

Road Tales of the Sultan of Pahang

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Caged in the back seat of a heat-trapped car spearing south down the Hume Highway towards Adelaide. It's their first holiday outside of Sydney. Yellow smears of insects mashed on the windscreen, side windows rolled down and gusts of gritty wind lifting and tangling black hair into puffs of steel wool. The lingering smell of a recent puke and the odour of cracked vinyl seats. Wriggling restlessly the children whine, 'I want to go home. How much longer, Mum?' The father ignores them. His eyes squint into the glare of liquid heat and sun-baked bitumen. He hardly notices the blistered towns peeling away behind them. She cranes her neck around and spots the scatter of playing cards and plastic toys. 'It was hotter than this when we were in Pekan working for the Sultan of Pahang,' she tells them. 'We breathed in the humidity and sweat bubbled on our skin.'

Newly married, they crossed the purling tides of the Pahang River by a flat-bottomed ferry some time in 1968. He had been appointed the Chief Medical Officer to Sultan Abu Bakar Ri'ayat, the sovereign of Pahang—the largest state in peninsular Malaysia; a state which stretches from the hilly centre of the jutting arm of land to the east coast where craggy cliffs fall into the sea. She accompanied him to Pekan, the royal town, for she had been appointed the Sultan's Dental Officer. Their duties included looking after the health and teeth of the Sultan's five wives and fifteen odd children.

They spent their honeymoon in a haunted house, made their new home there. They had no choice. The doctor was indentured to the government of Malaysia because he had been granted a state scholarship to study medicine. Upon graduation, he and other state scholars were sent to the remote regions of Malaysia to serve out their indentureship. In Pekan, they were given an old, 1920s colonial bungalow to live in. A low, rambling building of wood and stone circumferenced by deep verandahs and raised on brick pylons, it had been abandoned by the British when they went home after the Federation of Malaya gained independence in 1957. Outside, a flagstaff which once hoisted the Union Jack now stood forlorn, its wiry rope dangling, tintinnabulating against the peeling paint of the metal pole in the evening when the wind lifted.

They had no furniture and few possessions, so the large, airy rooms echoed the sound of slapping slippers and the steady whup-whup-whup of the ceiling fan. They occupied two rooms in that vast house: a bedroom and the kitchen. She'd never learnt to cook or clean. Always had maids and the old amah who brought her up. Later, she would ask: Can you make a house your home if you don't rouse the corners and chase out the dirt yourself, pop the gas stove and stir the fumes of frying meat into the sultry air?

The Malay woman who came up from the town everyday to cook and clean warned them never to enter the second bedroom. A man had hanged himself with the cord that worked the punkah fan overhead. When they cut him down, the cord was left coiled under the bed and it was well known in the town that his ghost haunted the room still. The previous Medical Officer's wife had spent one night in that room after she quarrelled with her husband. She fell asleep in a ferment of resentment, and the ghost had come to sit on her chest. They carried her out the next morning, heavy as wet sand, grey as grief and whimpering feebly for the priest.

The doctor had his first audience with the Sultan shortly after crossing the river. He made his way to the royal palace—an extraordinary feat of Malay architecture, dazzling white in the sunlight, studded with turrets and minarets, capped with gently sloping terracotta roofs and pinched golden domes. The chamberlain met him and led him into the Sultan's office and he was surprised to find it ordinary. The Sultan greeted him, a figure dressed in the usual Malay costume—collarless *baju panjang* tunic over loose pants, small sarong wrapped around his waist like a cummerbund and a silver kris at his side—but he too seemed ordinary.

The Sultan of Pahang compelled their imagination and curiosity even before they had their first audience with him. He was descended from one of the oldest royal houses in Malaysia and could trace his ancestry back to the fifteenth-century Sayyid 'Aidarus of Aceh in Sumatra, whose family originated from the Hadramaut in Southern Arabia. As the longest-serving titular head of any state when Malaysia came into being, Sultan Abu Bakar was offered the kingship of the new nation. But he turned down the chance to be the first *Yang di-Pertuan Agong*, the villagers said proudly. Their sultan regarded the kingship as a trap. He preferred to spend his time travelling, dancing, and at the horse races.

Many were the tales told of Sultan Abu Bakar in the kampongs. They said he had five wives, the most talked about being Maria Menando, a Eurasian actress—beautiful, of course—who divorced her first husband, converted to Islam and became Maria Abdullah when she married the Sultan. He already had four wives; he built palaces for them all. But for Maria Abdullah he built a magnificent houseboat and moored it off the banks of the Pahang River. The joke at the time was that, having filled his quota under Islamic law of four wives on land, he solved the dilemma of a fifth wife by floating her on water.

Kindness was all the doctor and dentist ever experienced from him. It was the Sultan who made them welcome, who made them feel that perhaps, after all, this could be their home. That to be Chinese in a predominantly Malay town was no great disadvantage in the newly formed state of Malaysia. He enjoyed their company and even tried to teach the doctor how to ride a horse. On occasion he summoned them away from their patients and brought them to meet various ambassadors over long lunches of beef *rendang* and stuffed pigeons served with saffron *kunyit* rice.

