

ANTU BANYU

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My Hamlet and the Hamlet Across the River

Erul gobbled up his lunch. Throughout his meal, he heard his mother chattered about the missing boy from the hamlet across the river. It felt like an endless incessant chattering. However, the only thing stuck to his memory was “Don’t swim for too long in the river! Don’t swim too late in the afternoon! Don’t swim too far in the middle of the river!”

Finished listening to the chatter, Erul was finally released from the torment. Slowly, he began to ease his way out and left his mother. He quickly wore the shirt that was hung on the kitchen door before. Erul remembered his promise with Ujang and Mamat to go play in the hamlet across the river while getting bamboo for kite making material. Erul did promise his younger cousin, Ley, to make him two kites.

Erul’s ability in kite making was well-known. His handmade kites were famous for their smooth shaven bamboo strips, agility and superiority when the kites soared high in the sky.

Erul first learned the trade from his paternal grandfather. Erul had learned to make kite before his grandfather passed away. With passion, Erul followed all the steps to make it. He had learned

everything, starting from how to pick a good cane, take the sturdy part, shave it into strips, and even how to choose the best oil paper. Now, his grandfather was gone, but he had passed down all his knowledge to his only grandchild.

Whenever Erul remembered his grandfather, he started making kites. Sometimes, during school holidays he would make these kites in a large number, hung them on the wall outside his stilt house so that many people who walked by and saw it would be interested to buy or simply peruse at them. Erul sold the kites at low prices and saved his earnings to purchase some supplies for the new school year. However, in his school days Erul only made a small number, usually for his little cousins. Erul's handcrafted kites were famous throughout the hamlets along the Lematang Riverbank. That afternoon the sun shone bright and scorching overhead. Whistling playfully, Erul directed his steps towards the bank of the river where he had promised to meet his two best friends, Ujang and Mamat.

Erul's hamlet and the opposite hamlet were situated on the upstream of Musi River. Musi River was the largest river in South Sumatra. It has nine branches. People often called it *Batanghari Sembilan* meaning the nine major rivers.

It refers to Musi River and the other eight tributaries that flowed into the Musi. One of them was Lematang River. This river separates Erul's hamlet and the hamlet across. Perhaps because it

is located on the bank of Lematang River, people named it Lematang Hamlet. As it was situated on a riverbank, river became a major source of livelihood for the local community, who mostly worked as fishermen and rattan seekers. They relied on the river to fulfill all of their household needs.

When the water receded, the rocks and stones at the bottom of the river and on the banks were clearly visible. Usually, crayfish could be seen peeping out of between these rock crevices. *Seluang* fish could also be seen swimming freely amidst them. However, when the tide rose, it ostensibly became murky, brown and dirty. Never mind bathing, even the locals were reluctant to touch it.

Erul's hamlet was quite cool, perhaps because it was located on the riverside, along Bukit Barisan Mountain Range. The people use water transportation to go everywhere. Motor boat was very useful for the locals who wish to travel to any place. Almost every family owned one. The boat would be tied to a sturdy tree with a strong line of rope. Each boat had their own characteristics with distinct colour, shape, and decoration that were made according to the preference of their owner.

There was a hamlet in the opposite direction to Erul's hamlet. Both were only separated by Lematang River. In there was a massive palm oil industry. Most of its villagers worked as factory workers. It caused their agricultural land, which had been passed

down within the families, became abandoned. People were unwilling to work in the fields, because working in the factory was not arduous as farming.

Erul's hamlet and the hamlet across his village lived in harmony. Conflict between the two hamlets was never heard of. In fact, if there was a celebration, they would be keen on visiting each others.

According to the story of the elders in Erul's hamlet, that hamlet was said to be the oldest settlement of all the hamlets along the Lematang Riverside.

In the past, large trees lined the area. Residents who have lived to the age of 100 years were commonly found there. Almost all residents of the hamlet had a big stilt house with a spacious yard. Not long afterwards, Erul eventually arrived at the river bank. He did not find his two best friends. He looked around the river, but found none. Then, Erul shouted as he headed towards the river.

“Oiiii!” Erul yelled.

Not a reply was heard.

Usually, if it was like that, the three of them would be waiting for each other. Erul then sat on the biggest rock in the river. He immersed his feet in the water. He saw some small fish swarming over to feed on the the remaining rice grains that had been stuck

on his trousers and fell into the river. Erul saw it and smiled to himself. From a distance, he saw Ujang and Mamat paddling their canoe down the river bank towards where Erul sat.

“Oiii!” Erul shouted.

Mamat yelled back, “Oiiii!”

He greeted his two buddies with a warm tone. Erul had not even asked when Mamat started to explain about the delay. It was because when they were going to leave, Mamat’s grandmother called out to ask him to buy a cleaning paste at a raft stall not far from Mamat’s house which was situated on the edge of the river. Only after that, they went off to see Erul.

“What is our plan today?” Erul asked.

