

# FICTION

## The Crocodile and the Steel Pole

*Andrew Sia*

*“Don’t assume there are no crocodiles in calm waters.”*

—Malay proverb

HE STOPPED the car, got out and opened the back door... then grabbed my shiny steel pole and flung it onto the roadside.

“Hey, what the hell are you doing?!! You have no right to throw away my stuff!” I protested.

“No! You can’t bring it in my car!” he roared. His voice and face were on fire, his hands tightened into fists, and I wondered if he would soon deploy his taekwondo skills on me.

This is the story of crocodiles, a steel pole and how a “fun” kayak trip down a tropical river went terribly wrong.

It began three weeks ago when this guy, let’s call him D, asked me to join him to paddle down the main river of Perak. This is the state in Malaysia named after “silver”, though it was actually tin ore that made this place fabulously rich. So rich that, before World War II, prostitutes would come all the way from Japan to ply their trade here; while after the war, local mining tycoons could buy new Mercedes Benzes every year.

We were to paddle down from Kuala Kangsar, where the Sultan has his Istana, to Manong, a pretty little town that most people had never heard of. This was a trip way off the tourist radar. It promised far more social media bragging rights than yet another hill conquered while hiking or another hammerhead shark spotted while diving.

There was history in this adventure too, like rediscovering some Indiana Jones lost ark or tomb or whatever; a return to centuries past when the river was the only transport artery in the state, before the British colonisers arrived. So my answer to D was, yeah OK, count me in.

\*\*\*

But several days before the trip, I started having a premonition, a foreboding of dreadful danger... from crocodile attacks. The riverine reptiles had been hunted almost to extinction in the 1970s, which led to calls to protect them. Unlike many other conservation efforts in the country, this one had actually worked.

One could idealise how the old machismo of trapping or gunning down the critters had been replaced with a new version of manhood. Of being, what, the Father Protector of Mother Nature? But the reality was more mundane. These fellows are strong, stealthy and submarine; without humans dedicated to turning their hides into handbags, they could multiply surreptitiously.

In recent years, they had become a serious menace in the state of Sarawak, in the eastern half of Malaysia on Borneo. It was hard to tell when a floating piece of "wood" may open up at one end to reveal rows of gleaming yellow-white teeth, so there were dozens of attacks, some fatal, on villagers who used boats to get around.

This was one of the least developed states in the country (the plundering by our own brown versions of the British "White Rajahs" was often cited as the cause), and people still relied on river transport. It was romantic for tourists, but it also dovetailed with the reptile resurgence to create tragedy.

Nobody could forget the infamous 19-foot, one-ton beast named Bujang Senang which had claimed 13 lives. The legend goes that an Iban tribal warrior had been butchered while trying to save his wife, and both their bodies were thrown into the Lupar river of Sarawak. In the afterlife, he managed to contact his relative, a powerful dukun, a healer with occult skills, and revealed his mission for revenge.

The dukun used his wizardry to transfer the warrior's spirit into a gigantic crocodile, which then wreaked havoc on the supposed descendants of those who had wronged him. After claiming its 14th victim, a massive hunt cornered the brute in 1992. Even normal bullets were ineffective and it was killed only after being shot multiple times with 4-inch nails. But some say its spirit still lives on... as Malaysia's own version of the Loch Ness Monster.

In the more developed western half of Malaysia, there were, as yet, no reported fatalities linked to the creatures. But there had been an upsurge of sightings — at the fishing village of Kuala Kurau, Perak, near Batu Pahat town, Johor, and even near Klang town, just half an hour's drive from the nation's capital KL, the popular nickname for Kuala Lumpur. Politicians even talked about creating a new tourist attraction for Klang, but the stars of the show slinked away without an encore.

All these places are near the coast, just perfect for *Crocodylus porosus*, the estuarine crocodiles, which love the murky world where rivers meet the sea. But these fellows could infest areas far upriver too, as they had done to deadly effect in Sarawak.

What about the Perak River that we were about to go on? While seeking knowledge from the online gods of Google, I received a revelation that they had been recently seen near the mouth of the 400 km-long river, around the old state capital of Teluk Anson, now shorn of its old British links and renamed Teluk Intan.

But what about Kuala Kangsar, which lies some 130 km upstream? I beseeched the web deities again, this time using the Malay word *buaya*. But the only crocs linked to Perak's royal town were of the political kind, two-legged crooks in suit, tie and songkok, who had devoured the state government with betrayals and backdoor deals, a pattern that had been repeated nationwide.

It reflected the decline of the state and country. At one time, one third of the world's tin was produced by Malaysia, providing over 40,000 jobs. But our Great Leader then, who claimed to champion the Third World, decided to play "activist" by manipulating the global market in the early 1980s. And so, a dummy company worth two ringgit (50 US cents at today's exchange rates) secretly bought up the metal to inflate prices on the London Metal Exchange.

It worked for a while. But such shenanigans are normally reserved for the big boys, not minor countries like ours. Soon, the Americans taught us not to be "uppity" and to "know our place" by flooding the market with tin from their strategic stockpile, causing prices to collapse. The national pension fund had to be raided to pay for the losses of six hundred

million ringgit while thousands lost their jobs as mines shut down. Today, Perak has deteriorated to become the second poorest state in West Malaysia.

