PAUL THEROUX

THE TIGER'S SUIT

Almost the worst corpse I've ever seen was that of a Malay woman, an epileptic, who, out planting rice in a field, had had a fit and tumbled into a flooded ditch. She was alone, and as soon as she was submerged the horseleeches swarmed beneath her loose blouse and over her legs and face. She hadn't drowned; she died from loss of blood, it had been sucked by those fattened leeches. They still clung to her, black with her blood, after she was hauled out. Her color was the most awful gray, like a dead sea creature with salt in her veins. Then the leeches were struck by the air and they peeled off and sank in the ditch, leaving the woman covered with welts the shape of watchstraps. It gave Ayer Hitam a week of fame. People came from all over to look at the ditch, and even now you can see the spot clearly because no one would plant rice near it after the tragedy. It had the makings of a horror story: the corpse found with its blood sucked, an investigation, some detective work, the news that she was an epileptic, and the chilling truth – leeches.

I never thought I would see anything worse; then the corpse of the child turned up, Aziza binte Salim. I suppose what made it particularly dreadful was her age – not more than seven – and the fact that she was a girl. Most people are apprehensive about their daughters; Malays turn this apprehension into paranoia, or at least underpin it with the ferocity of Islamic suspicion. Aziza was a prize, a cute round-faced girl with jet-black hair. She lived in the kampong at the northern end of the town, which bordered on the derelict rubber estate. The Malays there had repossessed the huts of the Tamil rubber tappers, shading them with banana groves. I often used to walk out that way in the late afternoon when the Consulate closed, to limber up for tennis. My walks were a displacement activity: I would have had a drink if I had gone to the Club after work; then another drink, and another, and no tennis. Though I never knew her name, I went through the kampong afterward and – how shall I put it? – I noticed she was missing. Then I remembered her laughing face.

The monsoon was late that year, so late it looked as if the rice shoots would never be planted. The fields had been prepared in that clumsy traditional way, by buffaloes dragging the metal ploughs through the water, stirring the mud. But weeks later there was still no rain, and the paddy fields were beginning to show the ridges of the empty furrows as the water level dropped. The ditches dried and the embankments came apart as the grass that knitted them together died. A sad sight: the quilt of drying fields that had been so green in the previous planting, the sun's slow fire bringing death.

While the agricultural officers were deliberating over their clipboards (one

American-trained Malay used to come to the Club and say, ‘These guys haven’t got a chance’ – I wanted to sock him in the jaw), the kampong was deciding things its own way.

I had the story from Peeraswami. As soon as it became clear that the situation was desperate, the Malay rice farmers met and decided to bring their problem to a bomoh – a medicine man – whose hut was deep in the bush, not far from the village of aboriginal Laruts who acted as his messengers. It was a part of the jungle where not even the Sultan’s tax collectors showed their faces. This bomoh, Noor, had a reputation. Later when I saw him in court he looked a most mild man, somewhat comic in his old-fashioned wire spectacles.

But he scared the life out of Peeraswami, who said that the Malays from the kampong had sworn that no one should reveal their identities – they took a vow of secrecy before they set out. Most of the stories about the bomoh Noor came from the Laruts, who spoke of goats that had disappeared and odd howlings from the bomoh’s hut. The Laruts had never engaged him, but the reason was simple: Noor was expensive. He asked the visiting Malays to make a contribution before he allowed them in.

The next thing he said was that the kampong was cursed: the curse was keeping the monsoon away.

They expected to hear that. They would have been surprised if he had said anything else. But how to cure it?

‘There is always a cure,’ said the bomoh Noor. ‘Can you afford it?’

They said yes, of course, but when the bomoh only smiled and said nothing else for several minutes they began wondering if their answer should have been no.

‘Three hundred dollars,’ said Noor, finally.

At that time, the exchange rate was three to one, Straits dollars to American green. But this was quite a sum to simple rice farmers who, long before the next harvest, would be living on credit from the Chinese shops. They had a fear, common in agricultural societies, of being uprooted and driven to a hostile part of the country to begin again. They asked the bomoh his terms.

‘Half the money now, the balance when it is finished.’

‘When the rain falls,’ said one man.

‘When it is finished there will be rain.’

The strange distancing construction of the Malay verbs made them inquire further: ‘You’re going to do it yourself?’

