mosque was empty. The hub of activity was now the market square where men congregate to have breakfast. Breakfast could be the various nasi, roti canai or the myriad Kelantan breakfast teipung.

That particular morning, though, most of the men were not eating their breakfasts but instead their gaze was fixed on the main entrance to the square. Seven a.m. was a bit late for breakfast; already the first slant of sunlight was filtering through the eaves of the blinds in the market. The men were getting restless. They were definitely waiting for something to appear. Very soon after, however, there was much excitement. All eyes were transfixed on a figure coming through the entrance. It was the figure of a woman. She was delicately balancing two huge basins on her head, her hips swaying gaily to and fro with the rhythm of the balancing. That particular gyrating seemed to mesmerize the men and glue them to their places.

There was much to mesmerize as far as Mariah was concerned, for that was the name of the lady with the two basins on her head. Mariah was a nasi seller in Molo, in fact the nasi seller in Molo. Every morning at seven sharp she would walk past the market entrance into the village square and mesmerize the men with her swaying hips as well as her nasi: nasi kerabu, nasi belauk and nasi dagang. Rumour had it (started by the womenfolk) that her nasi wasn’t much to crow about, but it was a combination of Mariah’s swaying as well as her easy smile that made all the men flock to the village square. Many a nasi belauk breakfast remained cold and uneaten in the houses as men ignored their wives’ cooking and paid tribute to Mariah’s instead.

Mariah also had another asset. She was without a husband. Note that I didn’t say either divorced or widowed. It would not have mattered either way in Kelantan. The most important thing was she was not with a husband. This was not to imply that she was not decorous in her manners . . . on the contrary, she was very much so . . . but men seem to want to partake of her nasi more because of her unmarried state.

Mariah had been married once, but her husband had passed away soon after. There had been many suitors after her husband’s untimely demise, but Mariah had seemed singularly uninterested. Rumour too (also spread by the womenfolk) had it that it was our Mariah who drove her husband to an early grave. This rumour was never corroborated by medical evidence, so we will never be able to confirm this allegation. Fifteen years after her husband’s death, which would make her fortyish, Mariah could easily pass for a beauty in her late twenties. Mariah was tall and well-proportioned and moved gracefully. No, not gracefully, but sensuously. Her face was unlined, her complexion fair and her very dark, very black eyes appeared to glow. Mariah always had on a short kebaya, which accentuated her well-proportioned curves. As a concession to propriety she used to cover her head and part of her torso with a kain lepas, a two-metre traditional head and body cover much favoured by the working womenfolk of Kelantan. The Kota Bharu Nickies or the more modern women prefer either a sliver of a scarf or go bareheaded, but in Molo one does not go about without a kain.
litas. To do so would be to incur the wrath of the village Imam, who was the guardian of modesty and propriety and enforcer of stringent mores.

On that particular morning, the Imam was with the men, falling on Mariah’s nasi belauk with much relish. His wife’s own nasi belauk was still waiting for him on his kitchen table under the tudung saji, getting very cold indeed. The Imam’s wife was pottering about in her spotless kitchen, muttering about the Imam’s lateness for breakfast. It wasn’t like the Imam at all to be late for breakfast. The Imam liked his nasi belauk, and his wife took great care in the preparation. Her culinary skills were not her only attribute; her housekeeping was also a model to be followed by other womenfolk in the village. One could always call at the Imam’s house at any time of the day, guaranteed to be greeted by a well-turned-out wife, hot tepung and fragrant surroundings. The Imam’s wife was somewhat assisted in this respect by not having grubby children who would mess things up. It was the only flaw in an otherwise perfect marriage.

Quarrelsome couples who called at the Imam’s place for arbitration would be sobered by the domestic serenity of the Imam’s abode. They would all gape enviously at the surroundings and forget to quarrel. They would listen attentively to the Imam’s sermon and exhortations to peace, hang their heads in shame and make new resolutions, but promptly quarrel again as soon as they got home. Their own domestic atmospheres were just not congenial enough for peace. But enough said about the Imam’s exemplary household, more important events were unfolding.

