

The Jet-ski

Najib said he had never worked in a hotel before. He was not confident speaking English. (In fact, he spoke little or none, but he did not want to admit this to the man.) The man said it didn't matter, he would learn on the job, and he would be given non-speaking parts at first, such as pool cleaning and gardening. He waited for Najib's reply but he evaded the question by looking into the vanload of European tourists.

Najib opened the door only slightly. He was embarrassed to see the man whose car he bought but had not paid for. The man appeared irritable, and kept looking over his shoulder to check that the passengers in the hotel shuttle van were not writhing in agony, or not yet, anyway.

The tourists were now fanning themselves, applying sunscreen or swatting mosquitoes. It looked like an activity kit where everyone took turns to comfort themselves from the overpowering heat. It was a small van, and Najib could see that there were six of them. Thus amused, Najib forgot the object of the man's visit.

"Well you decide," the man grunted. "Let me know. Either way you have to pay me for the car. You've already taken a month. The wife and kids ..."

"I know, I know," said Najib hurriedly, "I'll give it to you."

"You said that before. Five thousand *ringgit*, or else... or else I'll burn the car! I will!" The man jumped into the van whilst the tourists peered out nonchalantly, glad that their driver had returned.

There had been no rain in the last two months. The water buffalos looked parched as they rolled thoughtlessly in the muddy rice field. The tourists must love the dry weather, but the farmers wept. Najib, too, had suffered a small harvest.

The sound of his wife's farts and burps annoyed him. Was it true that old people farted more? She was not even old! However, she had become familiar to him as

his pair of hands. She was always there, front to back, back to front, sleeping, eating, feeding and washing the children outside under the open air shower which consisted of a rubber hose pipe in the field.

The house smelled of the meals she made; her breasts of onions and her fingers of garlic. Even her finger nails, carefully dyed with orange betelnut stains, had lost the bridal beauty they once represented. Everything that she was, or did, annoyed him.

If Najib took the job at the hotel, he would not see so much of her. "I'm taking the job at the hotel so I can pay for the car," he said.

Najib had never seen a hotel before. He rode his 25cc Honda to work everyday. His duties were simple and could be done very slowly. Therefore, it left him more time to daydream. He never thought of himself as a daydreamer, and never realised when he was doing it. When sweeping leaves he would rest for a bit under a palm tree and stare at yachts, wondering when he would be on one.

His father had always chastised him when he worked in the fields. "The water buffalo is doing more than you," said his father. "Have you thought what kind of life you are leading?"

"I think about it all the time," thought Najib truthfully, but fearing his father could hear his bold thoughts. He dreamt about having a family, so he married a girl from the village in the bay, where the beach had barnacled rocks in the clearest of water. Najib and his wife, before they were married, waded into the sea with their sarongs up to their chin.

The white girls on the hotel beach were different. They did not wear their sarongs into the water. They wore colourful underwear in small stringy pieces. Everyone could see what bodies they had. The three white girls Najib noticed were amongst the passengers in the shuttle van driven by the man whose car Najib bought and now was paying

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off. He felt that he knew the girls already, even if they only met briefly in what would be to them a most inconsequential meeting place - his home. All he could think was, at least it wasn't a mud hut.

Unbeknown to Najib, they had already forgotten all about him. In fact, they probably never even registered him in the first place. He was not a cog in the wheel of holiday time.

The three girls, one from New Zealand, two from England, noticed him staring from the gardens he was raking, and whispered something to each other. He averted his gaze abruptly to his feet where a cluster of dead leaves clung pathetically. His rake moved to and fro in a robotic fashion but the daydreamer was aware that the posse had moved their towels and belongings to the poolside from the sand-swept pavilion on the beach.

They passed him as they had to cross the landscaped garden, heady this time of year with the scent of frangipani. Pink bougainvillea flowers littered the grass. The girls glared at him with the eyes of a tiger family in the bushes. They reeked of, what he thought perhaps, coconut or something, and they gleamed like cut fruit. Their smell was strong and sticky, and sand had adhered to their straight pink limbs.

The girls were not like persons to him. They did not do person-like things. They were more like birds, or exhibits of some sort. Also, they did nothing. They were always lying down. This was done almost always in their little pieces of vibrant underwear. His wife's own underwear was beige, baggy and had holes in parts. In fact, these days he'd hardly seen her underwear.