There was another disturbing piece of history too. While doing my online research, I also spotted a place named Kampung Buaya (“Crocodile Village”) near Kuala Kangsar. Why was it named as such? Was it purely metaphorical? Or had the reptiles, in decades past, made this part of the river their home?

\*\*\*

D had a heavy, balding, oval head which was connected to his stocky, rather pudgy, body by a thick neck. He tried to spike up what little hair he had left, in keeping with current fashions, while a rough, wire brush beard laced with white strands hung off his chunky chin.

I wasn’t that close to him, but we did share interests in hiking and scuba diving. And since we were both Malaysian-Chinese blokes, we occasionally enjoyed exploring new restaurants serving up richly, glistening porky dishes.

The only downside to these meals was the conversation. He would be boasting about this and that, for instance, the time he prevailed in some martial arts contest despite being injured. Or he would be quietly brooding, before farting out some complaints about how moronic his boss was. He seldom asked about my concerns, it was all mostly about him.

He, who had many years of experience in the advertising industry, groaned that his talents had not been properly lionised, only because he refused to play the sucker-upperry of corporate politics, or so he claimed. Would I have to tolerate a whole load of whingeing alternating with bragging during the trip? This, and the croc fears lingering in my mind, were making me think of backing out.

The Perak River had been the state’s historical centre of gravity, with a string of royal tombs all along its length, a legacy of how Sultans had chosen various villages as their base over the past 500 years.

Then the British began building roads and railways in Malaya (now West Malaysia) in the late 19th century, using virtual slaves from India, to enable the lucrative extraction of tin and rubber. And so the river started to surrender its majestic role while the old royal villages with picturesque names such as Pasir Salak (sands with salak fruit trees) or Kampung Durian Sebatang (lone durian tree village) faded into obscurity.

New boomtowns sprang up elsewhere, especially near the tin mines, filled with Cantonese and Hakka coolies from southern China, many of whom sought comfort from their hard lives through opium, gambling and whoring. Other new towns were fuelled by rubber plantations, owned by the British, but worked by the Indians.

Chinese and Indian migrant labourers had toiled and died in the malarial jungles to enable Malaya to become so rich that it was the second most profitable colony of the British Empire, after only India. But their contributions were now being gradually erased from our school history books, so that the new *tuans* or “masters” of the land could take the credit for building this country.

Anyway, it was these very British-built (or rather, Indian-built) roads which were exploited by the Japanese in their swift conquest of the whole peninsula down to Singapore during the war. Perhaps it was their way to screw us after we had screwed their women in the tin miners’ brothels?

Fast forward to the 21st century, and the river was now treated with indifference, a half-forgotten backyard, a dumping ground for household and agricultural waste. Kayakers, if any, would usually tackle the cleaner waters in the upper, more jungle-clad parts of the river, not the more polluted lower stretches that we were about to venture on.

I liked travelling in Perak, for its air of decayed splendour. After the crash of the tin mining industry, the boom towns — Kampar, Batu Gajah, Gopeng, Bidor, Tapah, Sungkai, Papan and Tronoh — became shadows of their former selves as jobless youths sneaked abroad to Japan, America and Britain in the 1980s to work illegally, mostly in Chinese restaurants, but also in less savoury pursuits.

These included some of the ladies of Ipoh, the current state capital (but not the royal town), who were renowned for their beautiful complexions, thanks to the alkaline mineral-rich waters from the surrounding limestone hills. Some of them were in the flesh trade, serving the city's infamous *char guat yuen*, which is what the Cantonese-speaking residents called the massage parlours.

Their desirability was immortalised in the pimps' pidgin Malay sales pitch *Ipoh mali kencing talak bunyi*. This phrase literally translated as “(girls) from Ipoh, urinate without sound”, and it was a crude way to describe how “taut and tight” these ladies were “down there”, as opposed to having a loose, cavernous love canal that would be an echo chamber. But when the state's economy went into the doldrums, even this luscious resource had been compelled to decamp to KL or further overseas.

\*\*\*

The kayak operator was being forced to run a bare bones loss-making trip as we were the only customers. There would be no backup motorboat, no medivac if something serious happened. Why not wait for a better organised trip? With more participants and safety in numbers?

In fact, the operator also wanted to postpone. But astonishingly, D had told him that his “difficult” friend (namely me) was “furious” about any cancellation, and unless that “hot-headed” fellow was placated, he warned that future business would be jeopardised. The truth was, he had no intention to channel customers to the operator because he was treating our trip as a mere fact-finding mission before setting up his own kayaking company.

“See, I managed to force the guy to do it,” he told me with barely-disguised pride.

I had gamely helped him in his business plans, and we had discussed the pros and cons of different routes. Well, it was kinda fun studying Google maps to see where there were tiny village roads along the river where a van could bring in inflatable kayaks. I had actually proposed starting further upstream, near the small towns of either Gerik or Lenggong, where the waters are greener, cleaner and fresher. Plus, of course, this was even further

away from any *buaya* which may have wandered up from the estuary near Teluk Intan. But D overruled this idea.

