

# Lost Nostalgia

Stories



Mohamed Latiff Mohamed

Translation and Afterword by Nazry Bahrawi

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## THE SLIP

Out of the blue, panic grips the district without warning. People are bewildered. Everyone is obsessed with one thing—slipping. From the newborn to people who are dying, this preoccupation and fear is on their minds. Suddenly, everyone feels as if they are sliding. They have slipped. They *are* slipping.

No one feels safe sitting. It is unsafe to eat. Unsafe to shit. Unsafe to pray. At meal-times, they slip from chairs until they no longer know the direction of the qiblat. While having sex, they slip such that no one feels satisfied.

This is why panic has gripped the district. Some say an earthquake is coming. Some say the end of the world is nigh. Some say the district's residents have committed too much sin. To cut a long story short, plenty of conjectures were made, and numerous prognoses ventured.

Finally, the chief decides to gather the residents. He wants an end to the matter. The fear of the slip must be overcome. Thus, a call is broadcast to the entire district for anyone with a possible cure to come forward. At the designated meeting, thousands of intellectuals gather to deliberate the matter. The chief beats the drum, to signal the start of the meeting.

“Who slipped before this meeting?”

“Me, me, me, us, us, ussss!”

“Who slipped?”

“They did, they did, those who are seated up there, at the peak!”

“How do we overcome this problem?”

“We will strengthen our foothold, peg the earth with hardy roots, carry ourselves with confidence and strength.”

“We will also require faith. Slipping is for the sinful. Those who have ignored God’s word.”

The chief thinks long and hard. The weather is warming up. People are becoming anxious. The skies are turning gloomy. Clouds are swirling. Ballooning. The skies have turned pitch dark. Only, a ray of rainbow can be seen in the horizon. All eyes are on this rainbow, which is miraculously shining forth, standing its ground instead of being drowned in darkness. Panic has taken a grip on the people. The rainbow has grown thick, a cobra slithering round the thick and cloudy skies. The sky is as dark as soot.

“The miraculous rainbow!”

“The miraculous rainbow!”

The chief needs to get their attention. He coughs, and then wails the azan as loudly as he can. Little by little, people shift their gaze from the rainbow to the chief. Before he can say anything, the crowd suddenly starts to recite the azan. Everyone is wailing it. Then they start to perform the dzikr. Reciting the wird. It goes on forever. It is taking too much time. The sound of the azan and dzikr pierces the dark skies. A hole, not larger than that made by a needle, appears in the middle of the sooty clouds. The wave of voices continues to pierce through that tiny hole into who-knows-where. The crowd’s chanting drowns the chief’s voice. They are in a trance. They are in the state of fana’. Then with a great shout of “God is Great”, everyone stops their chant. They await the chief’s speech.

“How long more must we slide? How long?”

“We must stop this slip. We must halt these awry ways. We must run, not slip!”

“But the slip is deeply entrenched in our history. We are dragged into the slip. We are pushed to slip.”

“What? What caused this?”

The chief stares into the horizon. The clouds have become lumps of intertwining fog. It swirls ferociously. The skies have become a mass of darkness. The miraculous rainbow is nowhere to be seen. A gust of cool wind envelops the crowd, bringing with it colourless drizzle. Everyone seems to be shutting their eyes as the breeze caresses their eyelids with tenderness. They start to fall asleep. The skies are as dark as soot, and the rainbow is nowhere to be seen.

“Wake up! Wake up! Damn you all. Do not be complacent. Do not!”

The chief begins reciting verses, spitting to his left, then right. He begins to perform the silat, kicking to the left, then right. He grounds himself, as firmly as he can. Again, he spits to the left, then to the right, muttering thousands of curses and spells. Finally, the wind stops. The chief smiles proudly. The crowd begins to awaken.

“Let us discuss our fate. Come on!”

Out of the blue, all their clothing starts to slip. They desperately fight to keep it on. How disgraceful it would be if they were naked. How shameful! Suddenly, their bodies also start to slip. Their knees become weak, they lose their energy, and they plop to the ground. The chief commands his residents to pray, to recite whatever prayers they can recall. They raise their hands to the skies, praying for the strength to ward off this slipping virus that is attacking them with great force.

“Oh God! Such misfortune has befallen us. What caused this?”

“Fate, fate, fate is the cause!”

“Cowardice, cowardice is the cause!”

“History, history is the cause!”

“Aspirations, aspirations are the cause!”

“Dreams, dreams are the cause!”

“Concession, concession is the cause!”

“Surrender, surrender is the cause!”

All eyes are now on the chief. He raises his voice. The crowd is hanging on to his every word.

“We are cowards! We are cowards! Cowarddsssss!”