One of the girls started blowing a large inflatable object. The others were goading her by giggling and lying down with one leg crossed over the other. The blowing one was blowing so hard her eyes looked like they were popping out. After a few minutes, the object was complete.

It was a kind of quilted mattress that floated on the pool and the

Blower tried to get onto it with much difficulty as it kept slipping away. The other two assisted by holding on to the corners to steady it, and finally the Blower climbed onto it gratefully.

Najib was now watering the plants in his usual floaty manner as the hose pipe sprayed randomly and into the air when he found it uncontrollable. The Blower looked content on the mattress of air.

A white man suddenly appeared from the pool bar and announced something to the girls. He seemed to be well-acquainted with the girls as he was scratching his groin as he talked to them. He pointed to the inflamed patches of skin on his arms and shoulders and moaned. The girls made sympathetic cooing comments and the Blower said something which made the others burst out in unified laughter. The man, however, could not stop scratching.

"Ants. Apparently there are ants." Najib jumped. It was the pool attendant Azhar, a lifeguard wannabe. He was taking a break from dishing out towels at the changing rooms. Azhar was in his oversized fake Ray-bans whose mirrored surfaces reflected of Najib stereophonically, much to Najib's amusement.

"Big red ants." Azhar boomed and held up his thumb and index finger to indicate the concept of big, although Najib knew the ants could not have been two inches long.

"Where?"

"Around the pool terrace," said the pool attendant triumphantly, bug eyed. "Ice cream wrappers attract them. OK?"

"OK," said Najib, not quite sure what the comment was supposed to infer. Maybe he was to sweep the wrappers away every five minutes or so.

"That man complained," Azhar pointed to the white man Najib had seen scratching earlier. "He's been bitten by them."

"OK," said Najib again, al-

though he still did not know what he was saying OK to.

The Scratcher had a haircut that reminded Najib of a fish. It was cut short in front, long at the back and was bottle-brown which made his head look bulbous and blowdried. In fact, Najib's wife used to have that hairstyle in the early days of their courtship. She used to wear a black Metallica T-shirt and a sarong. In those days, he didn't know that she wore beige torn underwear.

"Excuse me, where can I hire a jet-ski?" One of the white girls on the deck chairs suddenly spoke.

Najib looked around, and there was no one. She must have been talking to him. Although he understood what she said, he was stunned and could not reply. It was as though she hit him on the head with a large mallet. He fished in his memory for what jet-ski meant, and from the cobwebs of primary school English, could find no equivalent. Najib stared straight into her huge sea-blue eyes and wondered where they were from. He leaned on the bamboo handle of his coconut husk broom to appear 'cool'.

The Jet-skier did not budge. She repeated the question, louder and slower. His heart went off the horizon like an out-of-control jet-ski on the crest of a wave.

Najib was still cryogenically frozen. He tried to remember something in English. Anything at all. The drawers and cupboards of his mind slammed open and shut to expose the ghost of any English phrase. Some crevices opened only to reveal the English teacher in a long Malay robe and talcum powdered neck. Still nothing spectacular came to mind. The blond girl turned around to her compatriots.

"Nope. No luck," she said matter-of-factly.

"Check with reception," replied the other with the dark hair and the hint of a moustache on her sweaty lip which made a look like a catfish.

She gazed up from a very thick paperback with an embossed gold title on the cover. Najib tried to steal a glance at the title, just to see what

the book was about, as the back cover had the illustration of an arched woman in the fell swoop of a muscle man. Seeing the prints of magazines and newspapers on the pool terrace, he recalled a few rust-encrusted lines.

"Hello. My name is Najib. How old are you?" he recited proudly, the broom handle shaking in the nerves of its handler.

The Jet-skier and the Reader both exploded in hyena laughter; the Blower was fast asleep on the bed of air on the water. Najib laughed as well, not realising he was laughed at. He thought they were laughing because the ice was broken. The Jet-skier panted to retard her laughter.

"Hellooo Najib," she said. "I am nineteen years old. How old are you?"

"Two-four," Najib replied with the appropriate number of fingers.

"We still don't know where to hire a jet-ski," the Reader reminded the Jet-skier. "Though I can't be bothered can you?"