I wasn't comfortable with the way he had twisted the operator's arm, but I shrugged it off as some sort of "good cop, bad cop" ruse. In hindsight, maybe it was his way to ensure there would be no future competition, to discourage the operator from tapping into my urban social network to bring in clients.

A mutual friend of ours, a dive instructor who also did freelance writing, asked me, "Are you sure you want to go with him?" She related how D had bad-mouthed her to a project manager in an attempt to grab a lucrative junket for himself.

I told her, "Well, I am not going into business with him or anything like that. It's just a fun kayaking trip, what could go wrong?"

I half-convincing myself that maybe I was just getting paranoid. Maybe my sense of foreboding didn't mean anything. Still, a kayak filled with air offered scant protection from a reptile's powerful jaws. The idea of my bones being crunched, and then being dragged underwater to drown, hidden beneath riverside vegetation out of rescuers' sight... it was a horrible way to die.

These fellows are descended from the era of dinosaurs some 100 million years ago. *Sarcosuchus*, an ancient 40-foot croc, could attack the largest land animals that ever lived on earth, namely Brachiosaurus and Brontosaurus. The modern animal, *Crocodylus porosus*, is half the length of its ancient ancestor, but their jaws still resemble an industrial metal cutter, capable of an immense force up to 5,000 pounds per square inch (psi), compared to the 100 psi of human jaws.

They are armed with very powerful tails that can knock the victims unconscious, before biting them. As if all this wasn't enough, these sinewy skulkers are also protected by a tough, scaly hide, making it nature's version of an armour-plated amphibious assault vehicle.

So, I felt somewhat justified in being hesitant about this trip. There was a risk, but was it negligible or substantial? Weighed against this, was the question of honouring my earlier promise to go, and to avoid the most unmanly act of chickening out. Besides, a bold adventure and bragging rights beckoned. Heck, it was a dilemma.

D invoked the ancient Code of Hunters' Honour with the phrase: "Come on dude..." In this was seeped the ancient rites of male bonding, forged over millennia of Paleolithic group attacks on wild animals with razor-sharp stone-tipped spears, followed by grunts of satiation as meat crackled and smoked over the campfires of humankind's misty pasts, way before history had even begun.

Did I dare break that unwritten code of brotherhood hard-wired somewhere deep inside our cavemen brains? Did I not have the balls to risk a chance encounter with a wild animal?

D applied more subtle pressure by WhatsApping me a 101 "how to" website about dealing with menacing crocs. Surprise encounters may provoke attacks, so paddle noisily or whistle to give advance notice of your approach. And guess what, humans can also intimidate them, either with flares, threatening gestures or even just by staring.

Despite their armour, they had weak spots, namely the eyes and nostrils. If bitten, continued the website, you should jab those areas to make them let go. Use knives, oars, sticks or even your hands if you have to. Nearby rescuers can help by pummelling the head.

Since I was being pulled into the gravitational orbit and trajectory of "going", the next best thing was to take extra precautions. I took my parang out and sharpened it. But as the blade hit the grinding stone, I wondered, did I want to wait till the croc was so close that it could bite off my arm? Why not get something longer, to go on the attack before it was too late?

A samurai sword came to mind, but it was illegal. If the police found one in your possession, this could mean a jail term of up to ten years (under a law with the cumbersome name of the Corrosive and Explosive Substances and Offensive Weapons

Act 1958). Ditto for spears, crossbows, knuckle dusters and tasers. Of course, as with many things in Malaysia, punishments could probably be “negotiated” with some “coffee money”, but “bargaining down” from a ten-year sentence was going to be costly for sure.

So I did the next best thing: I went to a hardware store and bought a five-foot-long steel tube rod. One of those heavy-duty ones used in house construction. Yeah, with that, I could apply the 101 lessons, stab a croc’s eyes before it came up to the kayak.

And what about intimidation? I didn’t have a flare gun but hey, why not tie a bright orange plastic bag at one end of the pole as a sort of warning flag?

\*\*\*

On a drizzly Friday night, D picked me up from somewhere near KL. Apart from the basic clothes, I was bringing a wide-brimmed hat, dark glasses, lotion with a SPF 50 rating and arm sleeves, all needed as protection from the sun, which would be searing on the many hours we were expected to be out on the open river.

The hat went into an extra-large Ikea bag with a life jacket, the sharpened parang, water bottles and some snacks. And finally, the steel rod with the improvised orange “flag.” As there was a lot of stuff, we decided to just stash everything on the back seat of his car.

We headed north on the wet, gleaming highway. Traffic was heavy as city folks were returning to their hometowns for the weekend. D had come from his copywriter’s office and his burly face looked even more grim than usual, like *hamm jinn pengg*, a rough, oval, deep-fried Cantonese dough snack.

He had probably gone through yet another day doing his passive aggressive routine with the boss. This was where his emails, spoken words and facial expressions implied in silent screams “*Oh my Gaaand, you are sooooo stupid*”, though, of course, it could never be said out loud. He was on shaky financial ground and could ill afford to be sacked from his job, even if he detested it.