“As planned, Rul, but the boat will be used later in the afternoon,” Mamat answered.

Erul nodded his approval, showed that he understood what Mamat had said. After that, he jumped into the boat from atop the big rock.

Erul took his place in front of the rudder. On the middle was Mamat and Ujang was at the back, holding a scull. On top of the boat there were only a pair of sculls and the other on was held by Erul. Erul steered the canoe straight ahead, cutting across the

river. Fortunately its current was not too strong, which made it easier for them to head to the village across the river.

They finally reached the other side. Mamat stood up right away, grabbed the boat's rope and jumped out to reach the shore. He looped the rope over sturdy branches. After that, he pulled the boat up the ground. Erul and Ujang quickly jumped out after Mamat.

Erul did not forget to bring his father's machete to cut down the bamboo. He tucked the machete into his pants as they walked towards bamboo trees that grew wild virtually along the path heading down the village.

Bamboo trees in this hamlet were of larger size. The villagers often made a raft out of these bamboo canes that would be used to cross the river. Erul took awhile to decide on what bamboo stem to pick. He chose with great consideration. A glimpse of his grandfather's face flashed through his head and with it, his lessons on how to pick the right bamboo to make a kite. He knocked several bamboo stems repeatedly, until they produced sounds. If it was loud, it meant that it was an old bamboo. On the other hand, weak sound indicated a young culm.

Soon, Erul swung his machete to one of the bamboo stalks. It looked very sturdy. It had bright yellow color. The culm had clean, even segments, but very tall. Erul cut it with difficulty

because it happened to be located in the middle of a bamboo grove. Eventually, it fell. Erul cleaned the small coarse hairs along the stem thoroughly. He also removed some smaller twigs that grew on it before cutting it into four pieces. Then, it was Mamat and Ujang's turn to work. Before Erul cut the cane, Mamat and Ujang were already busy looking for small, dry plants around them to be used as gloves when carrying the bamboo.

Each of them got two parts. They lifted these bamboo pieces and put them into the canoe. Incidentally, the area was located not far from it. Before heading towards the canoe, Erul cleaned up the remains of his work. All the wastes such as twigs, sticks and branches were piled up together within the bamboo grove. It was also taught by his grandfather. That was how Erul showed his gratitude to his grandfather, by keeping it clean wherever he was.

Before leaving that hamlet, they sat in leisure on the edge of the river for some time. Since it was still early in the afternoon, they spent their time idling on the bank.

From afar, they saw villagers of Lematang Hamlet were returning from their fields by boats. Their cultivated lands were mostly located far from the hamlet. They used boat to reach the fields.

Suddenly, behind Erul and his friends, there stood Ali, their schoolmate. Ali was indeed the native of the village, but he enrolled at a school in Lematang Hamlet.

Ali warmly greeted the three of them, “What are you doing here...?” he said.

Ujang answered Ali’s question, “As usual...getting some bamboos for Erul’s kites”.

All of a sudden, Erul remembered his mother’s words during lunchtime. So, an idea came into his mind that he should find out firsthand the real case through Ali.

He beckoned Ali to get closer. He told everything to him, about what his *Emak* had said at noon, about the kid who went missing in the village and not returning until now. Ali listened closely to Erul’s story while his two buddies, Ujang and Mamat also listened in while lying down on the grass at the riverbank. It was not long before Ali began telling the story and started it by nodding as though he confirmed everything that Erul had spoken to him.

“My grandfather once told me,” said Ali, “that Lematang River used to be very friendly, calm, and clean. But everything changed when a calamity struck our hamlet. There was this pair of lovers whose relationship was not sanctioned by both of their parents. This was because the woman came from a rich and respected family, while the man came from an ordinary family of fishermen and rattan seekers. Because their love was obstructed, they

eventually ended their lives and promised to always stay behind in this river.”

Ujang and Mamat who were initially indifferent with Ali’s story ended up listening seriously. Then, Ali went on. “The couple finally turned into spirits that watch over the river. It was said that both of them will appear when a villager throws garbage into the river or pollute it. They would be infuriated as well if a child bathes on the river at sundown. But, my grandfather suggested that they are decent beings because they also take care of the river and remind us as a child to obey what our parents say,” Ali continued. Ali concluded his story by getting up. “Go home,” he said.

Seeing that it was already late and the canoe had to be returned to the owner, the three of them left that place half-heartedly, due to Ali’s unfinished story that had piqued their curiosity. All the way home across the river, they were silent with their own thoughts. In Erul’s mind, so many unanswered questions grew.

He looked at his surrounding landscape. He did not feel or see something strange in this river. From childhood until now, he never saw the creature that Ali just told them. Neither his parents had ever told him about it. Erul kept his silence.

Without them realizing, they had arrived at Lematang Hamlet, their beloved village.

Erul was the only one getting ready to get off the boat because Ujang and Mamat should return the boat and went home. They carried the bamboo cuts together hand in hand until everything was brought out from the canoe. A wave of Ujang's hand implied that they would soon run it home. Erul waved back.

