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Between mother and daughter

Sharifah Al-Attas

THE immaculate coiffure. The important but understated jewellery. The baju kurung in co-ordinated yet unthreatening colours.

It could only be Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali. Poised and perfectly turned out, the 76-year-old Prime Minister's wife - a grandmother 15 times over - is warm and gentle. But one senses the steely determination beneath the polished surface; a determination which has seen her triumph over academic adversity and other obstacles.

Her daughter, seated beside her in the receiving rooms at Seri Perdana, is equally well-groomed. Boasting an enviably even complexion - which she laughingly dismisses as 'marvellous make-up' - Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir waits patiently, back ramrod-straight, as her mother describes their relationship.

President of the Malaysian AIDS Council and member of the Women's Aid Organisation, she has a reined-in energy about her, as though about to leap up at any moment.

Dr Siti Hasmah on Marina:

'WE were overjoyed when Marina was born. My husband wasn't the least disappointed to find his firstborn a girl ... although we were caught a little flat-footed. There was no ultrasound then, and all our preparations had been in blue! Suddenly, we had to think pink.

Baby Ina burped a lot! She was our little burping buffalo.

There's a photograph of my husband, home from the hospital and still in his white doctor's jacket, holding her high in the air over his head. There was a type of aeroplane at the time, and he called her that ... she loved it!

He made it a point to come home, and be with her. We both worked at Alor Star's general hospital. When I began there in 1956, he was already a medical officer.

We'd both attended the King Edward VII College of Medicine in Singapore - the foundation of today's Universiti Malaya Faculty of Medicine. I hadn't taken any particular notice of him at first ... he was just a man from Kedah!

I had to repeat my first year at the college. I hadn't done well enough to proceed to second-year studies. You see, I'd had no Physics or Chemistry until then, and Mahathir actually helped tutor me in Physics.

When we married and had Marina in June of 1957, he resigned and went into private practice later in the year.

By 1958, Marina had a companion - her brother Mirzan. She wasn't jealous at all; they enjoyed each other's company.

In the evenings, they'd rush round the garden after the gardener, Pak Hashim, begging him to tell them stories. He'd dilly-dally - deliberately, of course - so they'd have to plead, coax and wheedle!

We enrolled Marina in ballet classes, so she could learn good posture. The ballet mistress was very glamorous, and would motor from Penang in an MG. It didn't last, though ... suddenly, it all just stopped. I always wondered if something had happened to her.

It's a pity - that, and music. Piano lessons were abandoned - the teacher was a dragon! Strangely, nowadays she telephones the same lady, and they have lovely chats. Miss Sibert - she was enormous!

Marina has a flair for writing, too. That's partly from me, but mostly from her father. In those days, it was natural to write.

As a teenager at Tunku Kurshiah College in Seremban, she wrote long letters about what she was doing. She'd write reams about a choir competition ... pages and pages of minutiae.

There was no e-mail. They weren't allowed to telephone, either from TKC or, later, from Ipswich and Brighton in England, where she studied for the A-levels and went on to university. Telephoning was complicated, or expensive.

It's amazing how times have changed. Now, my daughter's daughter is at school outside Melbourne in Australia. She isn't allowed to e-mail or call either. She has to write, and Marina has to reply.

Ina searched high and low for a suitable writing pad. There weren't any - not decent ones, at any rate.

She bought her daughter aerogrammes; Ineza didn't know what they were - she put them in envelopes!

Ineza's earliest letters were in SMS-speak; e-mailese. Slowly, though, she began writing properly. Her words and her vocabulary are expanding.

The art of writing's been lost. Handwriting is appalling, too - macam budak-budak! It's print, not cursive. They don't teach cursive at school any more. And with SMS-ing ... things are abbreviated.

I'm like Ina - I can't abbreviate; I can't write just a page or two. Even with birthday cards, the white space is completely full.

Ina's dressing has changed, too; I remember her hot pants! She says she was then of an age to wear them, and that now she is not!

She's a people person. I've met all kinds, especially in my profession - the ailing and the healthy. You develop compassion, and I think she has that. I admire her compassion, especially for the underprivileged, and for those with diseases that people stigmatise, such as AIDS.

