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Please send all correspondence to: The Asian Reporter
922 N Killingsworth Street, Suite 2D, Portland, OR 97217
Phone: (503) 283-4440, Fax: (503) 283-4445

News Department e-mail: news@asianreporter.com
Advertising Department e-mail: ads@asianreporter.com
General e-mail: info@asianreporter.com
Website: www.asianreporter.com

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Publisher **Jaime Lim**
Contributing Editors

Ronault L.S. Catalani (Polo), Jeff Wenger
Correspondents

Ian Blazina, Josephine Bridges, Pamela Ellgen, Maileen Hamto, Edward J. Han, A.P. Kryza, Marie Lo, Simeon Mamaril, Julie Stegeman, Toni Tabora-Roberts, Allison Voigts
Illustrator **Jonathan Hill**
News Service **Associated Press/Newsfinder**

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General e-mail: info@asianreporter.com

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TALKING STORY IN ASIAN AMERICA



■ Polo

Island rules

An Old World compass on our chaotic new continent

When old ways and old guys show up

Part one of two

We are islanders. And we tell islander stories. Sure we do. For folks not so familiar with Indonesia's roughly 15,000 islands, ours is a really old-old story. So old, that archeologists refer to a wayward branch of prehistoric *Homo erectus* as Java Man. To which we quickly add that Java Women have lived and loved just as long. Making possible our joy. About 750,000 years of joy.

For all those years, all along our 3,000-mile archipelago, our elder aunties have been telling and telling us: "Hati-hati, anak. Be kind to every orang you meet on our djalan." Kindness matters that much. Especially toward strangers.

"You never know," they say. "Maybe walking in rags is Lord Shiva, or Compassionate Buddha. Maybe you meet Prophet Muhammad. (Peace be upon them all.) Maybe joh. We never know."

This old rule — carried in our pop's muscular arms, nurtured by our mom's sure hands, plus a couple of hastily packed bags — sailed with us into dark and deep seas, from steamy Singapore to icy Rotterdam then to humming New York City. That rule raised us from anxious renters on the edge of South Salem's crazy Commercial Street, to proud suburban homeowners — our pop's intoxicating roses, his crimson rhododendrons and sun-yellow azaleas, exploding with joy. That same old rule, this same old joy. Al'hamdulillaah.

After proving its efficacy across long millennia and across wide oceans — after those awesome International Space Station pics of our pretty blue planet, spinning her lonely arc through a universe of infinite silence and dark and cold — finally, NASA's mightiest minds are conclusively declaring that earth, our achy mother earth, is a lovely little island too. And so too, this elegant old-school island rule (always be kind) just as surely applies to our chaotic new nation. Sure it does.

Allow me an illustration.

One damp and chilly February afternoon — the afternoon that's actually the point of this loopy tale — as rain sprinted down our cold office windows, as night closed in the way Pacific Northwest winter darkness does at 4:00pm sharp — I sensed a man standing quietly behind and left of me. How long he

waited, I cannot say.

I was slouched at my desk, looking at a woman in a white cotton blouse, likewise slumping at her office desk across S.W. Portland's Stark Street, likewise gazing out her window. Her slender hands, she parked next to her keyboard. How long I was staring at her, I also cannot say.

That man behind me, was at once tense and breathing slow. I sensed a compact and capable man. You see, edgy guys like me, krontjong from our wobbly world's most shifty tectonics, know stuff like this. We sense essential little atoms, seconds before they manifest. Like green vine snakes do, flicking their tongues, sampling our air. It's why we made it here, to dreamy America. It's why we didn't die during our troubles back home. And why our families aren't languishing year after empty year in squalid refugee dumps in neighboring nations. It's this reptilian thing — and of course, merciful God noticing us. Ampun'illaah.

I sensed a tired man. Worn like me. When I swivelled around slow, a Viet Chin gentleman same generation as me was standing there. Rain-darkened jacket shoulders. Thin hair pasted to his head. A de rigueur Chinese guy hairdo, he had. Done in four minutes flat, at one of those ubiquitous regulation Chinese sojourner beauty shops, the kind dotting every eastern and western coastline of every continent since the days of Admiral Zheng He. He's grand armadas of merchant ships. Flagships about 100 feet longer than the Seattle Seahawks' home field. All that, about 100 years before Columbus.

Etched into the corners of his eyes and mouth: Joy and exhaustion. On his feet, Payless ShoeSource loafers, black. I knew that I know this man well, but

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