Best Friend

In the afternoon, after taking care all of the school works, Erul indulged himself by sitting idly on the steps in front of his house. Almost all houses in Erul's hamlet were on stilts. These houses were made of woods that came from the forest not far from the hamlet. The wood originated from a type of *tembesu* tree. This type of tree was believed by the people in Erul's hamlet to be strong, durable and resistant to termites. That was why it was always used by people to build stilt houses.

Erul's house loomed high, consisting of three bedrooms and one really spacious main room at the upper floor. In every corner, there was a window made of stacked woods. Air could enter through its recesses even though the window was shut. At the bottom of the house there was no room at all, just a wide-open space. For all water and sanitation-related activities, they must go to the river, except in case of emergency during nighttime. For that purpose, father provided a small latrine next to the well, which was located a few meters from the main building.

From atop the house, Erul could look as far as the eye can see. His house was on one side of the village thoroughfare, so he can see people passing in front of his house. Because father planted the yard with many vegetations and fruit trees, the air in Erul's home felt cool with fresh breeze wafted in.

When all was done, Erul stepped onto the yard next to his house. He saw bamboo pieces that they had brought from the village across already shaved into sticks. These sticks of bamboo were neatly lined up to dry on the yard. Erul turned them over and separated the dried ones from the rest. It was a hot sizzling afternoon. Erul thought that he should start making the kites tomorrow.

Erul usually made the kites with the help of his friend, Ujang. Out of the three, Ujang was somewhat taciturn. He only occasionally made a sound, but his hands were always busy working on something. He was popular for his inclination to lend a helping hand. He was always ready to help everyone in need.

For example, if someone wanted to have a celebration in Erul's hamlet, Ujang would be there without being asked for help. He was also not fussy about his work. Sometimes he took water from the river to the location of the party. Sometimes he collected fire wood and even did women's work like peeling the onions. As long as he could bring home some food for his four younger siblings, he was grateful already.

In helping Erul to make the kites, Ujang had his own share of work. He was assigned to cut the pieces neatly then to shave it off into small sticks that will make the kite's frame. They divvied up the task instinctively. This activity helped Ujang a lot because he could also get a share from the profit in selling the kites to meet his and his sibling's everyday needs.

Erul did not relax for long when Mamat and Ujang, his two buddies since childhood came. Mamat's Mother was his mother's cousin. They were both of the same age just that Mamat was the youngest while Erul was an only child. Ujang was their friend, whose house was closest to Erul's house. Ujang's father died about five years ago. In the past, during hunting season, people sometimes did not come out from the forest for many days. One day, Ujang's father joined the hunting. However, he never came back since. People had been looking everywhere, even venturing deep into the woods, but he was never found. It was likely that Ujang's father was separated from his hunting group or strayed off and died in the wilderness. And so, only Ujang's Mother and four little siblings remained.

Now, Ujang's mother also went overseas to work as a Female Migrant Workers (*TKW*), leaving her five children behind. She went home every *lebaran*, and sent money for her children every month. Ujang and his siblings stayed with their grandmother, who

was already an elderly but still strong enough to take care of them.

Ujang had once disappeared for three days. During that time, everyone in the village was looking for him. Some were looking into the river, some were looking into the jungle and some others even looked for him in the neighboring hamlets, but still could not find him.

At that time, there was nothing that his grandmother and four younger siblings could do but cry. People were looking for him day and night. People who searched him in the river even performed a traditional ritual that they normally did whenever there was a case of a missing child. Ujang's Mother, who was still in another country that time, had been informed of this but could only resigned to fate because she was unable to go home. Even Erul and Mamat could not escape from everyone's questioning about Ujang's whereabouts.

On the third day, Ujang unexpectedly appeared in his yard. He was barely recognizable by the people there. That day, Ujang's grandmother cried hysterically when seeing him. Only Grandmother knew that the figure who suddenly showed up was Ujang. His whole body was very dirty and all his clothes were in tatters. His hair was messed up and he just kept quiet, not speaking a word.

Finally, the villagers brought Ujang to the river to bathe. After that, they told Ujang to eat. At that time he ate his meal with gusto. He clearly looked very hungry. Once Ujang finished eating, he finally made a sound. He asked about his younger siblings, his mother, and his house's situation. After that, he was questioned back by our village's chief of folk ritual.

From his story, we could say that he intentionally ventured into the jungle to seek out his lost father. He was sorry to see his four little siblings who did not understand anything. He also felt sad for his mother who had to live separately from her children to meet their household needs.

During his time in the jungle, Ujang said that he was fine. Luckily, he did not get eaten by wild beasts. On the second day, he ran out of provisions so he started to eat everything that he could find. He marked each path that he walked on to make sure that he did not get lost in the jungle and could return safely. Then people asked whether he heard their voice. Ujang answered with a shake of his head. People sunk into silence.