As the Imam’s wife was vigorously scrubbing at an already spotless sink, there were salutations from the front door. It was a delegation of womenfolk from the village headed by Cik Gu Nab, one of the local women leaders. She was a teacher at a local primary school. Cik Yam wiped her hands and bade the visitors in. They were unexpected but not unwelcome. Cik Gu Nab made small talk for a while, commenting first on Cik Yam’s exquisitely appliquéd safrah before launching into the matter at hand. The matter at hand turned out to be none other than Mariah.

‘Cik Yam,’ began Cik Gu Nab, trying to put the matter across as delicately as possible, we mean our sisters no harm; in fact we are very happy if each one of us goes about doing her own thing. As we often say, each woman to her own rizq. In fact, we feel very bad about having to come to you. We don’t like to backbite our own sister.’

Cik Gu Nab cleared her throat and looked at the others for assent. Having got it in the form of gravely nodding heads, Cik Gu Nab continued: ‘Cik Yam, the problem now is that one of our own sisters is not doing her own thing at all, but instead meddling with other people’s.’

The Imam’s wife, Cik Yam, listened attentively.

‘Who do you mean, Cik Gu Nab?’ Cik Yam asked, ‘er... this troublemaker?’, wondering what this meandering of Cik Gu Nab’s was leading up to. Cik Gu Nab was known to favour a touch of melodrama and to use it to maximum effect always.

‘Why, Cik Yam, we mean Mariah, of course, the nasi seller! Don’t tell me you don’t know what she’s been up to!’ Cik Gu Nab looked peeved at Cik Yam’s ignorance of important village matters.

What can Mariah possibly be up to, thought Cik Yam. Mariah was apt to go around in her short and loud kebaya, but she was always properly covered by her kain lepas. If she hadn’t been so, the Imam would have reminded Cik Yam to pay her a visit. So it couldn’t have been the kain lepas.

‘No, I don’t know, Cik Gu Nab. What has she been up to?’ Cik Yam smiled sweetly. Cik Yam knew about most village matters, but not quick enough, it would seem. She was always too busy with housework to gossip. Besides, it was not considered proper for the Imam’s wife to be caught gossiping.

‘Cik Yam,’ continued Cik Gu Nab, ‘Mariah has been enticing our men to abandon their homes for her kedai merpati. You
know her nasi cannot be that special. Why, I am sure for one she cannot beat your nasi belauk.' (Cik Yam readily agreed.)

'But why do all these men seem hell bent on eating breakfast at her place? I reckon, I mean we reckon she has put "something" (Cik Gu Nab put heavy emphasis on the word *something*) in her nasi.' Cik Gu Nab paused for breath.

'I can't believe that, Cik Gu Nab! God forbid!' Cik Yam considered her next words carefully. 'We cannot accuse Mariah of something so grave without any concrete evidence. That's terribly unfair, you know, Cik Gu Nab. Perhaps that "something" you alleged she put in the nasi is just plain skill, Allah knows.'

Cik Gu Nab started. She felt she was being reproached. She did not like this allusion to her cooking skills either. Certainly, it was not her forte, still Cik Yam need not have referred to it in such a manner. Cik Yam was being very malicious, she thought.

'I didn't say "it" enticed all the men, Cik Yam. My Cik Gu Leh (Cik Gu Nab's husband), for instance, would never dream of having breakfast anywhere but at home. Some men do get easily enticed, some don't. Speaking of which, I saw the sainted Tok Imam himself having breakfast at Mariah's.' Having delivered this stinging retort, Cik Gu Nab stood and left in a huff. In a pointed rebuff, she did not even say a proper farewell.