She works hard, as I did. I was in charge of the maternity ward, and the ambulance would fetch me in the dead of night. Babies would be born at two and three in the morning, and it's not a matter of seeing the patient and going home again. When babies are born, you must stay until you're sure the mother isn't bleeding and is okay.

Marina's as obstinate as I am - which is good and bad. She's argumentative. To prove a point, she'll argue until I'm driven up the wall! But I admire her persistence.

Also, she's travelled, and travel broadens the mind. Once upon a time, the only time she had travelled alone was at 16; she was in America for three months with an AFS student's parents. Other than that, and when schooling in England, she was with us - always.

Now, she's more independent, and in control of her response to challenges.'

Marina on Dr Siti Hasmah:

`IT'S difficult to compare Mummy then and Mummy now. Then, I was a child; now, I'm an adult myself. Life is different - as a child, one is entirely dependent on one's parents. As an adult, one isn't.

We lived in a small town; no Internet, no mobile telephones ... no nothing.

In my school, I was one of the very few with a working mother. The other mothers were homemakers; they weren't careerwomen.

I was made to feel strange because of this - because it was so unusual. On top of that, she was a doctor!

I always thought it was normal to have a working mother. But at a friend's house (a house full of daughters, with a homemaker mother), they jeered, "Your mother works!" and I felt small. It was childish harassment; I was about 11.

I wondered if it were strange. Was there something missing?

But I was actually perfectly happy with the arrangement. We were in

school half the day anyway, then there was lunch, followed by homework; and by five, they were back. It's not like I was sitting home alone. And Pak Hashim would tell us Sang Kancil stories.

The upside of it, though, was that I grew up feeling that it was normal for women to work.

Ironically, when I married, I did stop working! Which was a good thing, actually. It gave me a two-year respite, and a different perspective on staying home.

People used to raise a hue and cry about staying home and caring for your children yourself, without help, as though it were a disaster. But it wasn't. I realised that a housewife is a manager; you must plan, draw up a budget ... I developed a healthy respect for living at home.

In my resume, 1986-1988 reads "household and infant manager". Women get it right away; but a man once asked, "For which company?"

Mum handled the day-to-day discipline. Always scolding! Dad exploded rarely, so when he did, it was more scary! Paradoxically, he was listened to more...

They were strict about school, and I was hopelessly undisciplined about putting things away.

I'd go to school with no pencils. In primary school, I went with a cold and no tissues or handkerchief. I'd tear out exercise book paper ... anything!

Now, my relationship with my mother is different, obviously. I've left home; I have my own family; I'm a mother myself.

Mummy's good at advice, and caring for her grandchildren while I'm away. The trouble is, she's away so much herself.

I speak to my daughter. I try to be proactive - I must practise what I preach. We have "girl" moments, and I talk to her about her body.

I got books for her early on. If I'd had that sort of book at her age, I'd never have read it in front of my mother! My daughter does so right in front of me, though.

Safe sex? AIDS? That's a little harder! My husband urged me to broach the subject, what with her going to Australia, but it isn't easy. I finally managed it the day we left her.

But she's sensible. She's been exposed to stuff, she isn't giddy ... about boys or anything else. But you never know!

My daughter's always attended a co-ed school. There are so few single-sex schools any more, anyway.

I grew up in a girl's school system; it was girls, girls and more girls until A-levels. Then I found I had warped ideas about boys. I assumed they were cleverer. Later, in a co-ed school, I realised they weren't. The segregation had made them seem creatures apart.

What's admirable about Mummy? She's a wonderful mediator, mainly between me and my dad ... that's where it's most necessary! She's supportive of women's rights, for example - meaning of my rights as a woman!

She tries to tone us both down, each to the other. He's basically a guy. He's pretty liberal, but can have conservative views.

It must be divine retribution, but when I was pregnant, he kept going on about a grandson; with the second, too. He's got 10 granddaughters, and five grandsons ... serve him right! He has no choice but to deal with this bevy of females!

My mother is warm, and people respond to that. I'm more like my dad - I respond to ordinary people, but have problems with the high-and-mighty.

What's aggravating about Mummy? She fusses! When we were returning to school in England, she'd pack. She's the world's best packer, and can pack anything, anywhere. She'd urge us to bring soap powder, for example. Why? They have it in England! It couldn't have been my untidiness; after a

while, that becomes inconvenient - so one learns ...'  
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