Najib was peacefully blank, assuming that he needn't speak since he wasn't spoken to. His calm persona was interrupted by the sound of a female voice from the other side of the pool.

"Excuse me, can you please help me lift this?"

Najib obediently went over, slightly touchy that his conversation with the Jet-skier was over. The woman who spoke was leathery and brown-moled. She wanted her deck chair moved into a sunnier spot. Her hair was the colour of dried anchovies, and her skin looked a size too large for her. Her sunglasses were large and ovoid with gold and diamante insignia on each arm such that Najib was suitably bedazzled, at least for a minute or two.

"There, hot!" Najib pointed to the desired sun-drenched part of the terrace. "Here, better." He gestured to the shade under the umbrella-shaped rain tree off the pool terrace. He thought he should advise her, as she probably was too old and absent-minded to realise how bright the sun was.

"Eh?" the woman scratched her anchovy head as she looked in horror at the cool shady spot scented by jasmine shrubs. "No, there's fine." She pointed at the sunny spot again. "Come on, give me a hand," she insisted. She looked like a close-up of a fly washing its hands. Najib shrugged, thinking she was just stubborn and not taking his advice. Her skin will only get bigger.

Najib cast a stealthy eye at the three girls across the pool, but they seemed peacefully asleep in the sun. It must be so amazing and wonderful to sleep so much, he thought. He wondered if they were insomniac at night.

Najib spent his nights brushing up on his children's English textbooks on the pretext of coaching the kids in their homework. He always stressed how important English was, especially in trying to get jobs. As he remembered more and more phrases, he started speaking the White Man's language at home too, which annoyed his wife greatly.

"Can't know too much!" He chimed when his wife clicked, although she too realised that their kids could end up working at the various five-star resorts scattered throughout the island they grew up in.

It was an archipelago of leafy islands. The mangrove swamps were thick on the west side of the island, and there was now a wooden jetty leading to an expensive restaurant and an art and craft shop for the tourists. The north was scattered with rocky outcrops and faced the Indian Ocean. The rain forests throughout the undeveloped little islands were so dense that it was impossible to enter without hacking with a *parang*. They had sprung up from barnacled masses of rocks, split in clear lines by the movement of tide and time. The crevices formed by splits in the rock were home to giant monitor lizards, crustaceans and dragonflies that

frequently skidded over the mud at low tide.

The mud over the rocks was dangerously slippery. There were signs throughout to warn people, but the signs themselves could not save those who chose to climb on the rocks. Najib's brother slipped and fell when Najib was nine. Unconscious, he lay on the mud at low tide baked by sun and salt spray, visited by passing arthropods, until the sun went down and the tide came up. Then his body supporting its cracked head was carried away to become food for fish. Police and rescue parties found Najib's decomposed brother days later. He had travelled to the sandy banks of a coral reef on a southern island.

Najib had never seen corals, even though he grew up literally a stone's throw from them. His parents said they brought bad luck to their family. His deceased brother sought high and low for corals, shells, sea cucumber and anything that would fetch money. The price of that greed was death.

"Better work on land," said his parents from the rice field home Najib lived in until he got married.

Many discussions with the recreational staff of the hotel clarified the meaning of the word jet-ski. Najib, however, could not understand why it was so thrilling that people would pay the equivalent of his weekly salary for one ride.

Najib had watched the jet-skis from the beach huts whose bins he emptied. The buzzing of one jet-ski was like a dragonfly's, but louder. It skated across the Straits of Malacca with an aggressive macho whirr of the engine. The jet-skis left diesel trails and the fish would surely go insane as the ripple circles were very large, travelling further than the eye could see.

He saw the white girls again at mid-afternoon several days later. He was emptying the bins at the beach bar and sweeping ice cream wrappers as they attracted ants. The girls were on the beach, all ready to watch a sunset from the way they were seated. Perhaps it was snowing

in their country and they could not see the sunset, thought Najib.

The sun was still high. It was hours to go for the sunset at twenty past seven, but Najib guessed they were doing what they always did - lying down, to fill time. The Jet-skier flapped her towel to shake excess sand off and then lay it down flat. Facing the sea, she started to brush her light gold hair, as if in preparation for a concert. Then she did a most amazing, spectacular thing; she took her swimsuit top off. Najib was totally appalled and the bin liner completely filled with beer cans crashed to the ground.