“Our history is dark! Dark! Darrkkkkkkk!”

“Our dreams are dour! Dour! Doouurrrr!”

“Our fate is ruptured! Ruptured! Ruptureedddd!”

“We are starved of strength, starved of knowledge, starved of efforts, we are starving!”

The crowd joins in the chief’s lamentations. Their dirges are so loud that they reach the open skies. The skies get darker. As black as soot. Their faces too turn black. Their clothes turn black. They look like wailing crows. The skies continue to darken.

Their lamentations have now become a wave of wretchedness.



## CARCASS

*D*ollah scratches the scab on his leg. Putrid blood begins to flow, clotting around his scab. Shaped like a map of some place, it bleeds whenever he scratches it. The blood will dry on its own if Dollah spends an entire day in the sun. Once that happens, the scab will turn dark. The dried blood protects Dollah's wound, at least until he scratches it again. Right now, a twig or barbed wire catches his scab and it starts to bleed. Unperturbed, Dollah trudges in the river, his right hand carrying a metal hook that he uses to pick things up from the rubbish. In his left hand is a small gunnysack filled with found metal objects, old tin and strands of electrical wire that he finds.

Dollah bends to scratch his scab again. It is getting unbearably itchy. The dried blood enveloping his wound is mixed with dirt. At its centre is a pin-sized hole, where pus has fused with thick blood. While scratching, Dollah's fingernail got stuck in the dried blood, tearing the wound open, releasing the flow of pus-blood down to his ankle. The edge of his long fingernail is crimson wet. Blood and dirt are wedged in his fingernail. Dollah approaches a guava tree that looks ripe. He plucks a leaf from it and wipes off the pus-blood flowing down his leg. He then plucks another and pastes it on his open, bleeding scab.

Dollah then moves to a starfruit tree beside the river. His wild eyes are searching for starfruits. He picks up a piece of wood the size of his forearm, and throws it at the tree's canopy. Starfruits fall. Dollah picks them, dusts the sand off

and immediately starts devouring them greedily. His throat is soaked in their delicious sweet and sour nectar, cooling his body from the heat. After munching three pieces, he sits down. He eyes the last piece he felled, a monstrous piece. He intends to pack it home but changes his mind after noticing part of it is tainted by fresh cat stool.

Dollah opens up his gunnysack. In it is a zinc kettle and a skillet. There are also several pieces of iron the size of nails that he collected on his way here. He chanced upon the kettle and skillet while scouring through other people's kitchens earlier. Dollah begins calculating—a pound of metal costs about five cents. Zinc is fifty cents a pound. Red copper is eighty-five cents. The kettle and the skillet can probably fetch a pound. The iron does not weigh a pound but he would not starve if he can get one to three more pounds of red copper. Still, red copper is scarce. It is easier to find iron. He has always dreamed of discovering a stash of red copper the size of an entire lorry. He would be rich.

Dollah looks to the heart of the river. The water flows muddy, dirty and rancid, listlessly. Its stench invades his nose. He scans the river for floating objects that he can grab and sell. Unfortunately, he has not spotted a single thing of value. Dollah looks up to the clear blue skies. He pictures his friends Supik and Salleh at school. Dollah has decided to cut school today. He did not attend lessons last Wednesday either. It is not that he is a bad student. In fact, Dollah is the best at reading in his class. Without fail, his teacher would get Dollah to demonstrate his skill come reading period. Be it Jawi or Roman script, Dollah seldom disappoints. He does well at his other subjects too. He has passed history, biology and spelling for both Jawi and Roman scripts. He just hates mathematics and

art. He is not good at these two subjects. At art, his drawings would invite laughter from his peers. With mathematics, he is always punished for not having memorised the multiplication table. Dollah believes he is smarter than his friends. Despite his poverty, Dollah could always understand history, biology and grammar lessons. Dollah believes he would be even smarter if his family were like Salleh's and Supik's.

Supik's daily pocket money is thirty cents while Salleh's is twenty cents. Dollah gets five cents and sometimes nothing. Supik and Salleh cycle to school while Dollah gets there on foot. Supik's father is a rojak seller. Salleh's father may be a lowly gardener but his son does not suffer the bouts of hunger as much as Dollah does. In truth, Dollah does not want to attend school because he is always famished. He has little energy to participate in physical exercise. During recess breaks, other students always get to eat delicious meals. Dollah has to take food from Supik's or Salleh's plate. This is one of the reasons why he dislikes attending school.

