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What's happened to Nafisah?

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TODAY, Nafisah Hassan turns 19. On every birthday since she was a child, her parents would pile little presents in her bedroom the night before and have the cake for tea the next day.

Nafisah would delight in opening the presents and laughing over the birthday messages from Mum, Dad and little brother Rashid.

On her 17th birthday, her Mum, Markizah, gave her two books - Marina Mahathir's *In Liberal Doses* and Chuah Guat Eng's *Echoes of Silence*. She also got her a teddy bear ("to remind her of us since she was going to boarding school") and the latest issue of *Bliss* ("it came with a backpack that month, I wanted to surprise her").

Her Dad, Hassan, was going to give her some money and Rashid shared a present with Nafisah's cat Majkat - an arty mug and a card that says, "I'm always telling people how great I think you are. No kidding."

But Nafisah never saw those presents. She did not come home after tuition. The presents and cards are still lying on her bed to this day.

Listening to her distraught parents relate the story of how their bubbly teenager went away exactly two years ago and how much she has changed since, it is unlikely that Nafisah is going to be moved by such gestures that had nurtured her childhood.

She is a different person now, they say. From time to time she speaks to them on the phone and each time she sounds cold, unfriendly and makes it clear she never intends to return home.

And to think that on Markizah's birthday earlier that year, Nafisah's card to her Mum had said "Thank you for besarkan us."

"I still can't believe it," says Markizah Halim, an osteopath who is also known in the entertainment circle as part of a singing duo, *Passion*, with her husband Hassan Brown Abdullah. "We were so close."

Hassan, who recently set up a homepage, still cannot get over the fact that he has "lost" his daughter and that, all his attempts at tracking her down have come to a dead end.

In the past two years, the couple have gone from bomoh to bureaucracy, making reports at police stations, Public Complaints Bureau, Pusat Islam, the Press and in desperation even writing to Inspector-General of Police Tan Sri Norian Mai and Home Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

The nightmare heightened when Nafisah called and threatened to report her father for sexual abuse if her parents did not leave her alone. She stopped contacting her close friends who are just as puzzled by this behaviour.

Nafisah was popular in her school. A prefect, cheerleader, Girl Guide and member of the Islamic Society, she was a bright student and had won a scholarship to do her A-levels at Padworth College in England after her Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia examinations.

She was so good in her studies that she actually need not have to be sent for tuition, which was how the problem began as far as Hassan and Markizah are concerned. Anxious for her to obtain straight As, they had engaged a tutor for Nafisah in April 1997, someone known to them and whom they trusted.

The tutor, who teaches in his house, convinced them that in order for Nafisah to achieve good results, she needed an intensive course which meant spending several hours everyday, at his place.

To cut travelling time and avoid traffic jams, he offered to pick her up

early in the morning.

"Although I paid the fees in advance, I thought it was very nice of him to go out of his way to buy her breakfast and KFC meals. They are not cheap," says Hassan.

It was around this time that Nafisah began to act in a strange way and pick fights with her parents. She wouldn't pray and would be dressed and ready for the tutor to pick her from as early as five in the morning.

On the eve of her 17th birthday, she did not return. The next morning, both Markizah and Hassan received a phone call from people claiming to be police officers.

"They said Nafisah had made a report accusing me of sexual abuse and that I was about to be arrested, said Hassan.

"I was shocked and even though this is untrue, we were scared. I called my lawyer who said I should make my own police report. We did this and reported Nafisah missing."

Hassan and Markizah contacted the tutor who told them he knew Nafisah had gone to many police stations to make the reports, and he had persuaded the police to put her in detention.

"All these were lies. There was no police report and no detention centre."

Nafisah did come back after that for five nights but refused to eat, drink, pray or be driven to her exams by her father. She insisted on being collected by the tutor in the morning and would be away the whole day whether there were exams or not. And she left her birthday presents untouched.

Nov 28, 1997, was to be the last time Hassan and Markizah ever saw their daughter - at the tutor's home.

When the SPM results came out, Hassan wrote to the school to ask that Nafisah's results be given to him. Nafisah obtained a Grade One with five distinctions.

In June the following year, Hassan learnt that Nafisah had left for England to take up the scholarship offer in Padworth College near Reading.

When Hassan contacted the principal, he was told he would not be allowed to see his daughter and that the school had the right to prevent him from doing so as Nafisah was over 16 years old. In England, a law under the British Children's Act passed in 1989 stipulates that a child can refuse to see a guardian if she thinks he may do her harm.

Hassan decided to visit her anyway, only to find out when he got there that Nafisah had left one week before the end of term.

Wherever you are, Nafisah, here is a message from your Mum and Dad:
"We wish you a happy birthday, As you are above 18 now, you are free to do as you please. All we ask is some contact with you because we love you and wish to know that you are safe and well-cared for. Hopefully one day you will wake up and realise what has happened and who is responsible, and return to us in your heart."