He looked tense as he belligerently pushed his race-tuned Proton Inspira, the Malaysian version of a Japanese Mitsubishi Lancer, tailgating other vehicles as a signal for them to get the fuck off the right-most fast lane if the wimps couldn't speed up. I felt that his driving was unsafe on the slippery road, especially at night, but held my counsel.

Inevitably, soon enough, D had to urgently jam the brakes and my head jerked forward. I looked at him, quietly.

“That idiot in front suddenly slowed down,” he barked, in half explanation, half exclamation.

“Hellooo, in this country, you have to drive as if anybody and everybody can be an idiot. Defensive driving *maah*... slow down a bit *laa*,” I replied.

“Hey, I know how to drive safely OK!” he retorted. After this initial locking of horns, we kept quiet.

Eventually, to break the uncomfortable silence, I broached the topic of cars, which I knew he loved. I am certainly no petrol head but, as a career journalist, my job has been to delve into people's worlds, to tease out what made them so passionate about their fields.

But it was the wrong approach to take on this subject. Ten minutes into the conversation, barely-disguised annoyance with my rather basic questions began to furrow his forehead. He explained technical details with increasing impatience while his body language seemed to sigh, “Man, don't you know ANYTHING about cars?”

We switched to the safer topic of what gear we were bringing. He said he had a diving knife that he would strap onto his leg. Wah, that sounded like Crocodile Dundee, I thought. Was he going to wrestle with the beast in the river before stabbing it to death?

An hour into the drive, we rolled off the highway towards a town called Tanjung Malim, the first town in Perak one encounters when driving up from KL. I saw what looked like a bustling restaurant, which meant that the food must be good, and suggested that we stop there for a late dinner. But he said he wanted to fill up the tank first.

After the petrol pit stop, fear played in my mind again. If a croc did launch a surprise attack, a hard kayak would probably be overturned, while an inflatable one would be torn apart. In either case, both my parang and pole would sink and there was no way I could retrieve them in time to repel the reptile. D had not shared more details about the organiser's equipment, claiming that he had not been told. Or maybe, as usual, he didn't want to give away too much information.

So I figured that I needed something strapped to my body as backup. I had a smartphone holster (for the arm) so maybe I could slip a small knife into it. If push came to being shoved into the water, I could grab it (hopefully) and attack the croc's weak spots. I really didn't look forward to any daredevil Dundee-ing, but if it came down to life or death...

In school, we had all been taught the Malay proverb: "*air tenang jangan disangka tiada buaya.*" The literal translation is, "Don't assume there are no crocodiles in calm waters", but the broader meaning was similar to "still waters run deep." In other words, don't assume that quiet, brooding men are not dangerous.

We passed by a brightly-lit hardware shop called Mr DIY and I asked D to stop. I went in and found a kitchen knife. But he saw what I was buying and mocked it, saying, "You think you can fight a croc with that small blade?"

"Then why are you bringing your diving knife?" I countered.

"I am trained for knife combat. You are not. You will just end up hurting yourself with this tiny thing."

His condescending attitude was irritating. Hey, I was not entering some ninja warrior competition or whatever, I just needed a bloody, simple knife to poke a reptile's eyes. OK *laa*, he was trained in taekwondo or whatever shit, but what's up with this arrogance? Doesn't martial arts teach you to be humble?

I didn't sign up for this trip to be lectured about how stupid my fears and precautions were. But since we had a two-hour drive ahead and an early morning start tomorrow, I just bit my tongue.

But back in the car, the scorn continued. Now D was running down my pole, saying it was “useless”, that I was not trained in self-defence bla bla bla. Soon, he was raising his voice and it was turning into a full-scale hectoring — if anything happened, he would be the one to rescue me, but nobody would save him, he complained.

No, I replied, if there was an attack, I could paddle my kayak over and use my pole to drive the creature away.

“NO, NO, DON’T DOOO THAT!” he shouted. “That will just make it even more angry!”

What?! Hold on, I pointed out, it was he himself who sent me the website about how to repel a croc. Why can’t a pole be used for that? But that only made him more agitated, and he accused me of twisting the website’s words. He couldn’t handle being contradicted.

That was my breaking point. I had taken enough crap and now I also raised my voice. STOP this stupid talking down nonsense, I told him. If he wanted to pour scorn on me all the way to Kuala Kangsar, I would not have agreed to come.

I added some sarcastic salt, “Oh don’t worry, I definitely won’t do anything if you get into trouble. Since you are the great kung fu *sifu* who knows everything, go save yourself.”

This led to more sour words, more verbal jousting. I took stock of the situation. There was no way we could do the trip in this venomous atmosphere. So I suggested a sort of peace offering, “OK enough, let’s take a five-minute time out. Let’s go eat dinner first, we can talk about this later.”

But it was too late, his temper had already boiled over. The cool raindrops on the windscreen did nothing to calm things down. D had turned into a flaming Demon and was unable to hit pause, his heat-seeking missile had been launched and the target was locked. So he stopped his car, opened the back door and flung my shiny steel pole out.

