

A JONG SAILS FROM THE HEART

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*A personal journey into the jong, the wind, and what is carried
forward.*

For Zakir.

*“No one ever steps in the same river twice, for it is not the same
river, and he is not the same man.”*

— Heraclitus

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CHAPTER ONE

The Beach at Teluk Bakau

One afternoon on New Year's Day, I saw a group of people playing close to my house. The sails attracted me like a magnet.

I'd spent the better part of two decades chasing that same pull — sails on a horizon, wind filling cloth, the specific way a hull answers the water beneath it. I'd sailed a black ferrocement junk, the RV *Heraclitus*, across the Coral Triangle and the open Pacific, through typhoons and doldrums both, leading an expedition whose whole reason for being was coral reefs and the people who lived alongside them. I knew what it meant to read a sky for weather, to feel a boat go from dead in the water to alive in a matter of seconds. What I didn't yet know, standing on that beach in Teluk Bakau, was that all of it — the ocean crossings, the reef surveys, the years of watching wind — had been preparation for something the size of my own two hands.

The boats these kids were sailing were smaller than anything I'd ever properly considered a boat. A meter long, maybe less. Hand-carved, no bigger than an arm. Unmanned — no one aboard, no rudder held by a living hand, nothing but wood, cloth, and a design tuned so precisely to wind and water that the boat sailed a straight line entirely on its own. I'd crossed oceans on a vessel built to carry twenty people. Here was a boat built to carry nothing at all, and somehow it held my attention just as completely.

I met Zakir that day, and it started the whole thing.

ZAKIR

I love sailing — not just the boats themselves, but the entire spirit that moves people to go out and be with the elements, to brave the sea in whatever form that takes. I'd built a life around that particular love, first as a sailor, then as the leader of an expedition that spent the better part of a decade documenting coral reefs across Southeast Asia and the Pacific. I knew the ocean at scale — thousands of miles of it, whole archipelagos, the open blue-water stretches where land disappears for weeks at a time.

Zakir knew a different scale entirely, and it turned out to be just as deep.

Jongs are seductive boats, in their own particular way. In the Western sailing world, a boat's always "she." At first you flirt around the edges, watching from afar, inspecting, curious. You strike up a conversation with the owner, catch a glimpse of the jong's name, its personality.

Eventually, I got married too. I bought two jongs during a racing event in Teluk Sebong, from Bugis jong-makers out of eastern Sumatra. Zakir picked them out himself — my matchmaker, choosing my wives.

We renamed the boats. One, Zakir's choice: Bule Kampong, literally "the white man from the village." The other, my own choice originally — Planet Samudra, ocean planet — though we cut it down, and she became simply Planet.

"You need to get married with your jong," Zakir told me, late one night, sipping coffee on the beach. I'd sailed enough of the world's oceans by then to think I understood what it meant to belong to a boat. I was wrong, or at least I hadn't yet understood it the way Zakir meant it. A ship the size of the Heraclitus asks for your labor, your leadership, your whole waking attention for months at a stretch. A jong asks for something quieter and, in its way, harder — a kind of intimacy with an object smaller than a child, one you have to learn to read the way you'd read a person.

The more time I spent with Zakir, the more I understood that the jong was not simply a boat. It carried a whole way of looking at the sea, at attention, and at the relationship between a maker and a thing made.

"You need to keep your heart clean."

I'd heard versions of that idea before, on the Heraclitus, in the language we used for our own particular practice — attention, presence, the discipline of staying awake to what the moment actually asked of you. Zakir arrived at the same truth from an entirely different direction, through wood and wind and a lineage older than anything I'd carried with me across the Pacific. I recognized it anyway. Some truths, it turns out, get discovered independently by anyone who spends enough time paying attention to the sea.

Zakir is gone now. He's no longer with us, though it's strange to write that sentence in the past tense, because so little about the school actually feels past. His hand is still in every jong built here, in every kid who learns to carve a hull the way he once showed me — holding the boat between my own arms, listening for where the mast fitting should sit, teaching by feel rather than by measurement, because a

jong was never really built with a tape measure in the first place. I'll come back to him again and again in these pages, the way you do with anyone whose absence never quite becomes absence, not entirely, not on a beach where his work is still visibly, physically holding the wind.

MEETING THE VILLAGE BEFORE THE SCHOOL

Before there was a school, there was a village, and before the village opened itself to me, I'd already spent time trying to understand who actually lived along this stretch of coast, and how.

I remember visiting a settlement of Orang Suku Laut not far from Teluk Bakau, houses built on poles above water that rises and falls with the tide, fish sheltering between the posts and the discarded fishing nets below. The village's spokesman elder greeted me in his house, one of his grandchildren asleep in the middle of the room. We talked for a long time, trading analogies about our respective lives. What I took from it, mostly, was that he missed the freedom of the open sea. He'd been a true nomad once, sailing between islands in Malaysia — places I'd sailed myself, on a considerably larger boat — and to Singapore. We both held a kind of mental map of the same waters; we talked about stars, about navigation, about where to find fresh water on islands most maps didn't bother naming.

Political change had closed off most of that freedom by the time I met him. He needed a passport now, a permit, for journeys his family had made without either for longer than anyone could quite say. We have no passports, no money for permits, and so on. His people had been pushed into one small corner of land, wedged between mangrove swamp, tide washing sewage and rubbish out to sea twice a day, one brackish well for washing, nothing fit to drink.

I couldn't yet see, sitting in that house, how directly this conversation would end up feeding into everything that came after — but it did. The Orang Suku Laut are the deep root system beneath the jong itself. Understanding what had been taken from them, and what still survived despite it, turned out to be essential to understanding why a small wooden boat, no bigger than a child, could still carry this much weight.

THE FIRST RACE

We decided to organize a first race in Teluk Bakau, during the tail end of the northeast monsoon, in March 2012. That first event proved the local community could rise to the challenge, handling the logistics of something entirely new. It came together with a great deal of *gotong royong* — people helping each other, helping the community, simply because that's what you do here.

Though the original plan called for something much smaller, attendance grew, and we ended up with four villages competing, capped off by a rarely performed interactive dance that evening to celebrate.

"When's the next one?" — a question that kept coming up, again and again, in casual conversation. Not wanting this to be a one-off but a proper program with a long-term vision, we started planning the next race. Trying to stay holistic about it, the seasons themselves gave us our tempo — one race for the *utara*, the northeast wind that runs from December through late March, and a *selatan* race for the southwest winds that follow, arriving as early as June and holding through September. That same rhythm has held every year since 2012: two races, set by wind rather than by calendar, the way the whole tradition was always meant to run.

We built a *pondok* at Zakir's house that year. Wood was chosen and distributed; about ten new jongs were born, at least half of them entered in the coming *selatan* race, still months off. The *pondok*, built entirely from local material, became the builder's own place — somewhere anyone could come watch a jong being made firsthand. A second builder lived in Teluk Bakau too, and with my own small fleet of two, we formed the core group of jong owners — the ones who'd maintain and keep the boats alive, while other players helped launch them, learned to test and tune a jong even if they never owned one themselves. Everyone loved watching them, playing with them, regardless.

The boat became part of an Indonesian group we named *Kelompok Jong "Sekapur Sirih"* — bringing together the different jong owners and players from around Bintan, so the villages got fairly represented, not just the capital, Tanjung Pinang, which in local eyes was really its own separate thing entirely, apart from Bintan itself. *Sekapur sirih* — the betel leaf and lime offering, respect and hospitality — became the name and, in a real sense, the whole spirit of what we were building.

With the jong and sampan dockyard in place, it was time to think about a traditional yacht club too — a grand name, honestly, for a few tables under a tree and an old recycled fishing boat fitted out with cushions. But a proper *pondok* stood there now, used freely by local fishermen, a kitchen and bar slowly coming together. A gateway to the sea, on a coastline getting fenced off and developed a little more every year. We did the opposite instead — built an access road, opened the area back up.

