

Thai Fiction

the murder case of tok imam storpa karde

SIRIWORN KAEWKAN

TRANSLATED FROM THE THAI BY MARCEL BARANG

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Siriworn
Kaewkan,
born 1968,
poet, novelist
and free spirit



Pracha Wongko-sin

I, provincial governor Pracha Wongko-sin, wish to state in all truthfulness that my visit to Tanyong Baru this time was only to give moral support to the villagers and to the late Tok Imam Storpa Karde's family and had no other purpose whatsoever.

Even though as governor I am a representative of the State, I must admit truthfully that I didn't come to win over or find fault with the people of Tanyong Baru in any way.

I entered the village as a simple citizen, as a friend, to extend justice and fairness after the demise of the old imam. Even though I am a Thai Buddhist, I consider myself one of his younger relatives.

Before this, I visited Tanyong Baru often enough to say that I am familiar with the area. But today I must confess frankly that Tanyong Baru has become a village that is foreign to me.

From the first step I took in Tanyong Baru, I felt oppressive forlornness and eeriness in every particle

of the air. Sunlight burned over the roofs of the houses and the dome of the mosque and almost every square inch of the village, so much so that I was afraid that from one minute to the next Tanyong Baru would die under the scorching light of the Malay peninsula.

I took a deep breath and released it slowly, raised my hand above my forehead as a visor, screwed up my eyes as I looked up at the sky and I was in for a surprise: hundreds of suns blazed over Tanyong Baru.

The next second, I looked down to the ground and blinked repeatedly. The suns remained stuck in my vision.

My eyes were swimming. I thought that something was wrong with them.

With the exception of Village Headman Karim Malateh and old teacher Madeng Yali, on my visit to Tanyong Baru this time around I didn't encounter any other male villager, besides one skinny Muslim child.

The next moment, I became aware that there was something fishy. The whole village was silent. So silent it felt eerie, as if I had strayed into a graveyard.

All houses had their doors and windows shut tight. Almost all of the diamond-shaped leaves of the *bangsoon* palms in the pots in front of the houses were withered. Even the zebra doves in the cages lined up under the eaves of each house didn't dare to coo.

But, strangely enough, the rose-mallow fences of

almost all houses bloomed with bright red flowers as if to scoff at the scorching sunlight.

There were some gusts of hot wind and then I saw some movement.

It was just women and young children. They were gathered quietly under one house by the only cement road of the village, some standing against the pillars of the house, some seated on the low bamboo platform, the children hidden behind the batik tube skirts of their mothers.

When they saw me and Hamid Mohammad walking with Headman Karim Malateh and old teacher Madeng Yali, they whispered among themselves.

Headman Karim Malateh greeted them in the local Malay dialect. I salaamed and smiled at everyone, but they all turned their eyes away from me.

Even though the shadow of the house and that of their headscarves concealed their faces, I managed to catch their expression but couldn't understand its meaning.

I salaamed the women and children once again. The uneasy silence that greeted me made my blood run cold. Headman Karim gave me the excuse that everybody was grieving after the demise of Mr Storpa Karde, their old imam, who had been shot to death by terrorists in front of the village mosque.

As you know, Governor, Headman Karim said, the villagers are in mourning, so they don't want to talk to anyone, especially strangers.

I told Headman Karim that I understood, but

neither I nor Hamid Mohammad were strangers here.

What you are saying, Governor, is true, Headman Karim told me, but as I said, when something like this happens, it's normal for anyone to be aggrieved, suspicious and frightened.

Hamid Mohammad and old teacher Madeng Yali were walking behind us quietly.

As we walked past the kindergarten school, I saw a female teacher who stood hidden in the shade of the bullet wood tree in front of the school building. There was a gust of hot wind. I felt as if the faint perfume of some flower came into my breath, perhaps of the gold-leaf flower or else the bullet wood flower.

I'm not sure.

Or perhaps it was my imagination.

I'm not sure.

So I told Headman Karim Malateh, old teacher Madeng Yali and Hamid Mohammad to go and wait at Tok Imam Storpa Karde's house and I'd shortly join them there.

Hamid Mohammad offered to stay to keep me company, but I told him not to worry. Even if she concealed her entire face so that I wouldn't be sure of who she was, something told me that that female teacher should know me.

What if something happens, Hamid said.

I raised my black leather case to show him. Hamid nodded. He knew there was a fully loaded shotgun

in there, but I realised he was still worried, so I whispered to caution him: had he already forgotten that outside of the village there were hundreds of our officials waiting, both military and police?

Hearing this, Hamid followed Headman Karim and old teacher Madeng to the old imam's house, which was next to the mosque.

It's rather bad, isn't it, teacher, I said, as I knew there had been no teaching for several days.

I didn't expect friendship from her, but then the female teacher of the kindergarten school talked to me through the *hijab* she drew purposefully across her mouth and nose.