“Hey, what the hell are you doing?!! You have no right to throw away my stuff!” I protested.

“No! You can’t bring it in my car!” he roared. His voice and face were dripping with indignation. His fists clenched. He was a heavysset, muscular bugger. Was he going to unleash his fucking black belt skills onto my face? Damn, if only I was an aikido master like Steven Seagal, I would use his own force against him, artfully dodge his heavy blows and then nimbly turn around to break his arms.

Luckily, it didn’t come to blows. Due to the commotion, a few curious bystanders were looking at us. We were several kilometres from town, at some shops near a university. Maybe that deterred him from turning this into a police assault case that would mean either losing his job, or at least ruining his trip.

But he was still on fire, and his volcano had to explode and spew out its rage somewhere. So he picked up my pole from the ground and smashed it against a tree like some Japanese warrior doing kendo. Again and again, he lashed at the tree till the bark had been lacerated.

Never had I seen someone who had such raw, molten, white-hot hate for a metal stick; though I’ll bet he wished that he was bashing me up. After the steel had been battered and bent, he went to the back of his car to unleash the only other attack he could, short of a crime. He grabbed my stuff — life jacket, water bottles, hat, parang, clothes — and flung them all over the roadside.

He drove off. Probably feeling triumphant that I was stranded there, in a small town, with lots of luggage as it kept drizzling. Hell, it was like a K-drama, and a dramatic soundtrack would have been right on cue here.

\*\*\*

It was late. I searched online schedules for the next bus or train back to the city. There were none. I was angry. After collecting my stuff sprawled all over the roadside, I fired off on Facebook about how I had been so rudely kicked out of his car. And thus began phase two of our battle — online.

He soon replied, apparently hurriedly, something vague about how he had been “slandered” and that I should “learn some manners.” The fact that he could not drive in peace and had to monitor social media while on the road pleased me. But before I could rebut him on his page, I found that he had blocked me. Our WhatsApp chats were also gone, thus erasing all evidence. Had to give the motherfucker his due, he knew how to cover his tracks — fast.

I could not see what he was posting, while he could still see mine, which was unsettling. The problem with being a middle-aged dinosaur in the tech world was that the only way I knew how to block someone was to go to their page and then click “block.” What if you can’t even do the first step? While still suffering from the aftershock of being kicked out, I had to learn things on the spot and Google “how to block someone who has blocked you.”

Fortunately, a friend from my office saw what I had posted and very kindly offered to drive up from KL to give me a lift home. I looked for dinner while waiting for her to arrive. The Chinese restaurants were all closed, but luckily a late-night Malay shop selling Western food was still open. A chicken chop with brown mushroom sauce soothed my stomach.

Feeling calmer, it was easier to regale my friend with the horror (and humour) of the night, before returning safely to KL. I didn’t know what to feel anymore. Should I be disappointed that the trip had ended so badly? Or should I say good riddance to such a poisonous guy? Maybe Providence had saved me from a worse fate on the river.

But the danger of being shot and wounded online was not over. What followed in the next two days was like two battleships which had a combat encounter before thick fog set in. Now we were sailing without visual contact, but still firing artillery shells at each other. We had to use social media “radar” — our mutual friends’ Facebook accounts — to see what ballistics were incoming.

I posted that he was a totally dishonourable person, not only for throwing me and my stuff out, but for refusing to even refund the hotel and kayaking fees I had paid upfront. Sure enough, despite being blocked, he was monitoring my Facebook feed and replied,

“The trip was not cancelled. He never turned up. And he could have come as someone picked him up.” Then he went on to gloat, “I went for the trip and had a great time.”

His gall and bragging made a disgusting cocktail. He could never admit even one milligram of *mea culpa*. Who kicks someone out in a small town and then has the nerve to expect my friend to turn a rescue pickup into a three-hour drive north to Kuala Kangsar in the middle of the night? Was he trying to make it sound as if my ejection from his car was some casual goodbye? Oh "*see you later alligator, in a while crocodile*"?

More outrageous statements poured forth. My reminder to him to drive more carefully on the slippery highway was magically transformed into me “screaming in fear” because I was “jealous” of his powerful car. What I said about him mocking my small knife was twisted into me feeling kiasu about his diving knife.

I was mistaken about him looking like a *hamm jinn pengg*, to me he now seemed more like a *muka chibai*, a pungent mix of Malay and Hokkien words producing the perfect insult: “cunt face.” A stinking, unwashed one.

But at least he had been dumb enough to admit the basic facts of the case. To be honest, I had no real evidence about the expulsion from his car. Amid the shock of the incident, my first instincts were about collecting my scattered stuff and getting back home. It had not occurred to me to ask for the phone numbers of any witnesses.

Since D had also erased the WhatsApp trail of our conversation, he could have done a bare-faced denial and then sued me for “slander”, as he initially claimed. Now that avenue was closed, as he had acknowledged what had happened, though of course he still tried his darndest to justify his actions. I’ll bet he was actually proud to crow about his power to kick me out. But I was happy to see that some of his own friends chastised him as being “too much” on his page for doing that.