THE STORY OF A SINGLE RACE DAY

The night before a race, a few jongs get opened up, sails fully out, and won't go to sleep until the whole thing is over.

I hosted a party the night before that first *selatan* race, with three live chickens left over from the Ramadan closing celebration of Idul Fitri — though I was actually out on Nikoi Island that same night, rescuing a stranded yacht off the reef. We cooked the chickens afterward in our new wood-fired pizza oven, had a few drinks, some music. But mostly I watched the last details being finished on the jongs. I learned that night to secure my *anak* — literally "child," the outrigger float — making sure the wedges sit solid. I noticed too, without being told directly, plenty of small details being kept quietly secret — someone taking a small handful of raw rice, a spell or two, no doubt, but concentration as much as anything else.

Zakir's rule again, unspoken but plainly still in force.

By six the next morning, the crew's already up and running. Poles go in, the beach gets one last cleaning, chairs arrive, food arrives. By seven, the first jongs start showing up — some by car from hours away, some by bike, some on foot. Six villages, that first *selatan* race. A few set up small shops selling snacks; we provide drinks for the players.

The elder opening the ceremony leads the first prayer; local leaders from the different areas come out to show their support. The beach fills with jongs laid out everywhere, a rainbow of color across the sand. But the most important element of all is here too, and not shy about it: the wind, gusting fifteen knots. Everyone already knows there'll be a few casualties in the race today. And the tide's rising, fast.

The tender boat moves into position; each jong gets a number that determines its spot on the starting line, drawn from a box so no one can cheat — though some positions do give a slight edge regardless.

Mati lampu. Power cut. Happens daily around here. So neither the stereo nor the microphone work, and voices start rising just to be heard. The first players take position, the crowd's already getting excited, shouts and screams building.

The finish line's set, and the first jongs head out to sea. It's tricky racing — this is the first *selatan* race ever held here, and it took our own team days just to work out how to tune for it. We've got a real edge there, at least.

"Twenty-seven." That's me. I pick up my jong, having made no adjustments beyond tightening the outrigger, and walk toward the starting line, a small camera in hand to catch a bit of the action, though my whole concentration's really on giving Bule Kampung her chance. The wind's blowing fourteen knots, gusty. *Satu, dua, tiga* — together with the whistle, though the wind's loud enough that the whistle's really all I hear. A few seconds' delay on my start because of it. From there, all you can do is watch your own horse, wait for a hand signal from a teammate telling you the result. The walk back to the beach feels genuinely serene; I make third place, enough to reach the finals.

This is my own account, but a hundred other people are living through these same exact steps today.

My second jong, Planet, runs wilder — bigger, harder to hold a line, veering straight into another boat before either of us quite know what's happened. By the time the finals come around, luck's entered the race as a serious player in its own right. Bule Kampung takes an early lead in her final, then inexplicably lets Zakir's own boat slip past right before the line, settling for second herself. Planet, having finally shaken off the boat she'd rammed earlier, makes an unbelievable last sprint to finish third — a completely wild boat, that one, more interested, I think, in stirring up trouble than in winning outright, though probably the fastest hull in my small fleet. I'd need to learn how to properly tame her.

I couldn't quite believe it myself. Luck walked right alongside me that whole day.

The race brings people together — old, young, men, women, no clear boundary between any of it. But maybe the most important part of all is that the kids take an interest. A tradition worth being proud of, worth cherishing, worth growing for the future.

It's competition, it's about playing clean, and it's about as green as anything gets — no carbon footprint at all, an art built entirely on

precision, attention, and true values, a game of technique and of our planet both, and a vehicle, in the end, for sharing ideas.

Some thanks were owed, that first year, and they're still owed now. To Nikoi, for helping sponsor the event, in money and in time. To every player who gave their time and energy, cutting grass, cleaning the beach, and everything in between. To Amie, my wife, for putting up with me through long, sleepless nights, always with a smile, never once refusing to make me a coffee. And to Zakir — simply because without him, none of this would have happened at all.

The next race would be held in March 2013. It's been held every year since, twice a year, set by the wind rather than the calendar, exactly the way Zakir first taught me it should be.

CHAPTER TWO

What the Game Actually Is

People ask me, sometimes, why after spending half my life around the globe — privileged to witness some of the grandest shows left on our planet, coral reefs stretching further than the eye could hold, whales surfacing beside a ship in the middle of open ocean — I ended up this enthusiastic about a few little fragile miniature sailing boats.

Because they're true masterpieces. Each single jong carries its own individuality.

I'd searched, by that point, across cultural manifestations from tribal and modern societies both, trying to learn something true about what it actually means to be human. I take my body for granted most days. I don't take my mind or my heart that way, or try not to. Both take work.

The world of jong is a school, and I'm one of its students.

There's so much more here than meets the eye. Buckminster Fuller, a man whose ideas had already shaped how I thought about the Heraclitus and everything we tried to build aboard her, put it well: ninety-nine percent of who you are is invisible and untouchable. That's true of nearly everything, I suppose. But the jong makes it visible in a way few other things manage to.

The work that goes into the game carries a design of the highest sophistication, the ultimate simplicity — and at the same time it relies on ancient knowledge passed down through generations, so far back that no one really knows where the line begins. The dimensions are based on the human body, rooted in animist belief where spirits are everywhere, including in your own jong, and every player carries a few secrets of his own.

It's really a detective story, in its way, and you spend your time trying to collect as many viewpoints as you can, to build the sharpest possible picture. The difficulty is that everyone, by cultural design, wants that picture kept a little blurred.

There's the physical object first — traceable back to the kolek sauh, the local sailboat whose hull and racing rig you can still find right across the northern Riau Archipelago, from Johor and Singapore down through Sumatra and the islands near Batam and

Bintan. I was told it once served as the vessel that carried food out to the spirits of the sea — betel nut, betel leaves, grains of rice. Those rituals still happen, not performed in public, but very much still part of the tradition before a race begins.

In the Malay tradition there are two kinds of information — what can be readily shared, and what has to stay secret. Like in a lot of tribal societies, your real name is never actually spoken. Plenty of players believe they're sailing with the help of their own ancestors, called in with particular mantras of their own.

It's highly competitive too, since the whole tradition's taken the shape of a race, and races need winners. Players come specifically to test their own work against everyone else's.

There's a metaphysical dimension to it as well, and this isn't just theory — the jong, as an extension of yourself, gives you honest feedback on the effect of your own focused attention. You can trace pieces of this back to Sufi tradition, still strong across various communities in the Riau Archipelago, especially the Naqshbandiyya order, which arrived early on the east coast of Sumatra. I recognized something of it immediately, having spent years aboard the Heraclitus learning our own version of the same discipline — presence, attention, the particular quality of focus that either makes or breaks a maneuver at sea, whether that sea is an ocean or a few hundred meters of shallow lagoon.

THE ORANG SUKU LAUT, AND WHAT WAS TAKEN

The tradition of seamanship across Asian cultures has shifted drastically over the years, and nowhere more than here in Riau.

The Orang Suku Laut — the people of the sea — once controlled the ocean around Riau entirely, serving as advisers to the Malay sultanate. Now they're largely relegated to sedentary life on portions of land no investor ever wanted. The Malay aristocracy has long looked down on the people who make their living from the sea, treating them as lesser Malays. The provincial government rarely features the sea in its own plans at all, treating it mostly as a source of exploitation, especially among the Chinese trading community that's amassed real money from sea products over the decades.

Less than a hundred years ago, the sea and ocean around the entire world were full of sails. The Riau Archipelago was one of the great pivots of world trade between east and west — essentially everyone passed through here, at some point. Now, apart from a handful of

traditional sailing boats used during a couple of provincially funded races, and a few small fishing canoes or sampan, the art of traditional sailing has almost entirely disappeared.

Somehow the jong survived all of it. Partly because it never demanded many resources to begin with. The essence of it is time and skill, and without time there's no possibility of ever furthering either.