‘It will be done,’ said the bomoh, using the same courtly remoteness.

‘By you?’

‘It is tiger’s work,’ said the old man. He smiled and showed his black teeth. Even the most menacing bomoh had an access of comedy – it could be as effective a curative as fear. The ramshackle hut, the clay bowls of beaks and feathers, the stink of decayed roots had, mingled with the riddle of their threat, an element of the clownish. But according to Peeraswami no one laughed. The old man said, ‘The money.’

They handed over the hundred and fifty. The bills were counted and put in a strong-box. The old man gestured for them to sit down.

The sun continued hot, wilting the foliage of the elastic figs; the frangipanis lost their leaves, and the bougainvillaeas at the Club took on a frail drooping look, rusted blossoms and slack leaves hanging from brittle branches. The dust was everywhere. The grass courts behind the Club were impossible, and I recall how an especially hard backhand shot would send the ball bouncing into my opponent’s face with a great puff of red dust. This was bad, and most people said it would get worse. It was a suffocating business to take the shortest walk. I worked late just to be away from the Club and the temptation to drink heavily. The other members wilted visibly at tables, cursing the heat over glasses of beer. Ayer Hitam was parched, changed in color from the yellow stucco to the deep red of the risen dust, and the tires of the trishaws left marks in the sun-softened tar.

After another week I was drinking – my habitual anesthetic of gin. One lunchtime, on the club verandah, I heard a commotion – whoops, shouts, a great gabbling. Odd sounds in such exhausting weather. On the road beyond the Club’s cricket ground were running people, twenty or more. They were gibbering and crying out, beating their way from a banana grove. The cries reached us, ‘Matjan! Matjan!’

At the next table Squibb said, ‘Something’s up.’

We went to the rail. The elderly Chinese Head Boy, Stanley Chee, crossed the verandah with a tray and towel. He peered at the road and cocked his head.

‘It’s a tiger,’ he said.

‘Balls,’ said Squibb. ‘There hasn’t been a tiger here for twenty years. Sure, you get them in Tapah, the Cameron Highlands, those places. They can feed there. But you never get them as far south as this. There’s nothing for them to eat, and they’ve all

been poached away.'

'Matjan!' The word was clear.

'If it is a tiger,' said Angela Miller, 'I'd love to see it. But an Ayer Hitam tiger would probably look like the one in that Saki story – toothless and frightened.'

Stanley Chee was still studying the mob in the road. He said, 'This tiger killed someone.'

'No,' said Angela, touching her throat.

'They have the body – there, you can see them carrying it.'

If it had been a car accident none of us would have gone near. Malays have been known to overturn a vehicle and kill the driver at the scene of an accident. But with Stanley's assurance that it was a tiger we left the verandah and met the procession.

And that is when I saw the corpse, which as I say was much worse than that poor epileptic's. It was clearly a small girl. She had been torn open, partially eaten – or at least frantically chewed – and flayed like a rabbit. Her blood stained the sheets they were carrying her in: red blossoms soaked it. Nor was that all, for just behind the first group there was another group, with a smaller sheet, and this bundle contained Aziza's head.

People were running from all directions, the Chinese from the shops, Peeraswami and his Tamil pals from the post office; and the Malays continued to shout while the impassive Stanley said, 'They found her in the lallang like that – they think it was a tiger. She is the daughter of Salim the carpenter.'

While we were standing there I got a sudden chill that made me hunch my shoulders. I thought it was simple fear and did not notice the sky darkening until it had gone almost black. Bizarre: but the monsoon is like that, brining a dark twilight at noon. The bamboos started cracking against each other, the banana leaves turned over and twisted in the wind, the grass parted and flattened – pale green undersides were whipped horizontal. And there was that muffled announcement of a tropical storm, the distant weeping of rain on leaves. I looked up and saw it approaching, the gray skirt of the storm being drawn towards us. The Malays began running again with their corpse, but they had not gone thirty yards when the deluge was upon us, making a deafening crackle on the road and gulping in the nearby ditches.

The rice was planted. The rain continued.

It was about a month after this that we heard the news of the lawsuit. It was

Peeraswami who explained it to me, and I am ashamed to say I didn't believe him. I needed the confirmation of Squibb and the others at the Club, but they didn't know half as much as my peon. For example, Peeraswami not only knew the details of the lawsuit but all that background as well – the arrangement that had been made in the bomoh's hut and that tantalizing scrap of dialogue, 'It is tiger's work.'

