

The Melanau¹ Fisherman

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Abstract

The Melanau people are an indigenous ethnic group living in the coastal wetlands in the southwestern region of Sarawak, Malaysian Borneo. Mukah, famed as the Melanau heartland, is a small town known for its fishing and sago industries. Set in Mukah, this short story tells the tale of two Melanau sisters faced with an unexpected change in their family circumstances leading to a clash of gender, extended family, culture and occupation.

Keywords: Short story, gender, extended family, Melanau, Sarawak, Borneo.

Anne is the Melanau fisherman. This comes about when her father Joshua passes away. There are no sons; Anne is the elder of two daughters. Beth is still in university and their mother is not a manager, even though Joshua has left a blueprint of the operations.

There has been little time to grieve. A fishing operation goes on daily because the fishermen need to work, the lorry drivers arrive at the dock, the fishmongers in the Mukah² and Kuching³ markets need the catch. At night, at the wake for Joshua in the house, church friends come to say the "Hail Marys" together, but Joshua's brothers and sisters stay away. They do not approve of his wife who is an outsider from a different town and they do not approve of the daughters. They have never been happy that Joshua had been so successful, that he owned a fleet of fifteen fishing boats, and the monthly haul was so outstanding that both daughters could be educated at a

¹ An indigenous ethnic group living in the south-western coastal wetland areas of Sarawak, Malaysian Borneo.

² A small coastal town located about one-hour's flight from Kuching, Mukah's population is about 43,000. The Melanau people form the largest ethnic group inhabiting the town. Along with sago production, fishing is the town's main economic activity.

³ The capital of Sarawak with a population of about 617,000.

private Australian branch campus in Kuching. The younger one had even gone on the exchange programme to the Melbourne campus the previous year.

Anne cannot afford to care. She has the blueprint of instructions to follow, and the fishing boats and the crew to take care of. She has to make sure her mother does not break down, and that her sister finishes her university course. Beth is dating a young Indian student from Malacca⁴ and this is another issue that the relatives are not happy about. It doesn't matter that the young man is an outstanding software engineer and skilled debater who has won national prizes in both areas. What matters is that he is not Melanau and worse, he is not from Sarawak.

"Too much success," Beth tells Anne as they greet visitors at the wake. Their mother is surrounded by her sisters, but everyone can see that Joshua's relatives are absent.

"Shut up, Beth," Anne mumbles as an elderly parishioner discreetly passes her an envelope and signs his name in the register.

Later, when the visitors have left and they are sitting alone at the dining table, their mother is silent, staring at a mug of tea in her hands. The sisters are not sure what to do. Beth is thinking about her test on Monday, her group assignment on Wednesday, her plans with Jeganathan. She feels guilty, but she also feels trapped. Should she care about the test and the assignment and her life apart from the family? Father is dead! Mother is devastated. Anne must carry on running the company on her own.

Anne brings the laptop to the kitchen table. "We must book your flight back to Kuching," she says. Beth is relieved. Anne will take care of things.

The sisters choose the flight and Anne makes the booking, paying with her credit card. "Don't worry," she tells her sister. "We'll manage here. You just make sure you pass."

Beth wants to hug her sister, but she can't. They don't hug in this family. And she doesn't want Anne to know just how relieved she is. Their mother is still just sitting there, as if she hasn't heard a word of their conversation. Would Mother be angry that she's flying off so soon? Anne will have to manage that too.

It is impossible to imagine going upstairs to sleep. Their parents' church friends must have been delusional when, after the prayers were over and they were leaving, they told them all to get a good night's rest. Or maybe that was the only thing they could think of saying. She herself had looked down and mumbled thanks for their concern. After all, what do you say when your father dies suddenly when he has seemed so fit and healthy? No cigarettes, no booze, not even *tuak*⁵ during the festival seasons. No

⁴ An historic city located in the southwest of Peninsular Malaysia; a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 2008.

⁵ Rice wine produced locally by indigenous groups.

gambling, no womanizing, just church every Sunset Mass. It's a joke. At the house on the corner lives an ancient old man who smokes and drinks every evening on his porch. What is he doing enjoying the tropical sunset when Father is dead before he is even fifty?

Three days later, Father is buried and Beth is on a Twin Otter⁶ back to university. Her mother's sisters are with her, two going back to their homes also in Kuching and one flying on to Kuala Lumpur⁷. From the airport, Anne goes back to the dock. She is watching the sea. Father's fishing boats are out beyond the horizon. The sea is still beautiful. The waters lap at the shore and up against the pier. Anne thinks about her mother in the empty house cooking lunch for the two of them that they will pretend to eat. About Beth in the Twin Otter fleeing the fishing village, birthplace of the Chief Minister, the so-called Melanau heartland. About the dead pit in her stomach. The last time she had been outside of Mukah was when she graduated from university two years ago. Actually, she had planned to take a holiday with her school friends next month, to visit Legoland in Johor⁸ and then take a bus across to Singapore and go window shopping on Orchard Road and eat the famous Singapore laksa with a spoon. That isn't likely to happen anymore. It can't because Anne is the Melanau fisherman now.

⁶ The 19-seater de Havilland Canada DHC-6 Twin Otter aircraft used by MASwings, the airline that services the regional communities in the Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak on the island of Borneo.

⁷ The capital of Malaysia located in Peninsular Malaysia, with a population of about 1.79 million.

⁸ The southern-most Malaysian state on the Malay Peninsula just north of the island nation of Singapore.