WHAT IT TAKES

It takes a lot. Time to select the tree, the right season to cut it, the time it takes to dry the wood before you can even begin to shape it. It takes passion, patience, dexterity, precision, a genuine geometrical knowledge that gets passed hand to hand rather than written down.

You learn it either by watching and playing, or — better — by being properly taught. The measurements are based on the human body, geometry built from halves and thirds and similar simple ratios, without ever needing a tape measure. My friend Zakir once showed me the dimensions of the jong he'd chosen for me by holding it between my own arms, listening as it found the exact spot where the mast fitting sat right. Everything needs to balance; trials are necessary to cut the sails properly. Lightness of the hull matters, but the most underrated element of all is the outrigger and its float, called the *anak* — the child.

I haven't seen women race, though there's no formal taboo against it — more, I think, that the culture simply assigns different activities to different genders, the way boys play with cars and girls with dolls back where I grew up. I've watched Zakir's own daughter try her hand at it, though when it comes to actual racing, the girls tend to shy away. She'll likely race, eventually, in the children's category we added later — a new addition that feels like exactly the right direction for all of this to keep growing in.

BUILDING THE WIDER TRADITION

The game grew. Younger men began wanting jongs of their own, and competition gave the tradition a new energy. We travelled to Penyengat, groups formed in Malang Rapat and Berakit, and the Orang Laut themselves eventually came to race alongside us. What had begun on one beach was becoming a wider community.

THE FUTURE I SEE FROM HERE

I'm often asked what I see coming next for the jong.

There's a real, strong popularity returning to it. A few years back, Zakir was more or less the only one holding the fort in the whole Teluk Bakau area. Now the races draw dozens of groups a season, and the tradition's clearly regaining ground it had spent decades losing.

The future, I think, is in making smaller races too, on the fringe of whatever the government sponsors officially — keeping control of quality, choosing the times and places that actually suit the art, so the people without much cash to spare can still be fully involved, close to home. There's real market potential in it too, enough that a few people could eventually earn some kind of living from it, partially financing the races themselves.

The races matter enormously, because they keep the jong, and the player, honest to their essence — sailing machines, tested against wind and water and each other, nothing more and nothing less. There's a separate contest too, for the most beautifully decorated jong, and while that serves its own purpose, putting a few jongs into offices and living rooms where people can admire them, the soul of the jong stays out on the water, where it's always belonged.

This is exactly why passing the tradition on to children has become the thing I care most about now. We started making smaller jongs specifically for the kids of Teluk Bakau — a new and exciting development, exciting enough that we built a full children's race around it, with prizes of school supplies and t-shirts rather than cash, so there's no meaningful difference in stakes between any of the kids competing.

What's actually exciting, more than any single race, is the platform it's created. So much passes on informally — a diagram drawn in the sand that the tide will erase within the hour, a trick shown once and remembered forever. The kids are receptive in a way that still surprises me, showing off to their friends what they've just learned, passing the knowledge sideways as fast as it moves down through the generations. Beyond the jong itself sits the whole world of the ocean, ready and waiting to capture them the same way it once captured me.

I dream, some days, of filling the whole coast of Bintan with sails again. We went backward for a while, leaning on motors and engines, all in service of saving time. But people here still have some time left to give. A little help can carry this a very long way.

Singapore was originally Malay. So was Borneo, so was much of what's now called Malaysia. Different jong-like designs exist across Micronesia, the Philippines — I've heard that Bali, until fairly recently, held its own races with a traditional design entirely its own. The possibility for real growth feels close to endless. Somewhere down the line, I can picture an international event — jong builders and racers from across this whole scattered, related tradition, meeting on one beach, comparing what centuries of separate island life did to a single shared idea of what a small boat, sailed by wind alone, is actually for.

On any given race day I'm still, after all these years, the exotic element on the beach — the odd Frenchman playing the game, posed for group photographs with the students, in exchange, more or less, for the hundreds of photographs I'm taking myself to keep documenting this whole world. Deep, wrinkled faces of old ibu-ibu, grandmothers, coming out to support their sons and grandsons, carrying hot tea but really carrying love. Kids jumping in the waves. And everywhere, if you look down at the hulls instead of the sails, prows carved into chickens, into snakes, into dragons — proud makers pulling me aside to show me their latest jong, posing next to it like it's a child that just did something remarkable.

I am only, in this particular school, still a child myself. I learn something new from these masters every single time I show up.

CHAPTER THREE

The Wind Decides

A STORY OF THE SELATAN RACE, TELUK BAKAU

AUGUST 15, 2026

You never step in the same river twice.

A jong, if you've never seen one: a small wooden sailboat, carved by hand, no bigger than a child is tall — raced unmanned across shallow water, steered by nothing but the set of its sail and the skill of whoever built it.

Two things govern every race day here, and neither of them can be argued with: the wind, and the tide. Everything else — when we race, how wide the beach is, whether a boat sails true or breaks — gets decided by these two long before anyone picks up a jong. And yet no two years are ever quite the same river. The wind that carried last year's race turned northerly halfway through, in the middle of what should have been steady Selatan season — a reminder that even a forecast checked on three different apps is really just a polite guess.

Indonesia doesn't really have four seasons. It has two winds. The northeast monsoon blows from December through late March, damp off the Indian Ocean, and the rains come with it. The southwest monsoon arrives as early as June and holds through September, dry off the Australian continent, and the country dries out behind it. Our races are named the old way — after the direction the wind comes from that season. The Utara race sails under that northeast wind. The Selatan race sails under the southwest wind that follows. Teaching the academic half of a youth course, I keep learning this alongside the kids — that a wind compass in the West is a pragmatic thing, four cardinal points and done, while Indonesian navigators kept their own names for the wind between the points, the northeast and the southwest carrying their own words, their own weight.

Tide runs on its own clock, separate from the wind's. Pasang is the water rising. Surut is the water falling, the sand widening, the seagrass bed drying into flats you can walk across. This year the tide was right,

but the navigable window was narrow — ten in the morning to six at night — which shaped everything else about how the day had to run.

Tomorrow is the Selatan race.

That's what I kept telling myself the evening before, watching it come together on the shore of Teluk Bakau. This year, for the first time, we really managed to fold the kids into the pre-race preparation itself — not a separate lesson off to the side, but the real thing, happening around them. The different kelompok gathered to set the next day's lineup. Some had already unloaded their jongs and staked out their patch of beach, and without wasting time, they were out practicing the course, hunting for the particular angle the wind wanted, fine-tuning rigs against it. Twenty-three groups came this year — Batam, Penyengat, Dompok, Teluk Sebung, Tanjung Siambang, Teluk Bakau, and more from around Bintan and Tanjung Pinang. Limiting each group to ten jongs let that many in without turning the day into something unfinishable.

We had funding for twenty kids. We taught closer to twenty-five, once my own daughter and a few of her friends folded themselves into the group — nobody was going to turn them away. They watched the big adult jongs being readied nearby, watched the pickup trucks unloading hull after hull from each kelompok, before it was their turn to hold a small training jong into the wind for the first time.

What struck me most, watching the grown boats come off those trucks, was how many new ones there were. Slightly bigger. A slightly greater ratio of mast to hull, built to carry a bit more canvas. New sails, cut clean. Everyone had brought their best boat this year. I'll admit to a small, private regret watching them — mine is old now, semi-retired, still sailing but not really competitive anymore. A new generation of real racers is coming up, and it shows. There were more wrinkles from the sun on the old faces than I remembered, some kelompok now in matching racing kit with their team's name printed across it, others as traditional as the day the school started. The new jongs themselves are leaner than the old ones — less decorated, less "punk," a cleaner style taking hold. That's evolution, I suppose, happening in real time on a beach in Bintan.

Every one of those hulls, old or new, started the same way: a piece of pulai wood, cut and left to dry for a month or two before anyone dares shape it. Rush that step and you're already building a bad jong. Once cured, the hull is drawn out by hand and hollowed as thin as the wood allows without losing its strength — until what's left is light enough to fly.