What happened was this. After the death of little Aziza – after the first of the rain – the kampong held a meeting. Salim was wretched: the rain was proof of his daughter's curse. And yet it was decided that the remainder of the money would not be paid to the bomoh. Salim said that whoever paid it would be regarded as the murderer of Aziza – and that man would be killed; also, the Penghulu, the headman, pointed out that the fields were full, the rice was planted, and even if it did not rain for another six months it would be a good harvest. The bomoh had brought the rain, but he could not take it away. A Larut boy – in town selling butterflies to tourists – was given the message. There was no response from the bomoh. None was expected: it was unanswerable, the matter settled.

Then the bomoh acted. Astonishing! He was suing the kampong's headman for nonpayment of the debt, a hundred and fifty Straits dollars plus costs. Peeraswami had the news before anyone. A day later the whole of Ayer Hitam knew.

'Apart from anything else,' said Squibb, 'they'll tear him apart as soon as they set eyes on him.'

'He's a monster,' said Angela.

'He must be joking,' said Lloyd Strang, the government surveyor.

'If the kampong don't kill him, the court will,' said Alec Stewart.

We consulted Stanley Chee.

'You don't know these Malay boys,' he said. 'They are very silly.'

I had to ask him to repeat that. The rain made a clatter on the roof, like a shower of tin discs. Now we were always shouting, and the monsoon drains, four feet deep, were filled to the brim.

The bomoh was taken into protective custody and a magistrate was sent from Seremban to hear the case. The week of the trial no one worked. It was like Ramadhan: a sullenness came over the town, the streets were empty and held a damp still smell of desertion. Down by the jail a group of Malays sheltered under the eaves from the rain and called out abuse to the upper window.

I knew the court would be jammed, so the morning of the trial I drove in my official car with the CC plates and parked conspicuously by the front steps. A policeman opened the door and waving the crowd aside showed me in. I saw the bomoh, sitting at a side table with an Indian lawyer. At a table opposite were the gloomy Malays, the headman, Salim, some others, and their Chinese lawyer. Two fans were beating in the courtroom, and yet it was terribly hot; the windows were shut to keep the rain out, sealing the sodden heat in.

The bomoh took his spectacles off and polished them in his shirt-tail. He had looked like a petty clerk; now he looked only frail, with close-set eyes and a narrow head. He replaced his glasses and laid his skinny arms on the table. The Indian lawyer, whose suit was stained with dark patches of sweat, leaned over and whispered to him. The bomoh nodded.

‘The court will now rise.’

The magistrate entered, a Chinese man in a black robe and ragged wig. He sat – dropped behind the tall bench until only his head showed – and fussed with papers. He called upon the bomoh’s lawyer to present the case, which, flourishing a truncheon of rolled foolscap, the Indian did. ‘My client is owed the sum –’

The headman was called. The Chinese lawyer squawked something about ‘blood money’ and was silenced by the magistrate. Twenty minutes of wrangling, then the magistrate said, ‘I have heard both sides of this unusual case. I order that Penghulu Ismail pay within thirty days the sum of one hundred and fifty –’

There were shouts, screams, stampings, and a woman’s wail briefly drowned the rain.

‘Silence or I’ll clear the court!’

The magistrate continued with his verdict. So it was settled. The kampong had to pay the debt and the court costs. When the magistrate had finished, the clerk of the court stood and shouted above the hubbub, ‘The court will now adjourn.’

‘What happens now?’ I said.

A fat Tamil in a light seersucker suit next to me said, ‘They are going to try the blighter for murder.’

I was afraid that if I left the court I’d lose my seat, so I stayed and talked to this Indian. He had come all the way from Singapore. He was a lawyer there in a firm that handled mostly shipping cases – ‘but I’m on the criminal side myself.’ This was a celebrated case: he knew the bomoh’s lawyer and he explained the defense.

‘Well, it’s a fine point. A British court would have thrown the book at him, but these Malay chaps are trying to do things their own way.’ He grinned, displaying a set of rusted betel-stained teeth. ‘Justice must be seen to be done. It’s not so simple with these witch doctors. They’re always giving trouble. Traditional law – it’s a big field – they’re going into it in KL. In a nutshell, this silly blighter bomoh is claiming he did not do the murder. Yes, there was a murder, but a tiger did it. You see?’