Cik Yam wore a deep shade of crimson. Cik Gu Nab's last retort was as good as a slap on the face. Cik Yam, incidentally, was a seasoned politician. The words stung her, surely, but she did not flinch. She was unnerved, but she quickly regained enough composure to smile at the rest of the delegates, served them her beautiful tepung and indulged in the social niceties required. Replete with Cik Yam's tepung and fortified with the latest gossip, the ladies then left. Only then did Cik Yam sit down to think of a way to settle the issue with the Imam. He was not going to escape unscathed, that she was going to make sure of!

The Imam went about his usual business and came home at twelve-thirty to have his lunch. Cik Yam was there to greet him; she took off his kuffiyah and gave him a clean sarong to change into. The Imam looked at his wife with obvious pride. There was not a living man in Molo who did not envy him for having such a devoted wife. But then, quick as lightning, as always he would look around at his empty house and let out a sigh. Why couldn't his wife bear children like other women? Some women, it seemed, have the fecundity of rabbits, but not his wife. Like all men of his generation, it never occurred to him he could be the culprit in his wife's supposed inability to bear children. As far as he was concerned, bearing children was a woman's job, and if she didn't there was something wrong with her. Fertility had nothing to do with men.

'Is lunch ready, Yam?' asked the Imam.

'Why, yes, Abang, it's under the tudung saji,' replied Cik Yam. The Imam picked up the tudung saji for his lunch, but much to his surprise it turned out to be the morning's nasi belauk. He was stunned into silence for a good few minutes and Cik Yam took the opportunity to confront him.

'I thought you would still like to finish off my nasi belauk after you breakfasted at Mariah's. After all, I have to prove that my nasi belauk is still edible compared to Mariah's, especially since the whole village saw you eating away, behaving as if your wife has never prepared nasi belauk for you! And Abang, I had to learn of it through someone else too!'

Cik Yam threw the tudung saji on the floor, narrowly missing the Imam's foot, then ran sobbing to their bedroom. What the hell is happening, thought the Imam. How did she know I had breakfast at Mariah's. It must have been one of the womenfolk.

'Oh... women! They are so impossible; why do they have to go around making life difficult for men? Beats the hell out of me,' muttered the Imam in vexation.

It was the only time he had ever gone to Mariah's. And he had done so only at that Cik Gu Leh's insistence. Cik Gu Leh had been extolling the virtues of Mariah's nasi belauk, but really Cik Gu Leh was no authority on the subject as his wife Cik Gu
Nab, as everybody knew, was a hopeless cook. The Imam begged to be excused, but Cik Gu Lch was most persistent. So finally, the Imam relented. The nasi belauk was, as he had expected, passable, but no more. It did not surprise him in the least. The thing that did surprise him was Mariah herself. At the thought of Mariah the Imam smiled dreamily to himself. What a woman she was! The Imam became transported to another time: his youth.

When the Imam was a young man of fifteen, his father had voiced his wish for his son to be sent to Pattani in southern Thailand to learn under the tutelage of a well-known sheikh. His father had spent a few years there himself but had not progressed very much. He had always nursed a secret ambition for his son to be the scholar he could not be and in doing so exculpate himself. The Imam had protested, full of other plans. He had no stamina for the arduous task of being a scholar. He feigned delicate health, but his father had decreed. The Imam, under protest and under duress, was sent to Pattani. The Imam was miserable in Pattani, moping for his mother and his friends rather than studying. But Allah is great and the Imam’s misery was soon alleviated.

One day when he had been in Pattani about three months, the Imam took his water pot to go to the communal well for his ablutions. It was around two or three in the afternoon when there were not many people about. The Imam saw from a distance a young lady drawing water from the well. Perhaps she thought there was no one about so her head was not covered. The Imam saw her tresses in their full silken glory. The white of her skin on her bare throat was blinding. The Imam stopped in his tracks, then took full flight. He ran trembling to his hut, panting and breathless. He took a drink of water and reflected upon the event. Who could that beautiful creature be? ‘I love her,’ he said to himself. ‘I love her and I shall make her mine. I want no one else,’ he vowed. He felt his head. It was throbbing as hard as his heart, as hot and feverish as his passion. Then he learnt that the object of his ardour was the daughter of the Sheikh himself.