However, at the end of his story Ujang said that he felt content with his search and will not repeat his action again. He was now thoroughly convinced that his father had truly gone, lost in the wilderness. Erul, Mamat, and Ujang sat languorously on the steps in front of the house, taking a nap. That afternoon, gentle breeze

wafted at them. Naturally, they got drowsy and almost fell asleep. Suddenly, Aunt Lena the biological sister of Erul's father arrived.

“Watch out...watchout...want to pass through. What are you doing here on the stairs? It's not good sitting here, furthermore young boys like you lot. Go, take a shower! The sun's going down soon,” said Aunt Lena. Then, she went upstairs into the house in a hurry. However, Aunt Lena's brisk scolding did not move the three of them from the stairs. They became even more preoccupied with their thoughts.

Soon, Aunt Lena returned, “Excuse me...passing through. Why you're still here. Don't be lazy! Go take a shower! You all smell very bad!” said Aunt Lena. Erul watched Aunt Lena passed by in haste. He could see briefly that Aunt Lena was holding a cake grill to make *lapan jam*, a specialty cake of Lematang Hamlet. Erul could imagine how difficult it was to make the cake. Perhaps the reason why it was called *lapan jam* was because it took approximately 8 (*lapan*) hours to make it.

With difficulty, Aunt Lena passed through Erul, Mamat, and Ujang who did not move an inch from their place. She passed them one by one. Her lips pouted, expressing her annoyance. Sometimes, her hands held onto the staircase's railing. Finally, she left.

A few moments passed before Mamat shifted from his position. While getting up, Mamat said, “Come on, let’s take a shower! I’m bored. It seems not many people are bathing in the river now. So, we can play freely.”

Mamat was vexed seeing his two friends showed no reaction to his invitation. He repeated his invitation again. Without a sound, the three of them reluctantly left Erul’s house and headed to the river. Along the way, all of them shared the story about their classroom. They attended the same school, but Ujang was at a higher grade than Erul and Mamat.

The three of them were so engrossed in their stories that Erul almost fell because he tripped over a tree root. He listened to Ujang’s story about his friend who hid a baby bird in his shorts’ pocket, and the chick pooped in his pants. As a reward, Ujang’s friend got a punishment from Mrs. Yamin. They laughed so hard listening on it. Mamat had another story. He told about his friend who got punished by standing in front of the class for being late to school. His homeroom teacher this morning saw him playing at the district office’s yard.

Then, Erul spoke about his aunt who went to his home this morning to borrow Erul’s boyscout cap, despite having a daughter.

Not knowing that, Aunt Lena's kid got teased at school. When they almost reached the river, all of a sudden Ujang stopped and walked off track towards the small woods on the riverside. Without giving any gestures, his two friends just followed behind him.

The forest was not too big. It was lined with banana trees. Wild fruits grew in abundance there.

The villagers often just took away these fruits without asking because nobody owned them. Usually, Ujang already targeted the fruits and knew the best time to pick them. After venturing a bit deeper into the woods, Ujang finally stopped.

“Where...?” Mamat said.

Ujang did not answer Mamat's question. He only pointed up; signaling that the fruit he was after was up above the tree that is close to them. Erul immediately looked up. He directed his gaze upward for a long time, but did not find one mango that was ripe and ready to be plucked.

Ujang climbed the tree nimbly. Once he arrived at the topmost branch, he pushed aside a curtain of leaves there. Then, he saw two ripe mangoes ready to be pulled and eaten. However, it was difficult for him to reach those fruits. He held on to a sturdy branch before reaching up to the fruits. After getting one, he threw it down.

Below, Mamat was ready to grab the mango. Not long after, Ujang's voice was heard.

“Catch...!” Ujang said.

“Okay...,” Mamat replied.

The fruit landed right in Mamat's hands. Mamat smiled happily. Without giving any cue, he ate the mango directly. He peeled it with his strong teeth. Only half of it peeled, and he continued by eating the inside flesh. Not long after, he gave the remaining half to Erul, which he took with relish. Meanwhile, Ujang who was still up above did not climb down the tree. Apparently he ate the other mango himself. He was so engrossed with it, staying on top of the tree without turning his glance down once.

“Come on, Jang! The sun was almost down. Later on, we will not have enough time to bathe,” Erul shouted. Ujang climbed down. The three of them bounded for the river. Their friendship was indeed very special. They went through joy and sorrow together.

Wak Hitam

Since olden times, the villagers along Lematang River had always lived in peace. It was said that they came from one predecessor. However, they had multiplied since and spread out to open new hamlets. The reason was being close to the river, these hamlets lined up neatly along the Lematang. For the populace, river was a

vital aspect of their lives. They were afraid to contaminate the river because they had been taught since childhood about the importance of river.

To instill habits of cleanliness, parents normally spoke to their children about a supernatural being that would readily eat a child who throws garbage into the river.

