

TLC Showcase

ELIZA VITRI HANDAYANI

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Introduction to *From Now On Everything Will Be Different*

From Now On Everything Will Be Different tells the story of my generation. We grew up under the repressive New Order regime and learned to keep our mouth shut and fall in line if we want to survive. As we were coming of age, however, massive demonstrations brought down the regime, and for the first time we saw that we had the power to take charge of our country's governance and our lives.

I wrote the novel to examine how free we truly became after democratic reforms began. As the nation continues to confront the ghosts of the regime, my protagonists Rizky and Julita keep on battling family expectations, social pressures, and their own self-destructive habits to realise their artistic aspirations and build an honest relationship. Can they break free from a pattern of repeated disappointments? What is sacrificed and what is achieved when we submit to other people's wishes and when we forge our own path? Spanning fifteen years and flitting back and forth between his and her perspectives, past and present, the novel explores what it means to be free, as citizens and individuals.

In 2012 I sent my manuscript for assessment to The Literary Consultancy and received a detailed feedback from Anna South. At first, the criticism was hard to take in, but she made me see my work much more objectively. Her feedback lit a fire in my belly. For months after I'd read the report, I sat on my desk with a burning sense of purpose. I wrote a soul-searching essay to remind myself why I write. I practiced editing my work and mulled over every word and punctuation. I translated my manuscript into Indonesian, revising it along the way. After that, I translated it back into English. Finally, it was published in Indonesian by Yayasan Obor (2014) and in English by Vagabond Press (2015).

The novel has earned me a writer's residency, teaching and speaking gigs, invitations to literary festivals, and writing commissions. I've also founded a literary journal and community, InterSastra, and recently I served as mentor to several emerging writers featured in our *Unrepressed* series. While thinking of how I should conduct that role, I recalled Anna's assessment of my manuscript and I knew I wanted to be as helpful to the writers as she was to me, offer honest, constructive, and fair critiques of their works, and do it in such a way that motivates them to lift their writing to the next level of accomplishment.

Extract from *From Now On Everything Will Be Different* by Eliza Vitri Handayani

This time she burst into his world with her profile in a Sunday newspaper, on a page dedicated to emerging artists.

It was several weeks after the dictator had stepped down, and the first time Rizky had heard from Julita since they'd graduated high school four years earlier in 1994. Her photographs of the massive demonstrations punctuated the article: a protester ripping his shirt and baring his tattoo-covered chest before lines of special riot police; a writer handing out photocopies of his banned book; five women covering their faces with the sign 'Do Not Rape, Native Indonesian Muslim'; a student launching paper doves from the roof of the parliament building.

Rizky peered at each portrait – faces momentarily stopping whatever they were doing to beam their souls at the camera. How was it possible that these people, who a few months earlier would have censored their own children's school reports for fear of drawing attention to themselves, now proudly showed themselves in these photographs? Where had they, after three decades of obedience and fear, found the courage to protest? These people were so used to submitting to fate, how had they decided that they could break the course of history?

The protests impressed him profoundly as the first confirmation that one could indeed bring about change. He would never forget how, along with the sound of thousands of students marching, he'd heard God whisper in his ear, 'You too can change your life's course.'

Rizky rifled his room for his high school yearbook, looked up Julita's home number, and got her cell number from her parents.

'Hello?' She sounded freshly torn from sleep.

'Hey, it's Rizky!'

'Who?'

'Riz-ky. From high school. I came to your house when you were suspended.'

He could hear her suspicion through the silence.

'What do you want?'

'Congratulations. I saw the article. I knew it, Juli, I've always known you could make it.'

'Oh my God, it came out today.'

'Where do you live? Let's meet up. Please.'

When Rizky saw a woman arriving on a motorbike-taxi, wearing a laced dress with a plunging neckline, he hadn't thought that it could be Julita. Even when she liberated her head from her helmet, he almost didn't recognize her. She looked taller and more feminine in her short dress and high heels; her long hair fell in neat layers around her face.

She had picked the place – one of those trendy, roadside tent cafés that many celebrities were opening at that time. The tent was furnished with recycled objects, and the tabletops were covered with funny, politically conscious caricatures. It was one of the most creative cafés around, Julita'd said on the phone, and she was happy that, although the owner was Chinese-Indonesian, it had survived the riots unscathed.