The Imam kept the burning secret to himself. Even his housemates never knew of this love. The Imam’s behaviour was nothing but exemplary. His manners were extremely correct, especially to the ladies. He was punctilious in the performance of his duties. If the Imam was consumed with love, the Sheikh was the last person to know. The Sheikh thought that the Imam stayed for the love of the Deen. It is true that as the years passed the Imam grew to love the Deen and the Sheikh, but so too did his love for the Sheikh’s daughter grow. In the Imam’s final year, the Sheikh was entrusting more and more of his duties to his model pupil, the Imam. The Imam was conducting kulliyahs, performing prayers and sometimes even paying courtesy calls on the Sheikh’s behalf.

He is grooming me to take his place and to be his son-in-law, thought the Imam. How full of hope he was! How sweet were the days as they passed for the Imam! How he patiently waited for the day when the Sheikh would broach the subject to him, but it was not to be. The Sheikh did broach the subject of his daughter to him but only to invite him to his daughter’s wedding to a cousin. The Imam was shattered. His world crashed around him. Pattani was nothing but a cauldron of smouldering embers. The Imam packed his books and bade goodbye to his Sheikh. He was really very fond of the old man and also very grateful for the tutelage, but he had to go. The Sheikh begged him to stay to look after his mosque for him, but the Imam gently refused. If it were not for the agony of having to see his beloved as somebody else’s wife, he would have stayed.

The Imam came home grieving to Kelantan. His mother understood the grieving and in a few months found him Cik Yam. Cik Yam, though no raving beauty, was an accomplished cook as well as being modest and extremely virtuous. She had been an obedient and excellent wife, but she was not the Sheikh’s daughter. The Imam had been happy with Cik Yam and
gradually as he grew older the hurt had eased. He had not thought again of the Sheikh’s daughter for a long time—until that morning, when, by the fate of God, Cik Gu Leh had dragged him to Mariah’s kedai mepati.

‘Oh Mariah…’ sighed the Imam. ‘Why do you have to be so like her… my long-lost love, the Passion of My Youth? Oh Mariah, why do you have to look like her from your toes right up to your eyebrows! It’s a test. By Allah! It’s a test.’

The Imam became very frightened. He left the table, took his ablutions and quickly went to the mosque.

‘Let me find refuge there,’ he thought. ‘Save me, oh God.’

What had his Sheikh always said in times like this? He quickly recollected.

Abase Yourself to the One You Love. Passion is Not Easy. Indeed, passion is not easy. ‘I have dispensed with thee, oh Passion. I have divorced thee thrice.’

The Imam kept repeating this litany as if in prayer. After the afternoon prayer the Imam stayed long in prostration. He dallied in the mosque. He came out but went in again. Finally he went in and fell into a troubled sleep, something which he had never done before.

The days passed. Things appeared normal. The Imam was punctual in his prayers and diligent in his duties, but his heart was in turmoil. He remembered a verse from his Pattani days.

O lady of excess who strips away my acts of devotion in every state.
There is no kindness in my wound
Either it is by abasement and it is attached to passion, or it is by might and it is attached to Kingdom.
If you’re in your immunity, it protects us and if you’re in the sea, you come in the boat.

It was either from Fusus Al-Hakam or the Knowledge of Man, the Imam could not be certain, but it certainly seemed apt now.

The Imam tried to go home to Cik Yam after subuh prayers, but every time somehow, in spite of himself, he would be by Cik Gu Leh’s side going to Mariah’s for breakfast. Mariah saw nothing amiss. She treated the Imam with reverence and courtesy, befitting his station and stature. She served him the choicest morsels on her best cutlery. He was, after all, the village imam.