Erul himself did not care about the story. Neither *Bapak* nor *Emak* had ever told him about it. However, the story about these beings would reappear whenever Wak Hitam came to visit their hamlet. So far, Erul recognized Wak Hitam from the clothes that he always wore. Wak Hitam was always clothed in black and wrapped in a sort of long black coat that almost touched the ground. He was toweringly tall, had a very dark skin, with a moustache and beard that hang low. He had long, loose hair and he always wore a black scarf that was wrapped over his head to form a cone.

Until now, no one knew Wak Hitam's true name, his origin, and actual age. The villagers in Erul's village never tried to ask about it. However, they guessed that maybe his name came from the color of his attire, which was black. His age was thought to be older than Erul's grandfather, although he was still able to walked steadily without being supported by anyone, not even with a stick that was commonly used by old people in Erul's hamlet However,

if the question was ‘where did he come from?’ everyone will shake their head.

It was said that Wak Hitam suddenly appeared amidst the inhabitants of Lematang Hamlet. He came alone and lived solitarily by the river. He erected a small hut on the bank of the Lematang River. Occassionaly, he went out to buy out some things, before being immersed in his solitary life again. People from the village across once said that Wak Hitam actually had a wife and a son, but did not care about them anymore. Once, his wife and child arrived at Lematang Village to look for Wak Hitam. They thought Wak Hitam had settled in this village. But, when they arrived at Wak Hitam’s cabin, it was empty and Wak Hitam disappeared without a trace. In the end, the pair of mother and child returned home. Their story was never heard again.

In fact, when Wak Hitam was notified about the arrival of his wife and child, he just kept quiet, not saying anything. One day, all the residents became anxious when a child went missing when playing on the edge of the river. At that time, the water was rising. It was improbable that a crocodile stayed on the river bank. So, it was unlikely that the child got eaten by the crocodile.

After searching from side to side, everyone gathered at the edge of the river. They resigned over the child’s fate. They gathered near Wak Hitam’s hut. But, during the incident, Wak Hitam’s figure was never seen or showed himself. Eventually, they

dispersed. The mother of the lost child broke into sobs and cried out her child's name. People sunk into silence. When the crowd were about to go home Wak Hitam's head suddenly emerged from the window of his house and said, "Just wait! He will be back before nightfall."

People who heard his words were startled, as if a power had convinced them to it. In the end, the villagers returned to sit close to the river. Some erected temporary tents to block the heat of the sun from striking their body directly. Some of them were using parasols, and the rest took shelter under the shade of the trees that line up the river. When the sun had set, a large whirlpool seemed to form in the river water. Everyone was dumbstruck looking at it. However, soon the water turned calm again.

Everyone was wondering because the figure of the child did not show up. One by one, they started to wrap up their things, preparing to return home. However, when they were about to leave, one of them suddenly shouted, "Oi...!! Look over there! Looks like someone is drifting down the river."

Everyone's eyes stared in that direction. Someone recognized the figure. It was the missing child that they all had been looking for. Since that incident, the people in Erul's hamlet believed everything that Wak Hitam said. From day to day, Wak Hitam appeared amongst the villagers. People often asked for Wak

Hitam's assistance whenever there was an incident that could not be resolved by the people.

He was often invited to come whenever someone intended to open a new field, build a new house, or when they were going to have some celebration. Wak Hitam never charged a certain fee. If people paid him with money, he accepted.

If people paid him with things, he also accepted. Even when people paid him with their crops or dishes, still he accepted.

He kept coming wearing a black shirt. Wak Hitam was treated like an important official in Erul's hamlet. He was always told to sit in front, on a special bench. People talked to him with reverence and courtesy, as if too afraid to offend him.

Erul, Mamat, and Ujang did not really care about this Wak Hitam person. Maybe during their age, it was a bit difficult to understand what was actually happened.

They were engrossed with what they are, with their own world. Erul once bumped into Wak Hitam when he was going to bathe in the river. Erul greeted him politely and Wak Hitam responded with a smile. However, it was different with Mamat. One day he went bathing in the river bringin a bucket of his unwashed clothes. Amongst his clothes, a plastic bag used for wrapping his sport shoes was tucked inside. The bag drifted down the river and

it was too late for him to grab it back. Suddenly from the back, a roar was heard saying, “Chase it...!”

Mamat immediately looked back. He saw the figure of Wak Hitam right behind him with red eyes and hands on his waist. That moment, Mamat instantly jumped into the river. He saw that the bag was not too far and it was stuck between several big rocks at the river’s edge. He swam as fast as he could and grabbed the bag then swam back to his original location.

When he got there, he did not see Wak Hitam’s figure anymore. He became afraid. He tidied up all his clothes that he did not have the chance to wash and rushed back home. His mother was stunned by his attitude. He immediately locked himself in his room. During that time, he kept recalling the figure of Wak Hitam with red eyes and hands on the waist. He thought, “What is wrong with Wak Hitam?”

He felt that he never offended him, nor acted impolitely in front of him. Not long after, the answer to his question flashed into his mind. Perhaps Wak Hitam thought he threw the plastic garbage into the river deliberately and Wak Hitam forbade it.