The wind held close to 10 to 14 knots through the day — fast, exciting, and beautiful, the kind of conditions a photographer dreams about. And the beauty of it is something we protect on purpose. There are no cigarette banners here, no bank logos, none of the usual noise that sponsorship drags onto an event like this. We'll take sponsors' money gladly — it's what keeps this running — but not at the cost of hurting the eye. Call it artist's snobbery if you like, but the setting matters. The attention belongs on the art of the racing jong and the people sailing it, not on what's printed behind them. Picture a sacred Balinese ceremony strung with noodle-brand advertising flags, and you'll understand exactly what we're trying to avoid. It's a difficult balance to hold, and we only manage it because just enough sponsors, year after year, are willing to show up quietly and let the boats be the only thing anyone's looking at.

This year, after some searching for hands to sail them, two of my older jongs went out with new racers at the helm — both well past twelve years old themselves, boats and sailors alike, and I loved watching them race regardless. Aji, who's become quite good, helps keep the fleet maintained and is close with Hassim, who years ago helped build a healthy, honest rivalry with Zakir in the school's earliest days. Darts, who's worked on Nikoi Island since building first started there, bought a jong of his own this year and raced it for the first time — he named it Nikoi Island, after the place and the sponsor both. Nikoi has backed us for years now and never once asked for a logo hung anywhere. That kind of sponsor is rarer than it should be.

The jury has changed almost as much as the boats. These days it runs on printed sheets, laptops, handheld radios relaying calls from the water to the starting line, a man stationed at the finish with a camera running to settle any dispute before it starts. In the earliest years, everything was done by hand — someone cutting little paper slips and writing each result out one at a time. We've kept roughly the same number of people on the jury even as the job itself needs fewer hands, so a fair few now spend the day sitting comfortably, enjoying themselves more than working. There's something almost quietly socialist about it — everyone paid the same, whether the job that day was essential or mostly ceremonial, because friendship counts, seniority counts, a little harmless corruption and quiet negotiation counts as good sport around here. Seen up close, it's a strange and extraordinary lesson in how a small society organizes itself. A total system, if you want to call it that. How far down that rabbit hole do

you want to go? Honestly, you have to be there to even start to understand it.

All the senses fill up on a day like this, including the ones that don't show up in any official record — salt, color, the smell of algae drying on the sand, wind, water, the constant flap and snap of sails catching and losing the breeze all at once. A symphony that has nothing to do with music and everything to do with paying attention. The sails do the rest, letting each jong lift almost off the water, flying more than sailing.

Schools came again this year too — some purely to watch, others to help. One team spent the morning cleaning the beach. Another looked after the visiting guests. We tried QR codes for the first time, a small piece of the modern world stitched into a very old one. That evening, the traditional dangkung played on the same sand as electro and avant-garde performance, one dissolving into the next without anyone treating it as strange. Among it, the kids' group took the floor themselves, performing a choreographed dance led by Dwi. They'd been rehearsing for almost two weeks straight for it — building, in that time, an entire small tale of wind and waves and sea, but also of secrecy, and magic, and simply being together, which is really what the whole day is about underneath everything else.

By evening, the fleet was back on the sand, salt-crusted, sails down. The same wind that carried the whole day would keep shifting with the season, the way it always does, and somewhere around March or April it would swing back around toward the north, and it would be time again to start thinking about the Utara race. The tide would rise and fall exactly the same the next morning, indifferent to who'd won.

None of this is really about nostalgia. It's closer to a reminder: that this coastline has always been a maritime place, that wind and tide shaped how people here lived long before anyone wrote it down, and that a small wooden boat, raced by a kid on an August afternoon, is still part of that same story — a slightly different boat, a slightly different kid, the same river never stepped in twice. We're not trying to keep any of it behind glass. We're trying to keep it in people's hands, one season, one tide, one kid at a time.

Let's keep this going.

Michel Lippitsch, The Jong School — Teluk Bakau, Bintan Island

INTERLUDE

The Names of the Fleet

Read three hundred jong names in a row — as I did, going through the heat sheets from this year's races — and a pattern surfaces that no single boat could show you on its own. It is not one language at work, it is four or five, stacked and overlapping the way the water off Teluk Bakau stacks its currents: the surface chop from today's wind, the long swell from somewhere else, the pull of tide underneath it all.

The first layer is court Malay, the language of titles that never quite left. Raja, Sultan, Laksamana, Panglima, Maharaja, Datok — a fleet of toy boats carrying the entire vocabulary of a vanished kingdom, one hull at a time. It costs nothing to call your jong Raja Laut, King of the Sea, and everything is riskier and more honest for it, because in twenty minutes the wind may make a fool of the name, and everyone on the beach will remember exactly which boat claimed to be king.

The second layer is inherited story, and it runs deeper than most of the owners probably stop to notice. Taming Sari is not just a pretty phrase — it is Hang Tuah's keris, the one no blade could touch. Jebat is the friend who becomes the traitor, or the truth-teller, depending which version of the epic you were raised on. Gatot Kaca flies. Gurindam is a poetic form, perfected by a poet buried on Penyengat, an island you can see, on a clear day, from roughly where these boats are launched. None of these names were chosen for a boat race by someone reaching for a dictionary. They were chosen because a nine-year-old, or his father, or his father's father, already knew the story by heart — the way you know a story that was told to you before you knew it was a story at all.

The third layer is the sea talking about itself, plainly. Lumba-Lumba. Kuda Laut. Todak Biru. Belanak Puteh. Nobody needs a legend to name a boat after a dolphin. This is the fisherman's register, not the sultan's — the register of men who know a mullet from a mullet and a swordfish's blue from any other blue, and who put that knowledge straight onto the hull without dressing it up.

And then there is the fourth layer, the one I find myself loving most, because it is the layer that proves the tradition is still alive

rather than preserved under glass. Upin and Ipin, straight off the television. Kurama, a nine-tailed fox from a Japanese cartoon, sailing a Riau creek. Nemo. Sniper. Gengster. A number, just because a boy likes a number and that is reason enough. Somewhere in a shed on Bintan, a kid is choosing between five hundred years of Malay royal genealogy and a fox demon from anime, and choosing the fox demon — and that is not a loss of culture. That is what living culture actually looks like from the inside. It never stops eating.

And once, this year, without any fanfare, a small sail went out under my daughter's name. Written down on the sheet between two others as if it belonged there exactly as much as they did, because by the rules of this fleet, it does. She is, after all, also named for the ocean.

One more name is worth sitting with before I close this. Nakhkoda Ninggal — the captain who has departed. Somebody, in some kelompok, on some morning, chose that name for their boat, and I don't know if they were thinking of Zakir, or of their own captain, or of no one in particular, the way a phrase can simply arrive because it is true and it is time to say it. But I read it on the sheet and had to stop for a moment. That is the thing about a fleet of nearly two hundred names: most of them are boys showing off, or fathers being sentimental, or a joke that only makes sense on this one beach — and then, once in a while, without warning, one of them is a eulogy, sailing.

CHAPTER FOUR

Calling the Wind — December 18, 2014

The tourism department had commissioned something unusual: a demonstration of jong racing for a group of windsurfing champions on a break from their competitive circuit. It was the kind of cross-cultural collision Bintan produces every so often — the world's elite athletes in one wind sport, suddenly curious about a miniature one they'd never encountered.

Our two local *kelompok* were rivals under ordinary circumstances — genuine rivals, each defending its own honor hard during a race. But this one felt bigger than the rivalry, and the heads of both groups understood that. It was a chance to show outsiders, people who understood athletic excellence from an entirely different angle, what we'd actually been building at Teluk Bakau.

We prepared the night before, nothing elaborate — the essentials of hospitality, done with intention. We brewed a welcome drink out of what the land gave us: ginger root, homegrown lemongrass, Indonesian rosella flowers, a few other spices I couldn't now name precisely if you asked me. People always want the exact recipe, as though the formula were the point. It never was. The drink wasn't meant to be replicated. It was meant to say something: we're offering our heart, made from what we have, prepared with care for your arrival. That's the language of *Sekapur Sirih* — the betel leaf and lime offering that carries meaning past the object itself, *sirih* standing for respect and generosity, shaped like a heart; *kapur*, the lime, standing for the purity of the heart underneath.

