

The Wind in His Face

(In Memory of Zulkifli Abdullah)

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It was the hottest time of the day when heat shimmered in the air, dust floated motionless in the stillness and the ground was too hot to walk on. Lunch was over and most people were indoors in the coolest place they could find.

Zul sat in the shade in the five-foot way in front of his father's motor workshop. His father had gone to town and he was minding the shop. He rested his back against the wall and closed his eyes.

The sound of a motorbike interrupted the afternoon quiet, not the deep throated roar of a powerful machine but the frustrated snarl of a puny engine. Zul could feel the rider trying to make up for the lack of power by aggressive riding, opening the throttle repeatedly, revving the engine hard, and since the silencer had been removed, creating a lot of noise.

He could hear the bike coming round the road at quite a speed. He should watch out, Zul said to himself, that's a treacherous bend at the bottom of the slope. Sure enough, the bike took the bend too fast, swung too close to the edge of the road, and skidded on the loose sand. The snarl of the machine collapsed to a whimper and died.

Zul opened his eyes. Nothing moved. No one came out of the shops and houses. Usually, people are drawn to accidents the way ants are drawn to sugar. They would appear from nowhere to gape at the unfortunate victims. But no one appeared. They must be asleep or lost in that twilight zone between sleepiness and wakefulness. He looked in the direction of the accident. The bike was lying on its side, its wheels spinning. The motorcyclist was lying on the grass edge, motionless. Since no one came to help the poor fellow, he felt he must do something. He shook sleep from his eyes, grabbed a bottle of water and went over to look.

The young man lying on the ground was younger than himself, fashionably dressed in well-cut jeans and expensive sports shoes. He poured some water on his face and waited anxiously. The young man stirred. Zul poured some more water and patted his face. After some moments, the young man opened his eyes and slowly sat up.

"Oh, my head," he groaned.

Zul offered him the bottle of water. He took a long gulp and poured the rest over his head and shoulders. The water ran over his face and down his shirt.

"My bike?" he asked.

Zul pointed to the machine and the young man gave it a baleful look.

"Have you ever, " he asked Zul, "wanted something so badly and yet felt angry when you received it?"

Zul thought for a moment. He had never thought of wanting anything, really wanting, that is. Not that there was nothing he wanted, or anything that his parents wouldn't give him. He just knew that they couldn't give him more and that he shouldn't ask.

So he replied, "No, I've never had what I wanted so I have stopped wishing for anything. Anyway, there is only one thing I really want and that no one can give to me." And he looked down.

The young man also looked and realised that his rescuer was actually sitting on a small wooden platform on wheels. His legs were skin and bone, twisted and bent under his body. But he had broad shoulders and muscular arms and his skin was deeply burnt by the sun. He put out his hand and spoke in Malay:

"I'm Jimmy Ong. My father gave me this bike for my birthday. I wanted a Suzuki Bandit 400 but he said that it was too powerful, too dangerous. So he gave me this Honda Cub instead. What's the good of this miserable bike? Only 110 c.c. No power, no pick-up, no vroom."

"I am Zul. My father's workshop is just over there. Why don't you come to the shop?"

Jimmy got up slowly to his feet, went over to his bike and gave it an angry kick. He then walked behind Zul and watched him push himself along using his hands like a pair of paddles. When they arrived at the workshop, Zul went to the kitchen to ask his mother to make some coffee while Jimmy picked up the telephone. From the expression of impatient resignation and what he could hear of the conversation, Zul guessed that he must be talking to his mother. Jimmy caught Zul's eye, shrugged and gave him a crooked smile. He then put down the phone and came over to sit on the floor beside him.

"My parents won't let me have a bike again, I suppose," he said gloomily. "But I am going to get one, no matter what. I am still studying, but I can get part-time work and save up. I'll get a proper bike this time, not a tinny job like that."

"I shall look for something at least 400 c.c., a Yamaha Virago perhaps. Or better still, one of those Kawasaki Fireblades, power and performance combined. Now the Triumph Thunderbird, that's class. Bubble exhaust, tank badge, triple cylinders, the works. Its only 900 c.c. though. What I would like is a BMW 1100, the one James Bond rode in *The Living Daylights*. Just think, the power of 1100 c.c.! One of these days, I aim to have a Harley-Davidson, the king of motorbikes."

Jimmy's voice became dreamy as images of these sleek and powerful machines floated across his mind. Suddenly, he turned to Zul.

"Have you ever ridden on a motorbike?"

Zul shook his head.

"It's the most wonderful feeling in the world. A car is different. You are closed up in a box. You can't feel the outside because you are inside."

Jimmy paused, searching for words to express his feelings.

"When you are sitting on a bike, you are in control. You are joined together into one machine. You can feel the power flowing from the bike to your body. You don't feel the road at all. You fly through the air like a bullet. You feel the speed. You feel the wind in your face, the wind going through your hair, your clothes beating against your skin. The faster you go, the harder the wind hits. There's nothing like it in the world."

As he listened to Jimmy, Zul who only a short while ago said that he did not allow himself to want anything, felt an inexplicable urge well up, an indescribable longing to ride a motorbike. To go wherever he wished to go. To go where other people go. To feel the wind in his face and to go so fast that he would have to squint his eyes against the force of the wind.