‘But he won the other case – he got his money. So he must be guilty.’

‘Not necessarily. Contract was made with him. Breach was proven – you heard it.’

‘Which means he killed the girl.’

‘No, tiger killed girl.’

‘But he’s the tiger.’

‘No, he is man. Tiger is tiger.’

‘I don’t get it,’ I said.

The Indian sighed. ‘Man cannot be tiger. If tiger killed girl, tiger must be brought to trial. If tiger cannot be found, man must be released.’

I said sharply, ‘It’s the same damned person!’

‘Listen, my friend. I will explain you for the last time. Tiger killed girl and perhaps man became tiger. But, if such is the case, he was not man when he killed girl and therefore man cannot be held responsible for crime. He can change shape, into monkey or tiger or what not. He can work magic. So traditional law applies.’

‘Has he got a chance?’

‘No, but it will be interesting all the same.’

The magistrate returned. The bomoh’s lawyer outlined the facts of the case, arguing along the lines the Indian next to me had suggested, and he concluded, ‘I submit, m’lud, that my client is innocent of this deed. He has never been to the kampong in question, he has never seen the girl.’

The bomoh was put in the witness box and cross-examined through a translator. He sat with his head slightly bowed, answering softly in Malay. The prosecuting lawyer charged him, flung his arms about, rounded on him with accusations. But the bomoh said, ‘Yes, I took the money – half of it – but I did not kill the girl. A tiger did that.’

‘I am putting it to you that you are the tiger,’ said the furious lawyer.

The bomoh spoke, then smiled. It was translated. ‘I think that someone like you who has been to a school can tell the difference between a tiger and a man.’

There was little more. An adjournment, the sound of rain, the suffocating heat. Then the verdict: guilty. The magistrate specified the punishment: the bomoh Noor was to be hanged.

People stood and howled and shook their fists, and I saw the bomoh being led away, a small foolish man in a faded shirt, handcuffed to two hurrying policemen.

It was difficult not to feel sorry for the deluded witch doctor who had sued the kampong for breach of contract and delivered himself into the hands of the police. He was a murderer, undoubtedly, but my sympathy for him increased when his appeal was turned down. The people at the Club, some of them, asked me if I could use my influence as a member of the diplomatic corps and get them into the hanging at the Central Jail.

There were some stories: Father Lefever from the Catholic mission had visited him, to hear his confession – what a confession that would have been! – but the bomoh sent him away; in another version of that story, the bomoh was baptized and converted to Catholicism. Food was brought to the bomoh by a group of Larut tribesmen, and it was said that attempts had been made to poison it.

The failure of his appeal met with general satisfaction. Squibb said, ‘I’d hang him myself if they gave me a chance. I’ve got the rope, too.’

The night before the hanging I heard a cry, a low continual howl. I had just come back from the Club and was having a brandy alone on my upstairs verandah. I closed my eyes and listened very carefully. I had not imagined it: it had roused the village dogs, who replied with barks.

I gasped and had to put my glass down. For a moment I felt strangled – I couldn’t breathe. My mind hollowed and in its emptiness was only the sound of crickets and a solitary gecko. I had never experienced such frightful seconds of termination. But it was the rain: I had become so accustomed to the regular sprinkle it was like a sound within me. Now there was no rain, and it was as if my heart had stopped.

The sun – the first for many weeks – woke me the following morning, and hearing excited voices from the road, I rose and instead of having breakfast, took the car into town. There was a great mob gathered at the Central Jail, mostly Malays. I parked the car and pushed to the center of the mob, where there were half a dozen policemen

holding the crowd back. A police guard in a khaki uniform lay in the mud, his arms stretched out, one puttee undone and revealing not a leg but the bone of a leg. And his face had been removed: he wore a mask of dark meat.

Fifty feet away the jail door was open. The hasp of the lock dangled – it had obviously received a tremendous blow. The Malays' interest was all in the dead man, stinking in that bright dawn, but what interested me was not the twisted hasp or even the disorder that led to the cells, the smashed bench, the overturned chair, but rather the door itself, which was painted that Ministry of Works yellow. It had been raked very deeply with claws.

'Tuan!'

I turned. It was Peeraswami, all eyes and teeth, and he hissed at me, 'Matjan!'