It was almost solstice — that point in the year when day and night come back into balance, when the year turns over. The evening before the demonstration, sitting with a few of the elders, the air around us filled with *kretek* smoke, those clove-scented whirls, the whole scene disturbed only by softly spoken words and the cast of the moonlight on the water. Zakir pulled me aside.

"Call the wind," he said.

It wasn't a request, not exactly. It was closer to a statement of fact about what needed to happen next. Zakir didn't suggest things lightly. He asked because he believed it was possible, because he understood

something about intention and the sea that I was still only partway toward learning myself.

THE ASKING

I am far from a shaman. I have no training in any of this. What I had, by then, was years on the water, some real successes, plenty of failures, and a slowly deepening respect for whatever forces are actually at work when you race a boat with no one aboard to steer it. But when Zakir says something like that, you listen.

That night I sat alone under the stars. Clear sky, the kind of clarity you only get in the tropics, far from any city light — the Milky Way not as an idea but as the dense river of light it actually is.

I asked.

Not with the arrogance of someone certain it would work. Not with the confidence of a man who'd done this before and knew the technique — I hadn't, and I didn't. I asked with intention, clear intention, but with humility alongside it, and the humility mattered more than I expected it to. There's a real difference between calling and commanding, between asking and demanding.

Wind, if you're willing, if it serves — we could use your help tomorrow.

That's close enough to what I actually said, though I couldn't repeat the exact words today if you asked me to. The frame was the point, not the wording: not I need this, but we are asking, respectfully, and we'll understand if the answer is no.

WHAT THE WIND GAVE BACK

The north wind, when it came, was shy at first. Morning arrived without fanfare, gentle, nothing you'd call racing wind. But through the day it kept building — not violently, not in gusts, just steadily, persistently, until by afternoon it was blowing a clean twenty knots under a brilliant sun.

Perfect conditions.

The windsurfers went back out to race their boards on the very water we'd just, by whatever means, made perfect for them. We didn't pack up. We stayed, and kept honoring the wind — not as a resource we'd used and could now discard, but as a presence we'd asked for and been given.

The jongs came alive properly that afternoon, tuned now to a wind strength that matched hull and sail exactly, and we raced — informally, no prize money, no scoreboard, no trophy waiting at the end of it. The reward was already there: good food, good company, and, more than either of those, good spirit.

I've spent a life around competitive people. I've sailed with men who wanted badly to win, who carried real hunger for it. But there's something different in racing jongs with respect for something larger than yourself in the room. The energy doesn't turn mean. The competition never quite tips into zero-sum.

Magic, whether or not you believe in it, stays a real part of this game — and I want to be careful with the word, because I don't mean superstition, don't mean the kind of magical thinking that mistakes correlation for cause. I mean magic as the capacity to do — to manifest something, to bring it into being through focused intention and precise action, the two working together rather than one standing in for the other. You sort the technical side out first — the rigging, the tuning, the trim, the whole science and mechanics of the day — and only once that's mastered do you get to relax into whatever's underneath it. Only then do you get to watch the spirits play.

BULE KAMPONG AND PLANET

By then we all knew each other intimately — not just names and family histories, but character. Strengths, weaknesses, pride, arrogance, generosity. The jongs, being extensions of ourselves, carried all of it forward into the water with us.

We hadn't come for a masterclass from some outside teacher. We'd come to play the art together — a masterclass with no master in it, just players. In the arena of the race the jongs behaved like small gladiators, battling each other for the simple right to cross a line first, and the real gift was never in who crossed it. It was in how each boat revealed its own character, incarnated in wood and sail and nothing else.

We had just enough boats present that day to keep proper track of each other — not so many that attention scattered and the whole thing lost focus. Races with a hundred boats in them have their own kind of energy, their own integrity. But at this smaller scale, seven or eight boats racing seriously, you see something more intimate. You

don't just see who wins. You see how each boat wins. You see its personality.

My own Bule Kampong has a few peculiarities I've watched emerge over years of racing her. When she gets out ahead, when she's genuinely leading, she seems to get nervous about being alone out there. She'll slow down, almost on purpose, waiting for the rest of the fleet to close the gap. Having lost her own momentum doing it, she then has to wedge herself back into the pack from a compromised position, awkwardly. And yet once she's re-engaged, she'll cross the finish line seeming to celebrate everyone else's race more than her own.

One of the windsurfing champions had opened Bule Kampong up early that day — sailed her a while, got a feel for her before the real races began. She behaved exactly the same way for him that she behaves for me. Ran ahead, got nervous, slowed, let the others catch up. He understood it immediately — a rational mind, a man who'd go on to win Olympic gold in his own discipline, fighting big money and a rising field of newer sports the whole way there. He got, right away, that this small wooden boat was trying to teach him something about attitude.

That's the thing about jongs. They don't let you cheat. They reveal you, whether or not you were planning to be revealed.

Planet was a different animal entirely — a wild horse of a boat, prone to ramming anything nearby, seemingly more interested in stirring up a little trouble than in holding a clean line. But fast. God, she was fast. Some of the most beautiful sailing I've ever watched came out of Planet in the middle of causing the most chaos — a boat that couldn't quite be fully controlled, that clearly had intentions of her own.

WHAT IT ACTUALLY MEANT

Later, with a bottle of tequila open after the ceremonies wound down, the two brothers stayed on — one a mad windsurfer, living a little too well for a competitive career, fiercely independent in his own head; the other the rational one, the Olympic champion, a man who'd built his whole career on discipline against the pull of big money and easier sports.

We talked late into the night.

They understood something, viscerally, that you only really learn by competing seriously at the top of something: that attitude, that the

mental side, carries the real edge in winning. That nothing is quite as fixed as it looks. They saw in the jongs exactly what they'd already learned to see in their own sports — the triumph of focus over circumstance, of intention over doubt, the sense that excellence, wherever you find it, is built from the same handful of invisible elements: clarity of purpose, a mental state you can actually hold onto, a refusal to accept a limitation as final just because it's been true so far.

I don't think the jong taught them anything they didn't already know somewhere. I think it just confirmed it, in a form small and strange enough that they had to sit with it for a moment before recognizing their own sport looking back at them.

This is what I want you to understand about calling the wind, if you take nothing else from this chapter: it worked, if it worked, not because I hold some power I don't actually have, but because asking with humility is itself a form of focused attention. Because respecting something larger than yourself lines you up with forces that were already in motion regardless of you. Because what we call magic, most of the time, is really just the moment inner clarity happens to meet outer circumstance, and something in you notices the meeting.

The wind that day wasn't unusual for December in the Riau Archipelago — conditions shift that way in this season, plainly and often. But the timing felt exact. The intensity felt exact. Whatever it was, it felt earned rather than lucky.

In practical terms, it let us show a handful of visitors — people already excellent in their own field — exactly what we'd been quietly building at Teluk Bakau. Not as a curiosity for them to admire and move past. Not as a museum piece. As living art. As a discipline that asks for everything at once: technique, intuition, community, respect for forces you don't control, and a heart clean enough to let the wind straight through it.

When you learn that asking with humility works better than demanding with certainty, you've learned something that has very little to do with jong racing in particular. Zakir tried to tell me that from the very first week I knew him. The boat was never really the point. The boat is just the instrument you happen to be holding while you learn something about yourself.

CHAPTER FIVE

What Others Have Written

For thirteen years I built this mostly from the inside — from Zakir's hands, from trial and error on a beach, from whatever got passed to me sideways, in fragments, the way most of this tradition moves. I hadn't gone looking for what anyone outside Teluk Bakau had written about jong racing, mostly because it never occurred to me there'd be much to find. It turns out there's more than I expected, and less than I'd have guessed, and both of those facts taught me something.