The girls swivelled around at the commotion and Najib said 'good afternoon' to his feet. They chorused a reply but he didn't know if he should have looked or if she had gone mad. Too much sun. He felt his groin throb so loudly he wondered if everyone could hear it. A huge disco pulsating beat coming straight out of his loins.

All the same he remembered that his wife's nipples were brownish black from having given birth and fed their young. Now they even smelt of curries. The Jet-skier's nipples were like periwinkles in mounds of anthills, pink and lavishly oiled with that cream they always slathered on themselves.

Najib felt jumpy all day. The pool attendant was all out to catch him daydreaming or working slowly. But if he hadn't bought a car, he wouldn't be here. Suddenly his split-second sighting of a feast of love was interrupted by the anchovy-haired woman. The feast was over. He was irritated, and could possibly be wearing a frown, but the woman thought that he was just engrossed and very busy at work.

"I'm so sorry to disturb you again. We met the other day?"

He hadn't a clue what she was saying. Why doesn't she just ask for whatever it was she wanted? "Yes?" he mumbled.

"I have an incredible pain in my back, and I think it came from a splinter in the deck chair. Is it possible for you to see if it's there and

take it out?" She smiled a sort of pained smile and pointed to the small of her brown-moled back. Her swimsuit had a deep oval back and was speckled with sand.

Najib wondered what splinter meant. Maybe she wanted a massage. Maybe she injured herself jet-skiing. Maybe her diamond-encrusted sunglasses obscured her vision. He looked wistfully at the three girls now oblivious to his presence. The Jet-skier's nipple stared at him contemptuously.

"You pain?" he said to the woman. The bug-eyes nodded vigorously. "Wait, I call doctor."

"No, no!" she said. "It's only a splinter." Najib sighed heavily, and the woman grinned and half-wiggled to show him her back again.

The girls looked half dead as the sun roasted them away. There was something so clinical and unperson-like about the sun. These people are now crazy because of it. The Jet-skier's breasts flopped sideways in opposite directions as she lay down obediently as though she was on the doctor's couch. Perhaps it was not a good time for him to tell them where they could hire jet-skis.

The QWF Convention at the Three Horse Shoes Hotel Rugby 29th September to 1st October

Speakers include Barbara Jacobs, feature writer and Jane Wenham-Jones, commercial and literary short story writer. Participants are asked to bring work in progress to share with the group.

**For full details send SAE to
QWF Convention,
1 Blake Close
Bilton
Rugby CV22 7LJ**

What's On ...

Tavistock & West Dartmoor Writers 'Writing on the Wild Side' 25-29th September. A week of workshops (some outdoors in the Dartmoor landscape), readings, performances, talks. Inspirational tutors, poets, authors. Literary competition. Details: Roselle Angwin, TWDW, P O Box 17, Yelverton, Devon PL20 6TF. Tel: 01822 841081.

The Writing School at Leicester Adult Education College has a new and exciting programme of courses for autumn/winter. Innovations include scriptwriting for theatre/radio/screen and crime writing. Plus well-established short craft courses, writers' workshops, and an inspirational journalism taster. Contact the LAEC at Wellington Street, Leicester LE1 6HL. Tel: 0116 233 4343.

The Cardiff Writers lounge around on squashy sofas in a huge Victorian terrace every Monday evening between 7-9pm at 61 Park Place, Cardiff. Despite the opulent surroundings these people are focused and business like. Stories are read and constructively criticised from the viewpoint of 'how this could be improved'. An impressive group. £10 to join. £1.00 per session thereafter, but going along to see if you like it is free. *ST*.

Following the sell-out of their **Poetry Sampler** evening at the Bay Lit Fest, The Academi have organised another Sampler night where the audience hears poets performing four or five poems each, thus getting an overview of different styles and approaches. And if you don't like one poet's work you know there's going to be someone else on soon. Poets include Cardiff writers Gillian Brightmore and Topher Mills (both graduates of Chris Torrances's writing classes). Wednesday 4th October, 8.00pm at Chapter Arts Centre, Market Road, Canton, Cardiff. *ST*