Pekan was a sluggish, peaceful town with two main streets and little happening. In the evenings the Sultan climbed into his Mercedes cabriolet and cruised slowly around the town. One night the doctor, called to an emergency in one of the outlying villages, found himself stuck behind the

Sultan's car. The road was wide enough to overtake the convertible, but he did not dare. A few years earlier one of the Haw Par brothers, a well-known Chinese business family, had overtaken the car of the Tengku Mahkota, the crown prince of the State of Johor. The Tengku Mahkota was so incensed that he whipped out his pistol and shot at the brother, missed him, punctured his tyre instead. The victim brought the Tengku Mahkota to court and won the case. A wily man with a keen sense of self-preservation, he asked for and was awarded one cent in damages. Nevertheless, a precedent had been set whereby no-one was allowed to overtake royal cars. So the doctor curbed his impatience and kept his foot off the accelerator. Eventually the Sultan of Pahang glanced in his rear-view mirror, spotted the doctor. 'Emergency?' he called out. The doctor nodded yes, the Sultan waved him on. From that time on, the doctor was one of the few who was allowed to overtake the Sultan when he was out on his evening drives.

All the action in the state was found in the capital city, Kuantan, located some forty-five kilometres north of the royal town. Driving back from an evening at the Kuantan cinemas one night, the doctor crashed into a water buffalo. Rural roads in Pahang often criss-crossed the rice paddy fields where water buffaloes wallowed during the day. At night, they ranged up to the road and flattened their heavy bellies on the still-warm tar. In the darkness, their grey hides were impossible to see until the glare of oncoming headlights flashed over the graceful curve of a horn and bounced off their wet eyes. The car skidded to a halt, the left side of the mudguard and the front passenger door badly dented. Shaken, they stared back at the buffalo's reproachful gaze until it hoisted itself up and ambled back into the paddy fields, splashing noisily.

They got back to Pekan safely but the doctor was summoned to the palace the next day. 'I heard you ran into one of my buffaloes yesterday', the Sultan says. Eyeball to eyeball and a trickle of sweat trailing down the doctor's back. They say that if you run over a chicken on a rural road, you don't stop to make amends or the villagers might take a machete to you. You report it to the police at the next big town instead. How much worse the Sultan's buffalo? Then the Sultan signals and a man comes forward with a dish of steaming beef curry. 'Might as well enjoy it,' the Sultan laughs. A royal joke. The doctor laughs dutifully, with relief.

The Sultan knew everything that was going on in his town, kept tabs on everyone from his palace. A fisherman with tuberculosis escaped the hospital ward one day. The police were informed, and also the District Officer. Days passed and yet there was no sign of the fisherman. Then the doctor met the Sultan late in the afternoon and asked him for a favour: find the fisherman before tuberculosis spread throughout the state. By 9.30 that evening, the fisherman was back in the hospital ward. On another occasion an accident victim was brought in for an autopsy. Outside the hospital an angry mob demanded the body for burial before sunset. Village men armed with machetes warned the Chinese doctor—an infidel—to keep his hands off the corpse. Inside the police officer demanded that the doctor obey the legal injunction and perform the autopsy. He slit open the neck, found two fractured vertebrae, sewed it back again, and made his report. When he left the hospital that evening, he found that the Sultan had sent an escort to convey him safely home.

There was no safer place for a Chinese or Indian to be than in Pekan on 13 May 1969. An election had just been held in the neighbouring state of Selangor. The opposition party, which had a significant number of Chinese members, had won government of the state, but the incumbent Chief Minister refused to accept the result. Instead, the United Malays National Organisation rallied young supporters from outside the state. They gathered in Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya and rioted on May 13, killing and maiming Chinese and Indians. The federal government of Malaysia imposed emergency rule and abolished the parliament, but still the violence spread to other states over the next few weeks. In Pahang, however, there was no unrest. The Sultan was out of the state when the rioting and massacre broke out but he returned to Pekan immediately and summoned all the *pengulus*—the village heads. He warned them that there was to be no trouble in Pahang, and he extended his personal protection to all non-Malays within the state.

Not long after the May 13 Incident, the federal government transferred the doctor to a hospital in Petaling Jaya, Selangor, where some of the worst rioting had occurred. During his final audience at the palace, the Sultan urged the doctor to leave his wife and child behind in Pekan, under royal protection, until the state of Selangor was safe. ‘And if there are any serious problems, you can always return to Pekan,’ the Sultan told him. ‘Any time. This is your home.’ But in the end, one person alone cannot make you feel at home even if he is the sultan of the state.

In the years that followed they travelled frequently, looking for a place to sink down new roots, a place to build up a home. They lived in Petaling Jaya, Kuala Lumpur, Johor Bahru, Singapore, London, Edinburgh, and finally landed in Sydney. If the neighbours didn’t immediately pop round to roll out the welcome mat, neither did they line up outside with the machetes. And when, at the end of the twentieth century, the bile of resentment rose in the throats of the forgotten and discarded, choking them with fear and challenging the right of non-Anglo Australians to be here—to call Australia home—counteracting this hostility were the hundreds, thousands, of fellow-Australians who stood up and protested. And maybe that is where their sense of home lies: in a place where some of the neighbours will stand up for them, stand with them, and let them know they belong.

As for myself, driving to Adelaide years later, I think about the stories my mother told me as a child on that hot and seemingly endless car trip. I think about the stories she read to me, about the books she taught me to read, and the books she bought me to read for myself. As I grew up she looped a rope around my wrist and let me wander away from home. But I see now that at frequent intervals she told a tale and tied a knot into that rope to give me a foothold when I slip, to mesh a safety net beneath me when I fall. For it is in those stories, in her stories, that I find my sense of home.