Since then, Mamat was very careful when washing clothes in the river. Before starting, he checked his clothes first. He was afraid that the incident would happen again. Unlike Erul and Mamat,

Ujang had another experience. One day, Ujang went to the river alone to bathe.

Coincidentally, the river that afternoon was very quiet. Ujang washed his bike energetically. When he turned to look at Wak Hitam's house, he saw Wak Hitam sprinkling colorful flowers into the river from his window. Then, Wak Hitam muttered as if chanting a prayer. Ujang then stealthily came near to see what Wak Hitam was doing. Then, he saw him jumped into the river in his black garb.

Wak Hitam dived for a long time and unexpectedly appeared besides Ujang, saying, "Continue with your work...!"

Ujang immediately apologized and went back to wash his bike quickly, terrified. Since that time, whenever he bumped into Wak Hitam, he always bowed his head.

Conviction

At last, Erul, Mamat, and Ujang arrived on the edge of the river. That afternoon, the sun still shone. The river current was a bit strong because of the rainy season, but its waters were not that murky yet. Only Wak Dolah and Wak Wahid were seen bathing and cleaning their knives after looking for rattan in the forest. The river and the not-so-blistering weather condition made them eager to swim. They could no longer wait to play around and have some race in the water. It had become their habit since childhood.

Usually, in this circumstance, Erul would be the most energetic one. However, this afternoon Erul was somewhat reluctant to start. Suddenly, he remembered his mother's message after school during lunch. Erul sat atop one of the tree trunks that jutted into the river. It was his favorite place since he was but a child. The tree was very sturdy, protruded out over the river water, almost touching when the tide was high. From that tree Erul can extend his leg to touch the water, and even jumped directly into the river and felt a sensation that could not be described with words.

“Come on... let us...Rul...!” Mamat and Ujang teased him from the bottom to jump out into the river. Seeing his two friends laughed happily, Erul was tempted. Then, he opened his shirt and hung it on one of the tree branches. Then, Erul jumped down, exhilarated to join with his friends. They competed to be the one who could hold their breath longest in the river. Ujang always won this. Between the three of them Ujang had always been unbeatable since childhood. From afar, they heard Wak Dollah asked them to get ashore. However, his shout was ignored.

And so, they continued the game by competing to gather mussels (a type of clams) that live attached to the rocks, pieces of wood, and tree roots on the riverbank. The one who gathered mussels the most will be the winner. If he won, all mussels gathered will be his. In Erul's hamlet, mussels can be made into a tasty meal.

Excitedly, Erul collected mussels one by one. He could already imagine his mother's face when he came home with lots of mussels to cook. They heard Wak Wahid's voice from a distance. However, it was not clear what he was shouting at.

In the end, Erul became the winner of the mussel gathering competition. He felt very pleased that time and laughed aloud with pride. After putting together their catch, they only realized that they have gathered so much. It was just not enough to rely on both hands to carry everything.

Erul looked around the river. Suddenly he spotted a black plastic bag that drifted along the stream. Without thinking he immediately went back into the river. Quickly she swam to reach the bag, so without realizing he swam farther to the middle. Suddenly Erul realized that his body was spinning faster and faster. He was trapped in a very large whirlpool. There was a kind of energy that sucked him deeper. Erul tried to fight the whirlpool with all his might. The more he struggled, the deeper it sucked him in. He had experienced the same thing several times before. He can hold on to the roots of the trees that crawled along the banks of the river. But where were them now? He did not know. Maybe because it was dark, he could not see it. Finally, Erul was resigned to his fate. His body felt weak, helpless. He was dizzy and sick.

Faintly, he heard the sound of his two friends, Ujang and Mamat. He wanted to shout to answer their call, but there is no power from within his body to do that.

Then, he heard the voices of his parents, Wak Dollah, Wak Wahid, and the people of his hamlet. From a distance Erul saw his mother crying by the river, surrounded by relatives. To his mother's right he saw his father with a grim face sitting side by side with Wak Hitam. Wak Hitam is a famous spiritualist in their village. His mouth mumbled as if reading something. On the other hand, Erul did not feel any pain at all. He just follows the vortex that carries his body in. But what he was worried of was why Mother, Father, and these people did not see and hear him, when he felt very close?

Erul eventually became panicked. He was very sorry for not heeding his mother's advice yesterday. *Emak* had asked him not to stay long in the river, not to bathe in the river after the sun is out, and not to swim far into the middle. However, everything was already happened. He sobbed hard. He wanted to hug his *Emak* right there and apologized for what he had done. Then, he called his mother with all his might.

"*Emak ...!*" he cried aloud.

Not long after Erul felt the whirlpool that carried him away turned even faster.

Suddenly, there was some energy that pushed his body up as fast as lightning toward the surface of the river water. Then, he felt his body floating. Then, he heard his mother yelled, "That's Erul... that's my son...! Hurry...! Hurry...! "

Suddenly, he heard a lot of people's voices.