Well, who is it that's caused trouble like this, she said brusquely but with determination in her voice.

Behind her beautifully curved eyelashes I could see shrewd eyes the meaning of whose glint in the shadow of the *hijab* I couldn't make out.

I understood how she felt, because no one knows what may happen in the next second.

Meanwhile, I saw a lanky Muslim boy walking up crestfallen with a white goat. It looked as though the goat suffered the same fate as the boy.

Sorrowful, hopeless, scared with the world and life.

And what made me wonder was that in one hand the boy held a birdcage, maybe one he had made himself. I couldn't see clearly whether there was a bird in the cage but it looked like there was something flapping in there.

The boy walked along a rose-mallow fence towards

us, but as soon as he saw us, he led the goat in another direction. I saw him walk out through a small gate at the back, heading towards the bridge over the canal.

I complained that it was unusually hot today before I walked past the bullet wood tree, hoping to escape the heat under the eaves of the school building, which is a single storey wooden building.

Actually, I wanted her to leave the shade of the bullet wood as well; I don't know why. Seeing that she stuck to the shade of that tree, I was all the more suspicious. That female teacher was silent and still, no part of her body moving at all except for her sharp eyes.

When I was sure there was no way she'd leave the shade of that tree, I turned round and walked back to her.

I meant to stare her in the eye, then found that there was some sort of haze barring the way between us, so I smiled at her while searching for some parting words.

Then I found a clutter of words, so I asked her how she felt that the media had announced that if the Tanyong Baru people had blockaded the village and prevented officials from doing their duty on the first day after the murder of the imam it was because there was a group of ill-intentioned people inciting them behind the scene.

The teacher shot a glance at me before she said that the noses of the Tanyong Baru villagers were still the

same, nobody had pierced holes in them.

Hearing this, I laughed to cover my embarrassment before saying that wasn't what I meant. I merely wanted to know how she felt about it.

There was silence between us for a while. While it lasted, I felt as though hundreds of pairs of eyes were watching stealthily, lying in wait in the rubber plantation at the foot of the mountain behind the village as well as under the *longkong* trees, the fences of cat-tits creepers, the fences of hibiscus, the wild banana groves and every corner of the village.

And then she proffered that the reason why the villagers refused access to the officials that morning was because they feared for their own safety.

Whenever the state can't help in anything – the teacher's voice was harsh – we'll close the village like this from now on. We'll close the village and stay like this. We'll stay by ourselves. Taking care of ourselves by our own lights is better.

I told her that the government was trying to find ways to be of help, so long as everybody was willing to cooperate.

Cooperate, she exclaimed in a high-pitched, nasal voice. What does that mean, cooperate?

So I told her that the government would protect, control and ensure safety in everything until—

Until all of us in the village are killed, the teacher interjected.

The sun was even more scorching. I felt like I stood in a brazier.

I don't know when classes can resume, I said, trying to control the heat of my feelings. She told me that the answer to that question didn't depend only on the Tanyong Baru villagers.

The teacher insisted that everything would stay as it was so long as the state didn't provide clarifications about the case of the murder of Tok Imam Storpa Karde, the religious leader that they all revered.

After that, I asked her whether she had heard the news about four hundred villagers having fled to Malaysia. She said that she had heard about it but that it had nothing to do with the villagers here because all the Tanyong Baru people were still here, none of them had fled or migrated as the various newspapers and television channels had reported.

I nodded to acknowledge the point, but I couldn't help remark to her that, besides Headman Karim and old teacher Madeng, I didn't see any other man, not one.

This time she stared at me openly. So much so that I felt those eyes shouldn't be the eyes of a teacher nurturing and providing knowledge to children.

You are no different from other state officials, Governor, she said, who consider and decide everything with their eyes and according to their moods only.

So I told her that I was merely wondering.

The teacher thus told me that all the men were at home, they shut themselves in their houses because they didn't want to mess around outside, they didn't

want to meet, they didn't want to answer the questions of state officials.

Upon hearing the last part of the sentence, I realised that this was the signal the teacher was trying to convey to me that I shouldn't press her further.

That's when I said goodbye and walked away.

There was another gust of hot wind, bringing forth that faint fragrance of a flower of some sort like before.

Governor, if you want to know more of the truth, then...

The shout came through the heat from under the shade of the bullet wood tree.

...You should ask Headman Karim Malateh.

Karim Malateh

In the name of Allah, most merciful, may progress and peace be upon Prophet Muhammad and his followers.

I, Karim Malateh, village headman of Tanyong Baru sub-district, wish to say frankly that the reason why we closed the village and don't want state officials, whether soldiers or policemen, to enter it is because we are dissatisfied with their behaviour. We have borne with it for a long time but this time, too much is too much, they treat us with too much disrespect. ...