THE PAPER TRAIL

Indonesia keeps a formal registry of intangible cultural heritage, and jong is on it — filed in 2016, under Kepulauan Riau province, in the category of knowledge and practice concerning nature and the sea. The entry is short, almost clinical, the way government paperwork usually is: a sailboat-shaped toy roughly a meter to a meter and a half long, made from pulai wood because pulai floats and runs fast, played during the north monsoon at Penyengat and Bintan and the south monsoon at Lingga and Singkep, origin unknown, “known and passed down since the Riau-Lingga Sultanate.” I read that last part twice. It's the same vague, honest shrug I've been giving people myself for thirteen years whenever someone asks me how old this actually is. Nobody knows. Not the government, not the historians, not me. It's simply old enough that the beginning of it disappeared before anyone thought to write it down.

There's exactly one academic paper I could find that studies jong racing directly rather than in passing — out of the maritime university in Tanjungpinang, of all places, fieldwork done in a village on my own island, close enough to Teluk Bakau that I probably know some of the families involved without knowing I know them. Its interest is in character education — what racing a jong actually teaches a kid, beyond the sailing itself. Their list reads almost exactly like mine would: cooperation, discipline, responsibility, patience,

something they call spirituality and I'd probably just call respect. It's a strange and slightly moving thing, watching an outside researcher independently arrive at the same conclusions I've been building an entire youth program around.

GETTING THE WORD WRONG, GENTLY

The same paper repeats a claim I've seen elsewhere too, and it's worth correcting here, because I've probably said some version of it myself without checking. There's an older word, *djong*, for the great ocean-going trading ships of old Java and the Malay world — vessels that could run to a thousand tons or more, the ships the early European traders wrote home about. It is not the same word attached to the same thing as the boat I keep in my shed. Ours is small, unmanned, a meter or so long, built to be raced rather than loaded with cargo. The two traditions share a name and, I'd guess, share it for a real reason — some old memory of a big ship folded down, over centuries, into a toy a child could carry — but they are not one continuous object, and I don't want to keep implying they are just because the shared word makes a nicer story. The honest version is stranger and better anyway: a whole vocabulary of small racing boats — *jong* here, *jong kate* up in Natuna, *jong katil* on the Riau mainland — grew up independently around the memory of something larger, the way a folk song outlives the event it was written about.

The part of this reading that surprised me most was discovering how much company I'd apparently had the whole time. In Johor, Lazim Atan has spent decades building *jong* from the same *pulai* wood; in Singapore, a family with roots in the Riau Islands has been working to revive the tradition; and in Sarawak there is another *jong* tradition with a separate history. The discoveries mattered less as proof of one continuous story than as a reminder that the word, the boat, and the memory travelled in complicated ways across a region later divided by borders.

WHAT NOBODY HAS WRITTEN YET

Here's the thing that surprised me most, and that I probably should have expected: nobody has written the book. Not a real one. There are proposals, festival write-ups, a government registry entry, one conference paper, a great deal of tourism-board enthusiasm, and a

handful of very good short pieces of journalism — but no one has sat down and tried to hold the whole of this, the craft and the spirits and the races and the kids and Zakir and everything that happened on that one improbable December night in 2014, in a single place.

I find that both intimidating and, I'll admit, a little bit exciting. Thirteen years in, it turns out I'm not adding a chapter to an existing shelf. I'm building the shelf.

WHAT THIS CHANGES ABOUT THE BOOK I'M WRITING

Not much, honestly, and that's the real finding underneath all of this. The outside research doesn't correct my memory of what Zakir taught me, or what happened on the beach in 2012, or what the wind actually did in 2014. What it does is place all of that inside something larger than my own recollection — a government registry that agrees *jong* is worth protecting, a historian who's traced the same Johor-Riau-Lingga lineage I'd only ever heard secondhand, a university paper that watched a village of kids learning the same lessons mine are learning, a family in Singapore trying to bring the exact same thing back to life an hour's boat ride from here.

It turns out I was never really alone in this, even during the years it felt that way. I just hadn't gone looking for the others yet.

CHAPTER SIX

The Jong School — June 21, 2025

For thirteen years none of this had a name beyond the one everybody already used for it — the jong game at Planet Samudra, the Saturday thing, whatever people wanted to call it that week. It didn't need a name. It needed a beach, a tide, and a few hands to hold the sails steady until launch.

That changed on the twenty-first of June, 2025 — a Saturday, fittingly, since almost everything important in this story seems to happen on one. We gathered at Planet Samudra Café, the same café that had been quietly hosting jong races since 2012, and made the whole thing official. Not because the informality had ever been a problem. Because informality has a ceiling, and we'd been bumping against it for a while.

The reasoning, written into the minutes that day, was plain enough that I'll just give it to you straight: what had begun as the traditional jong game held routinely at Planet Samudra since 2012 had, over the years, started attracting foreign visitors — tourists who wanted to watch, then wanted to understand, then wanted to know if they could learn. That enthusiasm, arriving steadily enough that we could no longer treat it as a curiosity, is what pushed us toward something with an actual name and an actual structure: Jong School Planet Samudra.

The purpose, as we wrote it down, was to preserve Malay culture — specifically the jong game — so that the tradition of building and playing it wouldn't disappear, and to introduce that culture, Bintan's own particular version of it, to people from outside, by building a school any child, local or foreign, could walk into and learn from.

I became chairman that day, which mostly means I'm the one who answers the phone. Rajuna took on secretary. Amie — my wife, who has been putting up with all of this since long before it had a name — became treasurer, a role she'd more or less already been filling for over a decade without the title. Dimastyo, Yani, Azura, and Toni signed on as members, the people who actually show up, who clear the beach, who keep the whole thing standing on the mornings I'm not there to hold it up myself.

I won't pretend the paperwork changed much about the actual mornings on the beach. The tide doesn't care what's written in a meeting record. But something did shift, quietly, in how the village itself related to what we'd been doing. A registered school can ask the kepala desa for a letter of support. A registered school can walk into the tourism office and be taken a little more seriously than a Frenchman and his friends who happen to like sailing toy boats. And a registered school, when Zakir's memory needed somewhere permanent to live, had an actual institution behind it instead of just my own recollection, which fades a little more every year, the way everyone's does.

We called it Planet Samudra because that's the name of the café that hosted it from the very beginning, and because Planet is also the name of one of my own two original jongs — the wild one, still is, less controlled than Bule Kampong ever was, faster too. It felt right to let the school carry a small piece of that same restlessness in its name.

The reach of it has surprised me more than the paperwork did. We now run tailored workshops for international schools, and the kids who come through have arrived from as far as Brunei, Singapore, France, China, Bangladesh, and Australia — alongside the adult workshops we run for anyone curious enough to ask. Race day itself has grown past just the racing: local artists, musicians, and dancers now share the sand with the boats, from traditional dangkung to the avant-garde performances of the Taktido collective, Malay music and dance choreographed around the shape of the jong itself. Anthropologists and researchers come to Teluk Bakau now too, to watch and record something that started as a handful of us on a beach. I don't think of any of that as a distraction from the racing. I think of it as the same thing the formation paperwork was, really — proof that this had grown into something worth a name.

Thirteen years after a group of kids caught my attention on a beach on New Year's Day, it finally had a name of its own. I'm still not entirely sure the jong needed one. But the people learning it did, and that, in the end, is who any of this was ever really for.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Jong Utara Race — January 2017

I kept a journal that week, the kind you write half-asleep, in whatever gaps the race schedule leaves you. I found it again going through old files for this book, and I've decided to leave it mostly as it was written rather than smooth it into something tidier. It reads a little differently from the rest of this book — more clipped, closer to the actual hour it was written in — and I think that's worth keeping.

2 A.M., FRIDAY, JANUARY 27

Strong coffee keeps the jury up long enough to finish the registration and the draw. Two hundred and forty jongs entered, across two categories, one representative from each village drawing for line position. We'd limited entry to fifteen jongs per group this year, to let the maximum number of villages take part rather than letting a few big groups crowd out the smaller ones.