Her wide eyes found Rizky, sitting near the wooden cart that functioned as the café's counter, and she glided towards him without breaking eye contact, her camera bag balanced on one hand and the helmet on the other.

The first time had Rizky noticed Julita was on Kartini Day in the second year of high school. That day, as customary, girls showed up pretty in traditional dresses. But Julita felt that the custom did nothing to honour Kartini, who fought for women's rights, and thought it would be more fitting if on that day girls were allowed to express their future ideals. She showed up to school wearing a paint-smeared dress, a paintbrush tucked behind one ear, and a camera slung around her neck. Girls sneered, boys whistled, and teachers were furious. Rizky was intrigued.

As he and the rest of the school's band of bad boys had been caught smoking behind the school, they found themselves in the principal's office with Julita. They were lectured and then sent home. By the school gate Julita asked one of the boys to take her photo, and soon they were striking silly, irreverent poses together.

After that the boys were friendly to her—she would let them copy her homework in the mornings, and they would invite her to watch their band rehearse after school. Soon she became the band's unofficial photographer and the only girl who could hang out with the boys without becoming anyone's girlfriend.

Until she plastered the school's bulletin board with her collection *Teenage Human Delinquency*. There were photographs of a teacher smacking a student with a shoe; students beating up one another on the street; the school principal smoking while lining up to buy lottery tickets; a banknote bearing the face of the dictator stuck on a dartboard.

The school tore down her photos, summoned her parents, and threatened to expel her. Her parents had to make a large contribution to the school, paid in cash to the faculty members. The boys also got into trouble because there were photos of them drinking and making out with their girlfriends. The leader of the group approached Julita, his punch stopped an inch away from her nose. 'Too bad you're a girl,' he said.

Rizky went to her house one afternoon during her suspension. When he arrived she'd just finished painting her bedroom walls with a trickling blood pattern. Spotting him through the window, she was startled, but quickly he told her that he only wanted to talk. They ended up sitting on her front porch, smoking and munching fried tofu.

'Why don't you just transfer to another school?' he asked. His mouth was greasy and fiery because of the green chillies inside the tofu.

'My parents didn't want our relatives to hear that their daughter had been expelled. Besides, I plan to ace the final exams, so the school will have to give me awards. Imagine, the principal giving a trophy to the girl he'd called a troublemaker in front of the entire school. I have to bust my ass studying but I'll do it for all teenage outcasts everywhere.'

He offered her more tofu. He offered to go buy some coconut water. He wanted to offer her everything. She said she was fine.

'Is that what you want to be eventually? A photographer?'

'Taking photos is expensive, but I like that it makes me focus. I think I see so much more through the camera than without it. What about you?' She studied him, but when he met her eyes she quickly looked down.

'My parents want me to go to med. school. Being a doctor, that's my mother's biggest dream. Her father died when she was only fifteen, and she had to work to help send her brothers to college. So she did the next best thing: she married a doctor. My father came from a long line of doctors.'

Rizky was surprised that he could open himself up to a girl – this girl – who was very far from his type.

'But what do *you* like to do?'

Rizky was taken aback. No one had ever asked him that question before. 'I don't know. I guess I like making up stories and acting them out. I'm in the drama club and I've been trying to write lyrics for the band.'

'Oh God, the band!' She jabbed her nails into her shoulders and scratched down her arms. 'It was so stupid of me, Riz. I thought the photos would make everyone see that there were bigger offenses to worry about than kids having fun... Oh God. Please tell the boys I'm sorry.'

But Rizky never even told them that he had gone to see her. He knew they would consider him a traitor if he did. When Julita passed them in school they called her names, and one morning they waited for her by the school gate, jammed side-by-side to form a fence of leering, spitting monsters. They blocked her way and shoved her back when she tried to pass, even grabbing her breasts. Rizky stood at the farthest end of the line, watching everything. The first time it happened, she caught his eyes to ask for help, but he just looked down. The second time, she looked at him with anger and then stopped looking at him at all.