Well, I had my pride too, and I would not let his lies go unanswered. As a writer, my main weapon was to use his own words against him. “What me, kiasu over your dive knife?” I wrote. “How many thousands of ringgit did it cost? Was it diamond-studded or gold-plated?”

“And what’s the big deal about your car? Is it a Ferrari or BMW? No? Not even a Toyota or Honda? Ha ha, you’re just driving a cheap Proton friend, you’ve just modified it to be more Ah Beng that’s all. You’re just a wannabe.”

I couldn’t do a Steven Seagal to him in physical combat. I couldn’t crack apart his elbow and shoulder joints. But I could harness the force of his hasty, brash verbal attacks to boomerang back onto him and break his arguments. And then I added some chilly: “Hello, I don’t need a fancy dive knife or aggressive driving to over compensate for an eggshell ego, you know, your whole small dick syndrome.”

At least my other friends were supportive on Facebook. Many expressed concern and hoped that I was OK. Several were disgusted with D's devilish behaviour. Even if there had been a terrible argument, they said the decent thing, at a bare minimum, was to drop me off properly at the bus or train station. Some said he seemed like a psycho.

A few advised me to take the high road and forget all about it, which I found irritating, given how our clash was ongoing. In the heat of battle, affirmation from allies is what we need, especially as character witnesses. Moralistic advice can wait.

A lady friend posted that she used to be his friend until a casual discussion on a proposed campsite business (another scheme of his) had also spiralled into rage-holic territory. The spark that lit the bomb was a rather innocent query on when he was going to get started after talking for months about it. But he just could not tolerate being questioned, from a woman at that.

A former journalist colleague recounted that he had been in a luxury car media event with D: “WTF, he took the car I was assigned to and left. I had to drive some other model. It was uncool.”

And the dive instructor said, “No, he’s not crazy. He’s just evil.”

I also had to question myself. Was I taking this fight too far? Sinking in my own pool of bile? Getting too agitated over some worthless bugger? Should I just surrender my own ego and let the whole thing go?

Maybe all this was pointless because he really was a “psycho”, as some friends had pointed out. I had balked from going that far, believing that his cancerous character was more likely due to excessive ego and pent-up, frustrated, aggression. But on second thoughts, maybe they had a point. Our national Health Minister had recently revealed that 29% of Malaysian adults have mental health problems. Was he one of them?

Some friends who must have watched a lot of Oprah Winfrey had made an online diagnosis of him as a "narcissist." Now, when had I last heard that word? Oh yeah, Donald “J for Jesus” Trump, the malignant narcissist who claims to be the Saviour of America. I looked it up, and this is what the renowned Mayo Clinic said.

*“Narcissistic personality disorder is a mental condition in which people have an inflated sense of their own importance, a deep need for excessive attention and admiration, troubled relationships, and a lack of empathy for others.”*

*“But behind this mask of extreme confidence lies a fragile self-esteem that's vulnerable to the slightest criticism. A narcissistic personality disorder causes problems in many areas of life, such as relationships, work, school or financial affairs.”*

Ah of course, Dear Donald. Always the “bestest and mostest” at everything, like the biggest Presidential inauguration crowd size, and the greatest re-election victory, if only he had not been “robbed” by the “sneaky” Democrats.

He was always “right” too. It was useless for the media to point out his lies, because those snowflakes were just “jealous” of how tough, strong and great he was. Journalists could not be believed, for they were just “screaming” hysterically as desperate purveyors of “fake news.”

I posted on Facebook, rather gleefully I confess, that the Mayo Clinic’s diagnosis fit D perfectly. Maybe he needed help. Proper psychiatric help. But I was sure his he-man hubris would never admit it. If that’s what he wanted to believe, sure, no problem. After all, he didn’t deserve the reflected acclaim of an Alfred Hitchcock movie. He didn’t merit any infamy, even as a “psycho.” He was just an ordinary brute, a regular asshole.

The whole affair had proven the wisdom of the old Malay proverb — “Don’t assume there are no crocodiles in still waters”, even though no rapacious reptile had lurched up from the placid wilderness to pounce upon my flimsy, inflatable kayak.

Instead, I had been attacked despite being “protected” by the hard metal shell of a car, within the safety of so-called “civilisation.” An assault that continued online with his warped mind twisting the narrative.

While the legend of Bujang Senang was about a vengeful warrior’s spirit transposed into a river demon, perhaps I had seen the reverse, a monstrous crocodile’s spirit possessing a man. It was another kind of cold-blooded beast, one that could not be deterred by a steel pole.

More fantastic lies were spewed forth. D now claimed that the pole had been “sneaked” into his car, that it was a “dangerous object” which the police could detain him for, had it been discovered at a roadblock. This was unfucking-believable.

He had to absolve his actions even if it meant twisting logic like a Mongolian contortionist until its backbone snapped. Or, as they say in Manglish, “die die also must be right”, or “one must be right even to the bitter end.” Never had I met someone with such an inflated yet fragile ego, such toxic masculinity.