The Imam would take the nasi belauk without averting his gaze from the plate in accordance with the Koranic injunction for men to lower their gazes. He would tremble slightly, but the men in the kedai mepati attributed that to extreme modesty. ‘The Imam is an extremely modest man,’ thought the other men, ‘not used to the company of women.’ Every time he took the nasi belauk from Mariah he would feel a pang of guilt, remembering his wife’s nasi belauk under the tudung saji.

‘Forgive me, oh God, for men are weak,’ supplicated the Imam silently, spooning nasi belauk into his mouth. After the nasi belauk the Imam would still tarry, nursing a cup of coffee with Cik Gu Leh. At least, that was how it looked on the surface. That was the time the Imam would use to steal long lingering glances at Mariah. His heart ached with the pent-up longing for the Sheikh’s daughter. Oh Mariah!...

Things would never be the same again for the Imam. He spent the nights in supplication, asking God for succour. He was frightened of the emotions stirred up by his unintentional meeting with Mariah. It was too colossal for him to handle. And yet he felt elated. He believed it was fate, a part of a grand design by God to heal his heart; but on the account of a woman? Could a beautiful, alluring woman be a part of a healing process? It seemed so profane to the Imam. But why should a woman be more profane than a man? Did not the Prophet himself say that three things are pleasing to him: prayers, women
and perfume? There you are! Proof, exoneration for the Imam. He felt resolved to do what he had to do. Cik Gu Leh would be his emissary.

The Imam chose the occasion well. It had to be on a Thursday night, the eve of Friday. After prayers and long supplication, the Imam went to his bedroom. Cik Yam was sitting on the bed waiting for him to finish. He knelt by the bed and kissed Cik Yam’s hands. Cik Yam was surprised by this reverent show of affection but did not say anything. Cik Yam waited. The Imam kissed Cik Yam’s knees and then placed his head on Cik Yam’s lap. Cik Yam stroked his head lovingly. Immediately as if released by a valve the Imam’s hot tears fell on Cik Yam’s sarong. Cik Yam felt the hot tears on her skin as they seeped through the sarong. Cik Yam lifted the Imam’s head and looked at him questioningly. Fifteen years of marital bliss had left their mark. Love and understanding shone through Cik Yam’s also tear-filled eyes.

‘Tell me what grieves you, my husband, and I will make it better for you,’’ Cik Yam whispered to the Imam. At these words the Imam felt himself choke, but he steeled himself. He told Cik Yam of his unrequited love for the Sheikh’s daughter. He told Cik Yam of his pain and longing. He then told Cik Yam of Mariah, how he had fought his emotions and how he had lost. He begged Cik Yam’s forgiveness, kissed the hem of Cik Yam’s sarong and asked for her permission to take Mariah as his second wife!

Cik Yam jumped up as if struck by a bolt of lightning. Can that dreaded thing most feared by women be real, happening to her? Please God, let it not be true, she prayed. Why couldn’t it have happened to that lazy Cik Gu Nab, who couldn’t even fry an egg properly? Why her? The loving, devoted wife, the model housewife? Why? Why? Despair and humiliation all came and passed through Cik Yam’s heart. She threw herself on the bed and wept piteously.

‘O wretched, wretched self!’

By then Cik Yam was racked by despairing sobs. The Imam tried to hold her, but she pushed him away. Finally the Imam managed to capture her in his embrace and placated her with promises of his love and continuing devotion.

‘I love you and will always love you, Yam. Nothing can change that. I will always be your husband. I will care for you, Yam . . .’ said in between kisses on Cik Yam’s forehead, hands and finally, in the final act of submission, on Cik Yam’s feet. Thus the night passed and in the morning with the first rays of sunlight, Cik Yam said ‘Yes’ to the Imam’s request, on condition of equality. The Imam had breakfast at home with Cik Yam and he himself spooned the nasi belauk into Cik Yam’s mouth.