The hand draw is its own small ritual, a bit like the roll of a die — lucky fingers, on top of proper tuning, add their own edge to the game. Technicalities aside, our jury team by this point is seasoned, dedicated, and mostly unsung — the real unsung heroes of any race.

The speakers, the microphones, the voice on the PA system all show up somewhere around the middle of the night, tested against a local song and a few jokes to keep the mood light while everyone works.

The jong house fills with sleeping bodies, people arriving early from Tembeling. We fire up the pizza oven for a Korean visitor who's turned up unannounced. Pizza for everyone after that, tables full, nutmeg fruit syrup going around, a few beers for the players — a proper cultural melting pot. The secret to a good party, I've decided, is generosity and attention to detail. Our little café, Planet Samudra, does what it always does: it hosts.

6 A.M., SATURDAY, JANUARY 28

The fleets are arriving.

We've cleared the ground better than ever this year, with an army of twelve workers sent over from the Kantor Desa. Break time comes with snacks, sweat, and good moods. Tunas Muda shows up for a gotong royong session to help sort out the last details and finish clearing the beach.

The wings unfold one by one, greeted by the sunrise — one of my favorite moments of the whole event. The sea angels, getting ready to play.

Don't be fooled by the word angels, though — they compete too. I get bitten by a large centipede, which reminds Eka of the centipede tattooed on his own chest. We joke about it, I show him my dolphin tattoo, and warn him that the dolphins will retaliate. They do. His jong breaks partway through the race. Ritual warfare on the racing course, I've come to think, is what keeps the peace on land.

The wind rises through the morning, but the tide, running unusually high, gives everyone the chance to chat, tune their rigs, and take care of last details, while the kids, drawn to the sand like it's magnetic, invent games too complicated and creative for any adult to properly follow.

We have an "important visitor" this year — the tourism minister, come to watch the opening of the race. The kepala desa of Teluk Bakau shows up to give a speech; tourism gives one too. But the political framing runs a little further than I'd like, and I step in to set the record straight: the real heroes here are the jong players, the makers who keep this game alive, not the officials standing beside them for the photo. Still, the exposure matters — the symbol travels now, all the way to Jakarta, and there's a real chance it opens up funding for future events. I keep my reservations about how that funding tends to arrive mostly to myself that morning, in front of the minister.

I was wrong about the page running out. It turns out my own notes from that week ran on for two more days, filed away and forgotten until now — so here is the rest of what actually happened at that race, starting from Saturday afternoon.

I had never seen so many cameras. Photographers with gear that could have funded the whole event for years, all of it in service of a media-obsessed world where presence online is what counts. But a photograph of nothing real eventually loses all meaning. The press,

that week, was mostly political — a game of hide and seek, names getting boosted, claims that didn't quite hold up, all of it a little out of touch with what village life actually looks like from inside it. More than ten articles got written about that weekend. Not one of them named the real doers, or the real sponsors. The roots of history are always underground, though. That's what lets the flowers come up somewhere else.

Before anything else, this is the spirit of the ocean: the people who breathe its winds, sun-soaked and salt-skinned, their craft, their superstitions, their wisdom and their follies, the real deep wrinkles of their history, the drama and the tears of joy in it, their kids running to meet the kisses the sea sends the land, the ibu-ibu cheering their freedom-warriors from the shore, the whole outsized family spirit that shows up to celebrate simply being together. The faces are familiar. A spark in someone's eye is transmission enough. A smile says what a thousand words couldn't. All of time seems to meet, right there, in that one now.

Rivalries keep the game alive, jongs maintained, tested, repaired down to the last detail. Gossip is part of the psychological side of it too. But I learned something from other sea people once, carried in a song: drop the gossip on the tips of your wings, take off, let the wind brush it out of your feathers, and leave it behind wherever the whisper of its presence disappears. Then fly free.

The wind held. Every forecast had called for heavy rain that day, and not a drop of it materialized — the rain stayed offshore, out past where any of us could see it. The belief that rain can be summoned, or chased off, is still alive out here. I've seen the same belief in Melanesian cultures elsewhere in this ocean. And maybe, somewhere in the shadows of someone's quiet intention, a little help of that kind had genuinely been asked for.

You have to be willing to sacrifice your jong in strong wind. A crash — what we call a wedding — is what keeps a jong from crossing the line. Get married later. Not while you're racing.

After the smaller category finished, the tide dropped back and we all turned to preparing the big fleets. During the lunch lull, kids who'd come without a group of their own started asking around for jongs to borrow — the mood spreading the way it does, one kid at a time, until half the beach was theirs again.

The afternoon brought epic battles. Planet, one of my earliest jongs, took first place in the preliminaries. She'd fail in the finals —

which, if you've read this far, you'll know is exactly the kind of thing Planet does.

By four, most of the losing jongs were folded up and carried off. What remained was la crème de la crème, held over for the final the next day, alongside the kids' race. That evening the café filled with kitesurfers who'd taken advantage of the same wind, and somewhere in the middle of it all we crossed, officially, into the Year of the Rooster on the Chinese lunar calendar — no small thing, for a community this oceanic-minded, under a moon that glorious.

Most of the photographers and officials had already left by then, though a few tried to talk their way back in afterward, visibly stung that they hadn't been invited to whatever came next. A small standoff with an army officer trying to assert his authority ended the same way most of them do here — a few apologetic sentences, and he backed off. You can't shut a movement like this down without starting a riot. This is ancestors and tradition we're talking about. The kitesurfers kept their distance the rest of the evening, good sports about it, cheering loudly all the same.

SUNDAY, JANUARY 29

The wind dropped. Flat calm — against every forecast, again. So we did what you do: sat, swam, caught up on conversation, watched clouds, watched the banners for any small puff worth chasing.

We cleared the beach for the dancers. The troupe performed facing the land, not the sea, as if to let the ocean itself speak through their gestures instead of the other way around.

The wind started to return, and we finally got to the finals. But by the time the big jong super final came around, it had built past 15 knots, catching everyone by surprise — players sprinting for lead weights, two people holding a single jong steady while its rigging got a last adjustment, and then, suddenly, the jongs were flying, with hardly any water left under them at all.

And just when I thought we'd gotten it right, the real highlight of the whole weekend turned out to be the kids. This was their turn now, and they'd been waiting two full days for it. Something took hold of all of them at once, and instead of running the short course we'd set up, they walked together, as a group, all the way out to a starting line far down the beach. Real racing. And the gestures, the postures, the whole spirit of it suddenly made flesh in a way I hadn't expected. Yes. Jongs are alive.

RESULT OF THE JONG UTARA RACE, 2017

JONG KECIL (small jong)

- 1st: Satu Hati, Junjung Budaya, Dompak
- 2nd: Kasturi, Junjung Budaya, Dompak
- 3rd: Motor Plus, Tok Yon, Teluk Bakau
- 4th: Dekrow, Selat Manila, Kete Tengah

JONG BESAR (big jong)

- 1st: Asdka, Budaya Melayu, Dompak
- 2nd: Badang Bintan, Tunas Muda, Teluk Bakau
- 3rd: Tameng Sam, Sekapur Sirih, Teluk Bakau
- 4th: Awang Kembali, Junjung Budaya, Dompak

Two hundred and forty jongs raced that weekend, the largest gathering Teluk Bakau had seen up to that point, and when the newspapers picked the story up a few days later, the number they printed matched mine exactly. It's a small thing, a number agreeing with itself across a journal and a newsprint clipping years apart, but it's the kind of small thing that makes me trust the rest of what I wrote down, half-asleep, across three days in January, more than I trust most of what I remember without it.

INTERLUDE

The Recipe for Meaningful Events

I found this list in an old file, undated, untitled beyond the words I'd given it. No sentences around it, no explanation of what it was for — just a list, the kind you write for yourself, not for anyone reading over your shoulder. I've left it exactly as I found it, because I don't think I could improve it now, and because a list like this earns more by being left alone than by being explained.