Again, logic was my best defence. How could I “sneak” a shiny, five-foot metal pole onto the backseat of his car in plain view when he came to pick me up? Ridicule was my rejoinder: “Are you suffering from cataract or glaucoma my friend?”

And how could it be “a dangerous object” when he, the Great Macho Man with the Magnificent Dive Knife had proclaimed my pole to be “useless”? “Hello, please get your lies straight,” I wrote, firing yet another volley through the fog of this online battle.

I was enjoying puncturing holes into his flimsy justifications. If I could debunk him so easily, it also revealed that he was not as smart as he claimed. What kind of copywriter was he anyway? Spinning and stretching facts may work when you are writing advertisements which consumers swallow without questions. But don’t try that with me.

As every Cantonese-speaking mechanic in KL would curse, he was really being a *sei sor bai*, a bloody stupid cunt, for inventing such rickety lies. Surely, by now, I must have proven the logical fallacy of his words? Surely, it was time for him to stop these smears?

But he kept at it. More Trump-like fictions were invented to justify himself. He contended that he had been “provoked” when I allegedly switched off his car radio and air conditioner. Oh, and I had “suddenly screamed” when we passed a restaurant at Tanjung Malim town and it was “distracting and dangerous.”

Oh is that so? I had supposedly “screamed” when he was driving too fast on the highway and “screamed” again over some popular restaurant? After claiming that my pole was “dangerous”, now my voice was guilty of that too? Oh come off it. Can’t he be more inventive in his lies instead of recycling the same old shit? And how could any high-pitched voice “distract” such a skilled Formula 1 Ah Beng driver anyway?

\*\*\*

It was descending into the realm of the ridiculous, and pointless to keep answering what could be endless falsehoods. So I decided to employ the traditional acid test of truth used in Malaysia — the *sumpah lakanat*. This is where you swear a sacred oath that something is true, or may damnation befall you.

It had become rather popular among Malay-Muslims in national politics. One prominent politician had made our country “famous” worldwide when he was charged for sodomy. In this day and age, when being gay was distinctly fashionable, it made us look backward. But it was really the fault of the pompous Brits for giving us this archaic law when they were suffocating in their own prudish 19th-century Victorian morals.

The politician’s case was going through the courts, but our Westernised legal system was not good enough, in the eyes of religious conservatives, to wash his sins away. So he was challenged to declare upon the Quran, in a mosque, that he was innocent, with any deceit inviting the curses of Allah to rain down upon him. He declined to pick up this gauntlet, explaining that it was haram to use Islam as a political tool. He added that this would lead

every thief, rapist and murderer to abuse such oaths to claim innocence. However, that did set some tongues wagging about whether he was hiding something sordid.

Meanwhile, the politician's accuser, a good-looking young man who had once served as his aide, repeated his own *sumpah laknat* that he had, really, honestly, been butt fucked. The first oath had been at a huge mosque in KL, built in the Ottoman style of Istanbul. For the second, the accuser upped the ante and made a special trip to Saudi Arabia, to swear at the very holy of holies, the Ka'abah of Makkah, the site of *haj* pilgrimages for Muslims worldwide.

The local Chinese also used to have their own version of this. They made solemn vows of innocence in a temple under the stern, watchful eyes of Guan Gong, a legendary general reincarnated as the God of Justice, while the blood of a freshly-beheaded chicken bore witness to the sanctity of the pledge.

Yes, both the Muslim and Chinese versions were exercises in traditional theatre. And it was slightly embarrassing that I, a modern Malaysian who spoke English as my first language, had to resort to such dramatics. But then again, tough times make us dig deeper into our Asian roots — maybe our forefathers knew more practical ways of dealing with diabolical deceivers than any high-tech lie detector.

I myself had been compelled to deploy this test over 15 years ago, when I suspected an ex-girlfriend was cheating on me; dodging and denying even as she professed utter honesty. I was so sick and tired of this that one day, before she went to catch her bus downtown (incidentally, along a major road named after Ipoh), I challenged her to swear that she was telling the truth, or face a traffic accident that same day.

She went quiet. Ah... even serial liars fear being jinxed.

So I declared my own *sumpah laknat* and challenged D to do the same. I did not fear misfortune because, as they say in Malay, *berani kerana benar*. One is “brave because of the truth.”

But to my surprise, unlike my cheating ex, he accepted the challenge. Right on top of his litany of lies, he edited his Facebook post to add an announcement that he too would undertake this “truth or be damned” oath. Wow, was he really willing to gamble with fate? Did he have some demonic powers granting him immunity from calamity?

Maybe he simply dismissed all this as harmless superstition. Maybe he was unlike most Malaysians who believed in some aspect of the paranormal. Our multiracial society is awash with stories of mysticism: the dead pregnant women whom the Malays warned would become vengeful pontianak spirits and the Chinese temple mediums who could accurately predict winning four-digit lottery numbers. And almost all communities whispered that the hated wife of a prominent politician was a witch who used evil magic to maintain their wealth and power.

But D’s pride was probably so huge, that it weighed on and then pressed down the manual override button, overruling any spiritual worries. His conceit superseded everything else and he probably felt that he could, indeed had to, bulldoze through karma.