Three days after this event, the whole town of Molo was rife with speculations. Word got around the village that the Imam was taking a second wife, and that person was none other than Mariah!

‘Isn’t that rather odd?’ gossiped the villagers. ‘The Imam and Cik Yam have been married for fifteen years and Cik Yam is a model of virtue.’

‘Then of course Cik Yam is childless. . .’ voices trailed away.

The men in the village were all excitedly handling this issue in their own ways. They had all at some time or other in their lives fantasized about having second wives, but, sadly, neither their wives nor their budgets were accommodating enough. Cik Yam became a paragon of virtue. Women wondered how she could have easily succumbed to the whole arrangement. The men, on the other hand, wondered what Koranic ayats the Imam blew on Cik Yam’s face to subdue her. Perhaps he knew something they didn’t. It was difficult for everyone to agree upon one common reason. There was, however, something that everybody definitely agreed upon and that was . . . Cik Yam would certainly be found sheltering in the shade of the Umbrella of Siti Fatimah (the Prophet’s daughter) on the Day of Judgement. ‘Mashallah!’ they all whispered reverently in awe.
of Cik Yam’s virtue and steadfastness; would that they were as strong as Cik Yam!

But what of Mariah, the object of all this commotion? She continued, serenely unaffected, with her nasi belauk selling until the very day she married the Imam. When Cik Gu Leh, the Imam’s emissary, came to her house asking for her hand, she had been surprised, to say the least. The Imam was not on her list of prospective suitors. Initially, she had thought Cik Gu Leh had come on his own behalf. Cik Gu Leh had been most partial to her nasi. Cik Gu Nab had even begun sending threatening messages. But Cik Gu Leh had come for the Imam. Mariah only dithered for a day, then said ‘Yes.’ The Imam was the man to marry, if she would ever wish to marry. A man of religion would be the only person worth marrying after all those years of self-imposed celibacy. She wondered why the Imam had ever considered marrying her. Cik Yam was a model wife. Mariah was, in fact, slightly in awe of the pious Cik Yam. Mariah felt like a harlot in her short orange kebaya, sitting beside the robed Cik Yam. Cik Yam had been kind to her and allayed her fears. Truly Cik Yam was an angel, to willingly share her husband with her, Mariah the blousy lady, untutored in religion, in fact untutored in everything except nasi belauk selling.

‘It’s all Allah’s decree,’ sighed Mariah. ‘So be it.’

Mariah’s wedding surpassed even her own expectations. Her relatives, in deference to the stature of the new husband-to-be, organized the wedding with particular zealousness. She took out her savings from nasi belauk selling and prepared a bridal chamber grander than that of her first wedding. In an uncharacteristic show of flamboyance and extravagance, Mariah had her wedding finery tailored in Kota Bharu, no less. Her first husband had not been an imam; there had been no need for such fuss. Guests streamed into the house compound from sunrise till sundown, heaping compliments upon her and congratulating her.

‘Well, at least they harbour no ill feelings towards me,’ she noted.

After isha’ prayers, with the guests finally departed, she sighed with obvious relief that it was all over. Mariah found herself alone in the bridal chamber, ready to again begin life anew as a married woman. The Imam saluted at the door, and she replied, giving him permission to enter. The Imam was dressed in a white jubah and white serban, looking resplendent. Mariah noticed that the serban was held in place with the ends fashionably tied back. She suddenly realized how physically attractive the Imam was: tall, well-built and with measured movements. Mariah quickly averted her eyes from his piercing gaze and looked demurely at her hennaed hand. He came forward, took Mariah’s hand in his own and kissed it fervently and long, inhaling the heady scent of Mariah’s Tabu perfume. His eyes closed, his dream realized, the Imam managed a hoarse ‘Thank You, God, for Your Bounty,’ before Mariah’s perfume completely enveloped him and his senses.