

My Sister and Her Angel

In memory of Md TAN Beng Neo

My beloved sister, **Tan Beng Neo**, passed away on 21st February 2026. She was 89.

Our family knew her as “Bulat” which means “round” in Malay. This was because she was a bit fat during her younger days, during the Japanese Occupation of Malaya (1941-45) when food was hard to get, and she ate mostly boiled rice with soya sauce.

Having finished school, she went on to train as a nurse in Penang and also Australia. I was then in primary school. I dearly recall eagerly awaiting her return, when she would bring me picture books in which I pasted colour pictures of the 7 wonders of the world, various animals and so on.

Both my sister Bulat and our brother, the late Beng Tee, would often give me my first reading books in large print and with colourful pictures. They also taught me to read and to love books. All this laid the foundation for my love of learning and writing which has stayed with me to this day.

After her marriage, she left nursing and worked in the Eastern Bank, located at Benteng in KL. (The Eastern Bank was acquired by Chartered Bank in 1957.) By then she was living in KL with her husband, Loh Peng Kong, son Mervin (“Merv”) and daughter, Carolyn, whose son is Jonathan Lee, Bulat’s grandson.

In my teenage years, Bulat was always there when I needed someone to talk with. She was the best friend I had then. I would visit her in KL and spend time with her as sister and younger brother.

In my years as a Theravada monk (1970-1990), she was very supportive of me too. She was herself devoted to Buddhism, visited Buddhist temples, and had a Buddha shrine at home.

For some 20 years, especially when her health was failing, she was constantly and lovingly cared for in-house by Mervin’s wife, Corrie Mende (of Indonesian, Dutch, Chinese and Filipino descent), my niece. Though a devout Protestant she believes in karma from her experience and observation of life. When Peng Kong’s 2nd wife and her daughter visited my bed-ridden sister, they tried to convert Bulat. Corrie at once objected, insisting that they should respect her faith. Corrie is a remarkably compassionate, emotionally resilient and diligent person—an angel without wings.

I am now the only one left in my generation, and I must say that the 4 most remarkably loving women in my life are:

our mother, Md Tay Kim Im,
my loving wife Ratna Lim Ei Geik,
my dear niece Corrie Libriana S Mende,
and of course, my dearly beloved sister, Bulat Katherine Tan Beng Neo.

My only sister, Bulat, peacefully passed away on 21st February 2026. Corrie, who was with her in her last moments, told us that Bulat's last words were to call out her elder son's name, "Merv ... Merv," and then said, "I'm coming home." She passed away peacefully with a happy mind.

Be well and happy in your new life, Bulat.

Sadhu! Sadhu! Sadhu!

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