Still, he watched her from a distance. From time to time he tried to communicate with her through his actions – when her photograph was chosen as Photo of the Month by a photography magazine, he enrolled in the Jakarta High School Theater Festival and won second prize; when a state official's arrogant son called her a slut, he

scratched the boy's car with a nail. Julita graduated with perfect scores for Math and English, and Rizky for Indonesian and History. The teachers handed them trophies in front of the entire school.

'You did it,' he whispered to her as they stepped down from the stage with their diplomas. 'Congratulations!'

Rizky couldn't remember whether she'd even replied. Driving to the café he doubted she had forgiven him, but when he saw her walking in all made-up and wearing a sexy dress, he thought she had wanted to impress him.

She sat down and put her camera bag on the old trunk that served as a table.

'You were the first to congratulate me on the article,' she said.

'I always knew you would make it, Juli. You've proved that people like us could really make it in this world.'

'Are you still friends with the boys from high school?'

'No,' he lied.

'So what did you mean by "us"?'

'I just meant people like you and me, "troublemakers" or whatever.'

She reached inside her bag and fanned the photos on the trunk. 'So what do you think?' She leaned forward.

He knew if he looked down he could see inside her dress. He took the invitation. 'I like them.'

'Why?'

'You took pictures of individuals. Other photographers showed burning buildings, the marching army, the students en masse – their photos looked like stills from an epic film. You showed the people behind it all, you made it clear the demonstrations were about so much more than toppling a corrupt government, it was about the

people rising and coming out of hiding, it was our chance to take control of our lives.'

'That's beautiful, Riz. Thank you.'

'I mean it.'

'So, do you want to see more?' She leaned forward even farther.

'Do you want to show me more?'

She swept her photos off the table and put them back in her bag. She picked up the bag—and for a moment Rizky thought that they were going to leave together. He was getting up from his chair when Julita put her bag back down on the ground.

'Maybe later. What about you? You're graduating med. school, aren't you?'

Rizky pretended his back was sore and he was straightening up. 'Yeah. I'm done with exams – my GPA is almost perfect – but there is a ton of university stuff. It's my own fault for taking the job as class president.'

Her eyes beamed the admiration that he was fishing for. 'Wow, you must have a lot of responsibilities.'

'When you took photos on my campus, you must've seen the stage we built. We held open-mike events and performed one-act plays. That was my idea.'

Their exuberance swelled as they discussed the bold new world in front of them: from then on people would be able to voice their views, however controversial; artists no longer had to fear censorship or persecution; and there would be free elections! Just when it was their time to create real work, a gate of new opportunities had been kicked open before them. Julita said she wanted to exhibit her photos in a gallery and apply for a grant to take pictures all over the world. Rizky promised himself to tell his parents that his real passion was acting, not medicine, and to join a theatre group. Anything seemed possible. She was excited, he was excited, and their excitement was amplified a thousand fold by the excitement of the time.

About the Writer

Eliza Vitri Handayani is a novelist and artist from Indonesia. She is passionate about achieving inclusivity through the arts. Her original works have appeared in international literary outlets, such as *Asia Literary Review*, *The Griffith Review*, *Kill Your Darlings*, and *Story*, and have featured in anthologies, including *BookActually's Gold Standard*, *The Near and the Far* volume 2, and *Heat Flesh Trash*.

Her novel [*From Now On Everything Will Be Different*](#) ([Vagabond Press](#), 2015) earned her a WrICE fellowship (2016) and invitations to various festivals. At the Oslo and Jakarta launches, she wore the dress that she'd designed and made herself from the novel's proofs. When the novel's launch at a literary festival was canceled due to police warnings, Eliza protested by wearing T-shirts printed with the novel's excerpts.



She is the founding director of [InterSastra](#), a literary community that provides opportunities for creatives from diverse and disadvantaged backgrounds, [House of the Unsilenced](#), an art event for gender justice, and [Fashion ForWords](#), an innovative fashion showcase against oppression.

Eliza has translated many writers, including Wiji Thukul, Virginia Woolf, Mary MacLane, Lewis Carroll, John Milton, and Avianti Armand. She co-founded As-Salam Collective, which holds study sessions to relearn Islam from feminist perspectives, and has created the fashion collection *Indonesian Muslim Looks* (2019).

Eliza is one of Australia Arts Council's International Arts Leaders 2019. Read some of her works at [elizavitri.com](#), and greet her on Instagram or Twitter @elizavitri.