Erul sensed something warm dripping on his face. A pair of hands stroked his cheeks. He opened her eyes slowly and immediately he saw *Emak's* face with red eyes and tears that moistened her cheeks.

"Bring him! Hurry up...! It's night time already...lift him up the house!" People shouted. Erul's body was laid in the middle of the house and it was so crowded around him, full of people, to the point that Erul could not recognize them.

Soon he reopened his eyes. He saw his *Emak* return.

"*Emak* ...!" Erul shouted. He broke into sobs. He grabbed her body tightly. He did not know why, but he felt a tremendous fear somehow.

"It's all right, Son, thank God you finally came back. In the end they did not take you..., "said *Emak*, who was responded by the crowd who were in the big room of his stilt house. Erul is confused with the words of the people around him. He looked at each one around him. He was surprised since at that moment he

only felt dizzy and did not feel any pain at all. He was puzzled about who is the one that anyone thought had taken him away and returned him back in his *Emak's* embrace?

Finally mustering his courage, he asked his mother. "Who was it, *Mak* ...? Who was supposed to take me?" he inquired through his sobs. An answer came from his father who was on his mother's right. "Antu Banyu did it, Son.

He really likes children who do not follow the advice of their parents, who play in the river late in the night. From now on, do not repeat it, Son."

He glanced at *Emak*, staring deep into her eyes. *Emak* returned his gaze with a nod.

Erul embraced his mother tighter. He wanted to know the truth. He felt that to this day he never feel nor see the creature. Erul felt that no one hurt him or asked him to go. However, for now he only promised not to repeat what he had done and will always follow his mother's advice.

I Love *Emak*

It's been two days now that Erul was wondering about what *Emak* was doing. Since yesterday's incident *Emak* had almost never went to the field, whereas the villagers had resumed their activities again. It's been two days now Erul was not allowed to

go outdoors by *Emak*. Her reason being there were still many people who visit him to check his condition.

"What *Emak* said was true ..." thought Erul.

People came to visit one after another. Their visits brought many purposes. Some of them were just visiting for the sake of formality, some people intentionally came to wish for his well being, and some other came to ask about the incident in as much details, until he got fed up facing them. From the window of his high house, Erul saw Wak Dolah stacked the firewoods. Erul knew very well that these firewoods were taken the forest. Wak Dollah was used to picking wood in the forest because that was his side job.

The firewood was stacked so high. It was not up to the usual height, almost touching the roof of the made-up house that his Father had purposely built to store the firewood. From above it Erul also saw Wak Dollah bathed in sweat and did not stop at all from this morning. Every now and then, he just picked up a cup of black coffee that *Emak* had provided for him.

Erul was already bored with this. He missed the school, his friends, and his two best buddies, Mamat and Ujang so much. Then, he noticed some aunties in their neighborhood started to arrive. Some brought chicken. Some carried an unidentified black

bag. Some people carried kitchen knives wrapped in paper and tucked in their waist. Erul wondered.

Usually this situation occurred when a marriage, circumcision, or shaving ritual of a newborn baby was to be held. He was even more surprised when he remembered that none of his family members would hold the event. Suddenly Erul remembered *Emak*. “*Emak* must know. What is going on...?” Erul thought. Then he moved away from the window. In the corner of his house, Erul noticed that Aunt Lena was folding a tissue to wrap a spoon. Some girls were wiping the dishes. He could not find the figure of his beloved *Emak* there. He continued by searching at the back of the house. Still he couldn’t find her. Erul walked into his mother’s room. He pushed aside the red curtain on the door.

Slowly entering, Erul searched in every corner of the room. All he found was a pile of her mother’s clothes and long fabrics on the bed. Still, he could not find *Emak* there.

Erul went to the next room. This room was often used as a communal room in his house. Any visiting guests will surely sleep in this room. This room intentionally did not use a divan for the bed. Only a few mattresses were purposely left on the floor and if not used, the mattress will be rolled up. He looked at every corner of the room, but still he did not find his mother’s figure.

Cautiously, he went down the stairs to the bottom of his stage house. The lower house is purposely made without any partition by Bapak, because it had multi-purpose, be it as warehouse, garage for motor plough, or as food storage by *Emak*. *Emak* was not there either. Only the neighboring aunts who just came were cutting beans, peeling the onions, and grinding the chili. He approached Wak Najib who was sharpening a knife in the corner. "Did you see *Emak*, Uncle...?" asked Erul.

He repeated the question because Uncle Najib seemed to give no reaction. Uncle Najib eventually replied with a shake of his head. However, from behind, Erul heard the voice of one of these neighboring aunties answering his question. "Your mother is now moving around the village...inviting neighbors and people in the whole village. She probably goes directly into the next village."

Erul was silent for a moment when he heard the answer. He felt it was getting more and more strange. Then, he hesitatingly asked the lady.