Because backing down from a *sumpah laknat* at this stage would be an indirect confession that all his bluster and bravado were just a fake facade. He could never admit that he was distorting the truth, as he did every day in his advertising job, let alone actually lying. So he probably felt that he had no choice but to roll the dice of destiny, even if “die die also must be right” could assume a literal, fatal meaning.

With this, our online battle ground to a halt. We had both come to a deadlock. It was a Mexican standoff where guns loaded with curses were pointed at each other’s heads. What more could be said? I had taken logical refutation as far as I could go. For those who still wanted to believe his side of the story, perhaps only destiny could reveal who was telling the truth.

\*\*\*

The years passed. The media industry had been ravaged by Google and Facebook and I had taken early retirement from the newspaper I worked for. I heard that D had finally quit his hated job, perhaps his boss had tolerated enough of his sour face and made life unbearable for him.

Mutual friends told me that his attempt to set up a business running campsites had floundered when he cheated off some longer-staying customers with his know-it-all approach. But the same manner was more acceptable for shorter events, such as kayaking down the Perak River, because people didn't know the terrain well. So his business of taking corporate city slickers on half-day "team building" programmes was doing well.

Luck was on his side in other ways too. The government usually only helped Malay ventures, as affirmative action policies from 50 years ago had since mutated into the unhealthy racial politics of patronage. But D was getting financial and logistical support from state authorities despite being of Chinese descent. He had caught a lucky break because some politicians urgently needed to promote historical river tourism to impress some royals of the Istana. More importantly, an old buddy of his was close to the right VIPs in the corridors of power.

With such auspiciousness shining on D, oh well, I had to admit that the whole *sumpah laknat* thing was probably just some old folk belief that was irrelevant in the high-tech 21st century. Karmic payback had no real force, it was just a morality tale to encourage people to behave better. And so, I had to leave it at that.

Or so I thought.

A few weeks later, on a drizzly weekend evening, I was having my dinner of prawn tom yam and *kailan ikan masin* (kale with salted fish) at a Thai-Malay shop, when I saw the TV showing a news report about Kuala Kangsar. A Chinese man from KL had been attacked by a crocodile several kilometres downstream from the town. His kayak had been torn apart and he had been badly mauled. Multiple injuries on his left leg and torso had been inflicted by the savage reptile.

Its jaws were unclamped only when two other kayakers, who had been trailing behind, came upon the bloody scene and blew whistles. They also beat their oars on the water to scare it off. The river was streaked with red. Police and villagers were on a massive hunt to kill the man-eater, before it harmed anybody else.

Malay language stations liked to cite proverbs to make their bulletins seem more meaningful and the one about crocodiles in calm waters was dutifully rolled out for the occasion. All kayaking activities were suspended forthwith, pending an investigation by the government's Wildlife Department. The public was advised to look out for the riverine rogues to prevent any more tragedies.

The report added that *buaya* had never been seen so far upriver for decades. Some experts were interviewed. Maybe it was greater pollution downstream, or ever more freak weather from global warming, that drove the reptiles to unexpected places. Nobody knew for sure.

Who was the victim? His name was not mentioned. But on TV, the body being taken into the ambulance, with face blurred, seemed rather portly. And some sort of Rambo knife, still in its sheath, had been found near the victim's ankle.

Some days later, I heard that it was indeed D who had been chewed up. Word on the grapevine was that he had paddled far ahead, and then stopped to wait for the others to catch up. It was said that he liked doing this during his trips to show off his strength and to “playfully” laugh at those who were struggling to keep up. This could be passed off as “team building” of course, for he could then dispense “expert tips” to participants on how to move faster in the water.

When resting and drifting in the river, it seemed that he was snacking on some *char siew pao*, delicious steamed buns filled with roast pork. Unfortunately, this attracted crocs to his kayak. It was a folly to bring meat on the river and pork was even worse, people gossiped, for this offended the *bantu air* or river ghosts, which had Muslim leanings.

As hikers, we had all been warned to be respectful of jungle spirits called *bunian* which could lead us astray, some said, even into another dimension, where we would remain unseen by rescuers, even if we were standing right next to them. This was the first time I was hearing of *bantu air*, but it made cultural sense to have aquatic versions of jungle goblins.

Yet maybe, those ghosts were not the real culprits. Maybe the mishap was merely proof of the triumph of Mother Nature, which had survived the pummelling of ruthless, greedy men and bounced back with a vengeance, just like how the world was getting hit by ever more ferocious hurricanes.

Or perhaps a lesson that sacred oaths had dire repercussions? No, not in something so humdrum and stale as a heart attack or car crash. *Kumm hou sei?* Such a good death? That was typical Cantonese sarcasm that a person could not have things so easily in life, even when leaving it. No, surely karmic justice had to be more, shall we say, poetic?

But in public, I could not seem too smug about the gruesome onslaught. I had to play the game of appearing civil, and utter some suitable words of shock and sadness in public. You know, crocodile tears.

D had lost a lot of blood and was in critical condition. After undergoing several hours of surgery, somehow he survived. But doctors had to amputate his left leg. Perhaps a steel pole could help him walk?