Just then, he sees something shiny bobbing in the river. Dollah gets up, his hands readying his gunnysack and metal hook. He moves to the river's edge. The water is black like coffee. The riverbank is of awkward shape. Dollah spots a tiny island of mud behind the shiny floating object. In the past, he would often jump off bridges onto such tiny mud-islands. He would lie on them, imagining that he is stranded on an island with no humans in sight. Unblinkingly, Dollah studies the shiny object. He would be lucky if it turns out to be a zinc basin or a kettle. He decides to fish the object out of the water so he can sell it. As the object nears, Dollah sees that it is just an empty kerosene can. It is worthless; it can only sell for one cent. Dollah

continues along the riverbank as his mind attempts to recall the multiplication table. Surely, Salleh is struggling to read Jawi script at this moment, he imagines.

Dollah has always pondered about his difficult life. Why could he not live like Supik or Salleh? He does not desire wealth. He would be satisfied if he could just have breakfast, lunch and dinner without problem. If his father could provide these, he would be more than happy. He is not asking for a bicycle or brand-new clothes. All he wants is just not to feel famished every morning at school. He just wants daily pocket money of twenty cents so he can buy the curry puff or porridge that he likes. What he wants is not to suffer hunger in school and at home. To him, hunger is the worst kind of ailment. He knows that Supik and Salleh have never tasted his kind of hunger. To him, Supik is lucky because his father sells rojak. Each day, Supik gets to enjoy some scrumptious rojak! Dollah starts salivating at the thought of a plate of rojak prepared with squid, tofu, potatoes, liver, cucumber, prawns and other delicious ingredients. What a pleasure it is to have this every day. Dollah is perplexed as to why he has to be constantly hungry. He is unsure why he needs to eat rice with soy sauce. Ayah is still alive. Like Salleh's father, Ayah works too. All he knows is that his parents are always fighting. He recalls last night's fight.

"The landlords came to our house. I told them you haven't been back since last night. This is shameful. It's been two months and we could only pay fifteen dollars. You can't even pay Dollah's school fees of only fifty cents. Pity the boy. He's afraid to go to school. Where's the money for his school fees?" shouted Ibu.

“No money, lots of debts, tomorrow I’ll look for some,” answered Ayah, his tone showing irritation.

“How to get money if you’re always gambling? How to live? Can you get rich gambling? More like staying poor,” Ibu shouted again. Angered, Ayah stormed out of the house and stayed away for two nights.

Dollah notices a ball bobbing up and down the river. He waits till the ball is near. He picks up several stones and starts throwing them at the ball. One hits the ball. It explodes with a huge pop. Dollah is delighted by the sound. He is proud of his marksmanship. Dollah continues walking downriver. The stench of the river’s polluted waters is worsened by the smell of the carcasses of cats and chickens alongside its banks. Dollah then spots a piece of lime floating in the river. As it bumps into a piece of floating wood, the lime turns, revealing its rotten underside. A second later, Dollah sees a hole in the earth, the size of boy’s head at the river’s edge. He gets nearer. He starts poking it with his hook. People have said that snakes usually hide in such holes. After some time, he peeks into the hole. He cannot see any snakes and decides to continue his journey. Feeling parched, he approaches a rice warehouse. At its side is a pipe. He turns it and starts gulping down as much water as he can. His shirt becomes drenched.

Earlier, while making his way to the river, Dollah mulled over his fate. Ayah is a gambler. Ibu is kind-hearted and full of patience. She washes clothes and delivers babies to earn her keep. Dollah’s heart goes out to Ibu who has suffered for a long time. He resolves to do well in school so he can help her out when he is older. However, this desire dissolves in the face of hunger pangs. Sometimes, he imagines giving Ibu two hundred

dollars per month once he starts earning money. Every week, he will buy her satay, mee goreng and rojak. He will buy her a new top, gold rings and earrings. If he has plenty of money, he will buy a small car to take her on holidays. But each time he thinks about his future, he becomes unsure about landing a job when he grows up. As despair overcomes him, tears flow down his cheeks.

“Study properly. When you have grown up, don’t forget your Ibu. Think about how difficult it is for her to raise you. When you are married with a beautiful wife, don’t you forget your Ibu.”

He is reminded of Kak Sakinah’s words as Ibu massaged her after she has given birth. Dollah would sometimes follow Ibu on her rounds.

Dollah is momentarily stirred from his musings by a piece of stone falling in front of him. About forty metres ahead stand Yahya and Rasid. Dollah moves towards them.

“You skipped?” asks Dollah.

“If we didn’t, can we be here, stupid!” Yahya replied.

Yahya peers into the distance. Rasid does the same.

“Over there is the carcass of a pig. Let’s throw stones at it! Come!” Yahya suggests.

“Whoever breaks its stomach wins!” Rasid adds.

“Agree?” Yahya asks Dollah.

Dollah looks at the carcass floating in the river. Its belly is bloated like a balloon ready to explode. It is bobbing along the river’s current. Its bloated belly is hairless.