"What's all this about, *Bik*...?" Erul asked. A bit surprised, she smiled a little and answered Erul's question. "Eh... eh... this boy still does not know what will happen? We'll be performing '*sedekah kampung*' rite, Son."

Erul frowned, a sign that he did not understand anything. The lady immediately understood what Erul's gesture was. With a

smile she continued her explanation. “*Sedekah kampung* is a ritual to show gratitude for the luck and blessings granted for the family. It was a blessing that you had not been taken by the *antu banyu*. Usually anyone taken by *antu bayu* will not come back, Rul. You should be grateful. That's why your mother held this ritual and invited us all,"said the lady. Erul could not say a word. His mouth was wide open. Then he went away by going back to the house. Tomorrow night the event will take place, after Isha prayer. *Emak* and *Bapak* had explained everything to Erul.

Today, lots of people kept coming to Erul's house. Father set up a tent with the help of some neighbors and relatives. It was similar to an emergency tent, made of blue tarps only and attached to a wall of the house with ropes. Then people made partitions from coconut leaves.

Erul just watched the activities from atop his house. At a distance he saw a large smoke billowing into the sky, coming from a big wok used to cook side dishes. Fragrant smell of spices stir fried with coconut oil to form the basic ingredients of the side dishes seeped in. The delicious smell spread everywhere. Occasionally, a lady would stir the side dish at the same time wiped the sweat on her forehead. It was blistering hot that day. However, they had to work fast to get all the work done on time.

On the east it appeared that Wak Najib was pouring water into a large steamer. He must be making rice. Wak Najib looked a bit

overwhelmed when filling the steamer because of her small stature. Then, she was heard shouting to one of the neighbors to help her. They could finally fill the steamer and put it on the stove. Wak Najib also added firewoods to the fire to make the flame bigger. Without anyone realizing it, the day has turned into night.

Tonight he could not even get one wink of sleep. All night, Erul only fantasized about what would happen tomorrow. Every now and then, he went to the restroom and had to pass several relatives who slept in a row in his living room.

He was alone in his not-too-big room. His imagination roamed and he made guesses about the event. He looked at the clothes that he would be wearing tomorrow, a set of *teluk belango* – the traditional outfit. The shirt is red, the same color at the top and bottom. The shirt came with a *tanjak* hat made of songket fabric that was shaped into a triangle and juttet upward.

He imagined that the atmosphere would be like last time, when he was circumcised in the past. He spent the night restlessly. Suddenly, he woke up when the sun was already high in the sky. *Emak* found him sitting on the edge of the bed looking at her.

"Tonight after Isha...you should just sit next to *Emak*. You should be resting today. You seem sleep deprived," said *Emak*.

Erul wondered, where did she know that he did not sleep all night? He felt no one knew about it. Before leaving, *Emak* said, "The ritual was only to prevent it from happening again, and to ward off any misfortune... so that it does not happen to other children in the village." Erul simply replied, "Yes, *Mak*"

He passed through the day by rolling around in the bed. He had no intention whatsoever to go downstairs. From his room he can hear rackets and conversation. At times, he heard the boisterous sound of laughters. Erul even ate in his room. Bik Lena delivered his food into the room. Without realizing, the afternoon came. Some of the closest relatives had started arriving one by one. The crowd was already gathered at Erul's house and yard.

Erul had also prepared himself by wearing the clothes provided. He was just waiting for a call to get out of the room. *Emak* said, waiting for Wak Hitam to come around. Occasionally, he peeked through the curtains of his room. The middle room of his house had been fully crammed with people. Soon, people began to clamor, signifying that Wak Hitam had been present in their midst. Erul was brought out of his room by *Emak*. Then they fell into silence.

Some welcome speech as courtesy became a part of the opening event. Then it was continued by Wak Hitam. He asked Erul to come closer. He wiped Erul's face as he mumbled something. Erul only stayed silent and obeyed what Wak Hitam wanted. In

front of them there were some kind of incense and several dishes that looked very delicious. Not long after, Wak Hitam finished with his chanting. Erul was told to sit back near *Emak*. Erul was relieved. It turned out to be just that. Then, the event continued with prayer and having meals together. Once the event was over, Erul got surrounded by people. Some just rubbed his head, some kissed him, a person even carried him. Erul was happy, and what made him happier was that some people slipped envelopes into his hands. He can imagine what he would buy at Wak Syukur's stall near his hamlet. After the guests had returned home, Erul's house suddenly became deserted. Only a few closest people helped to clean up the rest of the event.

Erul went into his room. He changed his attire with his loungewear. Then he returned to the middle room. He found *Emak* and *Bapak* were sitting together. Erul came to them. At that time Erul just hugged *Bapak* and *Emak*, and *Emak* was hugging him back. Erul realized how much *Bapak* and *Emak* loved him. As a proof, they held this ritual of gratitude. Erul held his mother tightly in his arms. How he loved this person. He promised that he will not repeat what had happened yesterday and would always obey her mother's words. "I love *Emak* ..," Erul murmured in his heart.