A motorbike – sitting on a motorbike would mean that he could look people in the face, that he could live at the height of normal people. At present, he was living below eye level, below their awareness. Most of the time, he lived in a world of other people's knees or trousers or sarongs. He had acquired a more or less permanent crick in his neck from having to look up whenever he spoke to anyone.

He had never been able to walk and run like other boys. Not being able to walk meant not being able to go to school because his family could not pay for a car to take him there. So he stayed at home and worked in his father's workshop. His father made him a small wooden platform with wheels so that he could move about on his own. With this platform, he could push himself under a car and Zul became something of an expert on motorcar undercarriages.

The platform gave him some mobility. He could go to the corner shop to buy cigarettes, he could go to the fruit stall for a slice of watermelon, and he often went

to the coffee shop to chat with friends. But it also limited how far he could go. The *surau* a mile away was the furthest he could push himself and to go that distance, he would have to wear a kind of glove made out of pieces of rubber cut from an old tire and secured with string.

Zul hated wearing these gloves and normally preferred to do without them. He didn't mind paddling with his hands through dust and gravel, his hands were usually dirty with grease anyway. But he minded rotting banana skins, spit, fly-covered food remains, and worst of all, chicken dung and dog shit. Cars and lorries rushed past, hardly noticing him. They stirred up dust in his face, and when it rained, they dashed through the puddles and splashed dirty water all over him. He had been hit by fruit peels flung out of passing cars. People really had lousy habits, he thought.

If he were on a motorbike, why, he could go right into town by himself. He could mingle with the crowds and join in the street life. As it was, he could only listen to his family and friends talk about the bustle and bright lights of town. He thought of the places that he had heard of; the shops full of all kinds of goods; the eating places offering an unbelievable variety of food. He had heard stories of itinerant medicine-sellers who performed acrobatics as they delivered their sales chatter; and long haired men from distant countries and the lustrous gems and magical rings set with coloured stones that they laid out for sale; and the cobra men who in defiance of the law, slaughtered snakes on the street and sold their blood as powerful medicine. But he had never been able to see these sights for himself.

Once a year on Hari Raya, his uncle Hassan would borrow his boss's car for the day and take them all for a drive. With a motorbike, he need not wait to be taken. He could go by himself. And when he went for Friday prayers, he would no longer have to arrive all covered with sweat and dust. If only he had a motorbike...

A shiny black Mercedes stopped in front of the workshop and a smartly dressed woman got out and dashed up to Jimmy.

"Are you alright, Jimmy? Are you hurt?"

She hugged him and felt all over his arms and shoulders.

"I told your father he shouldn't have given you the motorbike. It's too dangerous. I was sure that this would happen. You could have been killed! Oh, your poor face."

Her hands held his shoulders as she examined his bruises and scratches while Jimmy squirmed and tried to wriggle out of her hands.

"Tsk, tsk, look at these cuts and scratches. We'd better get them cleaned up and put some medicine on."

Her fingers searched through his hair and found a bump.

“Ouch! Be careful!”

“I think I better take you to hospital and have an X-ray taken to see if anything has been broken. You may have concussion, too. I’ll ask the doctor to admit you for observation.”

She dragged Jimmy out to the car.

“Wait Mummy, you must meet Zul who came to my help. And this is his mother.”

“Thank you for the help you gave my son. I am truly grateful to you for helping him.”

She hurriedly opened her handbag, took out some money and thrust the notes into Mak Jah’s hand.

Jimmy shook Zul’s hand again. “*Terima kasih, kawan,*” he said and ran after his mother.

“What about your bike?” called Zul.

“You can have it.”

Zul was stunned. Just when he really wanted something, he actually got it.

He paddled over to the bike. It was not as badly damaged as it seemed. The front mudguard was bent but he could easily fix that. The front wheel was twisted and he would have to buy a new one. The mirror was broken and the lamp was smashed but they could be replaced.

When his father came home, he pushed the bike into the workshop and they discussed what they should do.

“*Ayah,*” said Zul to his father, “I would like to fix up the bike so that I can ride it.”

Pak Din nodded.

With Mrs. Ong’s money, they bought spare parts and modified the bike so that it could be operated by hand. They also bought a third wheel and added a small sidecar. The three wheels gave Zul the stability he needed and with a sidecar, he could take Mak Jah to market. Pak Din fixed a rod across the five-foot way and when the bike was parked underneath, Zul could pull himself on or off the seat with the help of this metal bar. Then his friend Sham who already had a bike of his own, showed him how to operate the machine.

“*Berhati hati*,” cautioned Sham, as he sat in the sidecar and Zul went round and round the carpark of the *surau*.

Jimmy was right. There was nothing like a motorbike. Just to sit on the saddle and feel the throbbing of the engine was to taste happiness. The bike gave him freedom of movement and released him from the bonds of his disability. The thought of mobility was pure pleasure and the act of moving sheer exhilaration. He could go wherever he wanted, whenever he wanted to go.

There was nothing like a motorbike for speed, for the sense of freedom, for the wind on your face.