“Agree or not? We bet on who can burst the pig’s belly. Whoever loses will pay the winner five cents, okay?”

Everyone concurs with Yahya's suggestion. Yahya urges Dollah and Rasid to bet and test their marksmanship on the carcass. Dollah looks at it. The river is full of carcasses of pigs, cats and chickens. They come from the farms at the top of the river. Dollah remembers his teacher's words. There are humans who live for nothing: they owe nothing and do nothing for the community, nation and religion. People who live only to have fun, they contribute nothing to their community. When they die, such people will die like cats in the rivers. Their stomach will be just as bloated. Such people will die like cats that got flattened by lorries. People who contribute nothing to the world will die like stray dogs by the roadside. All of you should start performing good deeds. Do something good that people can remember you by. Otherwise, you will die like rats, cats, dogs and pigs.

Dollah sees the carcass getting stuck on several pieces of rubbish in the river. The current moves it around the rubbish before it starts floating downriver again.

"Are we betting? Five cents is not much! Agree or not?" Yahya dares Dollah again.

Dollah is again stirred from his train of thought. He feels his pocket for a five-cent coin. He nods his head to accept his friend's dare. They each start collecting stones. Dollah lays his stones beside him as he heaves his gunnysack over his shoulder. Yahya grabs a heavy stone in the hope that its weight would burst the carcass' belly on impact. While waiting for Yahya and Rasid to collect their stones, Dollah begins to think that people like himself, Yahya, Rasid, his father, Supik and Salleh will definitely die in the same manner as this pig. The deaths of poor and foolish people like them will not affect the world drastically. Dollah thinks about death a lot.

To Dollah, death is better than living like a stray dog. Dollah welcomes death because he can then rest in the grave, not bothering about hunger or worrying about getting punished for not memorising the multiplication table. He believes that plenty of people will visit his home when he dies and give his mother lots of money as donation. His school will hold a donation drive, and then pass his mother the money collected. His mother can easily earn hundreds, perhaps even thousands if she is lucky. Thoughts of death always enter his mind whenever he is hungry. It also occupies his mind when he sees Ibu wash other people's dirty clothes.

The pig's carcass is nearing. Its bloated belly shines under the sun. Its stench dominates the air, invading their nostrils. They are used to the stink so they are undeterred by it. In fact, Dollah, Supik, Salleh, Yahya and Rasid learnt to swim in this very river. They have swallowed volumes of water dirtied by the carcasses of pigs, dogs, rats and other dead creatures. Dollah is grateful to the river for helping him master the art of swimming.

Rasid and Yahya have collected their stones. Dollah comes near them. He sees that Yahya has the most number of stones.

"We'll throw by turn. I go first," says Yahya.

"After Yahya, it's me," adds Rasid.

"Unfair. How about we throw at the same time?" Dollah counters.

They throw their stones all at once. All three hit the pig's belly but it does not burst. It just gets a bit deflated. They throw again. Rasid's stone hits the centre of the pig's belly. Pop! The carcass bursts open, and the dead pig's worm-riddled intestines flow into the river. Rasid is elated. Yahya carries on throwing



stones, some of which land inside the open belly of the carcass. The sight of worms twirling in the river delights them.

“Money, money, money! I won,” declared Rasid.

Dollah digs into his pocket for five cents, handing it over to Rasid. Yahya has not paid up yet.

The carcass continues to float downriver with its burst belly. The black waters of the river begin to fill the pig’s belly, dragging the carcass into it. Like an open sack of rice, worms are floating downstream.

“Now, let’s have a swimming contest. From here to there...” Yahya issues a new challenge. Rasid and Dollah stay mum.

“Are you scared? It’s not far. Don’t be a coward. Whoever reaches the bank first, I will give up my red copper,” says Yahya, showing off a bundle of red copper wire that is wrapped like an old cloth.

“Want or not? It’s heavy. About one and half pounds,” adds Yahya as he weighs the wires.

“If you lose, you give me your skillet,” says Yahya, pointing to Dollah’s gunnysack.

“All right, but we swim together,” answers Dollah.

They get ready. On Yahya’s count of three, they dive into the river simultaneously, swimming frantically. About two minutes later, Yahya reaches the other side of the bank first. Rasid comes soon after. However, Dollah is nowhere to be seen. They wait for five minutes. Dollah has still not emerged. Yahya and Rasid begin to panic. Yahya prods Rasid to run as quickly as they can, the river’s foul water dripping off them. Rasid and Yahya are seeking help. Dollah has not emerged from the river.

The river continues to flow listlessly. The carcass of a dog appears. Meanwhile, Dollah is nowhere to be seen.