Meaning

Freedom

Thinking for yourself

Fun

Work ethics

Art

Vibration

Spirited individuals

Creativity

Honest food

Minimum impact

Leaving a place in better shape than when you started

Increased value for the community

Respect

Diversity

Flexibility

Leadership, not dictatorship

Heart

Passion

Just enough money

Generosity

Time

Contemplation

Vision

Taking the punches

Setting

Good weather

Right time

Right place

Right people

Right intention

Experience

Attention to detail

Friendship

I don't remember writing this. I only remember, reading it now, that it's still true.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Penyengat — November 10, 2013

I don't have a journal from this one, the way I do from 2017. What I have instead is a small stack of photographs, taken by whoever happened to be holding a camera that week, and Zakir's own memory of it, passed to me the way he passed most things — a little at a time, over the years, until the whole trip had assembled itself in my head out of fragments I couldn't always place in order. So this chapter is built the way memory usually ends up being built, from pictures rather than sentences, and I'd rather admit that up front than pretend otherwise.

We took thirty jongs to Penyengat that November, our first trip outside Teluk Bakau's own waters — a small, mystical island a short crossing from Tanjungpinang, thick with its own royal Malay history. The old seat of the Riau-Lingga Sultanate. A mosque built, so the story goes, with egg whites worked into its mortar. A grave that still carries the weight of an entire vanished court behind it. Raja Ali Haji is buried there. I didn't know that yet, the first time I stepped off the boat with a jong under each arm. I know it now.

The island had turned itself into a festival for the week — Festival Laut, banners strung along a promenade fenced in woven bamboo, striped umbrellas, the whole path down to the water dressed up for visitors in a way Teluk Bakau's own beach never bothered to be. A crowd moved along that promenade in bright hijabs and match-day football shirts, half paying attention to the sea, half just enjoying the crowd itself, the way people do at any festival anywhere in the world. Somewhere behind a fence, a boy in a red shirt lit a cigarette in front of a wall painted with a grinning orangutan, and I remember laughing at that — at how completely ordinary it was, in the middle of something that felt, to me, entirely extraordinary.

Down at the water, the actual work of the day looked nothing like the festival above it. Shallow water the color of tea. Red laterite rocks scattered across the tideline. Men wading in past their knees with jongs held out in front of them like something being offered rather than carried. Sails in every color a length of cloth can hold — pale blue and cream in wide diagonal stripes, solid yellow, a dark one with

a crescent worked into the fabric, its owner keeping it half-furled until the last possible moment.

I'm in one of the photographs myself, waist-deep, working the rigging on a boat with a striped sail, a length of dowel held out over the water like I'm sighting down it. I don't remember which boat that was, or exactly what I was adjusting. What I remember, looking at it now, is the feeling underneath the moment rather than the moment itself — the particular kind of concentration that has nothing left over for anything but the knot in your hands, the whole festival and the whole crowd and the whole history of the island reduced, for a few seconds, to a piece of line and the tension you're trying to get right.

That's most of what this trip actually was, if I'm honest. Less a single dramatic afternoon than thirty small private acts of concentration, repeated in parallel, on a beach that had seen sultans and would go on seeing tourists long after we packed the jongs back onto the boat home.

The provincial government started taking real notice after that trip, the way Zakir always said it would. A group formed in Malang Rapat not long after. Berakit started organizing its own races. The Orang Laut themselves, the descendants of the very people who'd once kept this whole tradition before anyone thought to write it down, made the trip out during a Selatan race not long afterward, racing alongside the rest of us on water their own ancestors had sailed for a purpose entirely different from ours.

I don't have the words anyone actually said to each other that week. I only have what the camera happened to catch, which is, in its own way, an honest kind of record too — what people look like in the middle of doing something they care about, before anyone's thought to write any of it down.

CHAPTER NINE

Passing It On

August 22, 2025. The day before the Selatan race. The jury was gathering to welcome one representative from each group, draw the racing order and go over the rules one more time. Nobody on the beach was particularly interested in the rules.

The beach was already filling with jongs. Groups arrived by truck, boats stacked and tied down, sails still furled. Twenty-three kelompok had come this year, from all across the island — as far as Batam and Penyengat. The racing jongs were being unloaded. The wind was already blowing twelve knots, gusting to fifteen. Enough to test an old boat. Enough to break something. Something always breaks. That's part of the game.

And that's exactly why I wanted the children there. Not for a demonstration. Not to show them a perfect boat sailing perfectly. I wanted them to see the real thing. Wind. Wood. Skill. Mistakes. Things breaking. People fixing them. Trying again. And that's why I kept wanting more children on the beach. Not because I wanted to create little champions. Because I wanted them to feel that this was theirs.

The tide was dropping. The beach widened. The water became shallow and forgiving. The wind was holding around fifteen knots — enough to move a jong, but not so much that a beginner would immediately be punished for every mistake.

It was almost perfect. Dui helped bring together children from the neighbourhood and from as far away as Kawal. My Bahasa Indonesia still isn't perfect. But I taught my first class in it anyway. That felt appropriate. You don't need perfect language to teach someone how to hold a boat in the wind. You can demonstrate. You can point. You can put a child's hands in the right place. The boat does the rest.

We started simply. Which way is the wind coming from? How do you hold the jong steady? How do you turn it? How do you keep the sail from collapsing? Nothing complicated. But even these simple things require attention. Then something happened that I have come to recognize. The children stopped listening to us. Not because they

were bored. Because they had started learning. They were doing it themselves. Each pair named their jong.

A small ceremony, perhaps. But naming a boat changes the relationship with it. It becomes your boat. Then they started racing. Nobody had asked them to. Nobody had given them instructions. They simply kept racing. Again. And again. Nobody wanted to stop. That's when I knew something had been passed on. Not a lesson. A desire.

CHAPTER TEN

The Wood and Building

Every jong starts as a tree, and long before anyone's thinking about racing, or wind, or a beach full of shouting kids, somebody is already thinking about the tree. Pulai — kayu pulai, light and soft enough to work by hand, buoyant in a way that makes it exactly the wood this whole tradition was built around, and not by accident. Say it plainly and it sounds simple: cut the tree, shape the hull, sail the boat. It isn't. The wood is already half the boat before the first cut is ever made.

You can't just take any piece of pulai and expect a jong to come out of it. The grain has to run right. The weight has to be right, evenly distributed, nothing heavy hiding on one side waiting to reveal itself the moment the boat's actually in the water. A hull can look beautiful sitting on the sand and still be a genuinely terrible boat — I've seen it happen, a gorgeous piece of carving that simply won't sail true, and there's no arguing with it once it's built. The wood tells you, eventually, whether you got it right. It just waits until the worst possible moment to do so.

The builders here know all of this, mostly by feel rather than by explanation — plenty of them could show you exactly what to look for in a piece of wood without being able to tell you in words why it matters. Once the wood's cut, it needs to sit. A month. Sometimes two. You cannot rush that stage without paying for it later, and everyone who's tried has the ruined hull to prove it. Nothing appears to be happening during that waiting — a plank leaning against a wall, gathering dust — and everything is happening. The wood is losing moisture, settling into whatever shape it's actually going to hold, becoming, slowly, ready.

Once it's dried, the real carving starts. The hull gets drawn out by hand first, then shaped, then hollowed — slowly, carefully, the aim always to strip away as much weight as the wood will allow without giving up its strength. Every shaving changes the boat a little. A touch more taken here, a touch less there, until at some point — and there's no single moment you could point to and call it the moment — a piece of wood stops being a piece of wood and starts being a jong. The

maker knows it's happened. Or thinks he does. The water will be the one to actually decide.

I have a photograph on my phone I keep coming back to: one of our older builders, white-haired, shirtless, kneeling on a concrete floor that's gone soft-coloured over the years from decades of dripped paint. The hull is braced across a single wooden block in front of him. A scraper in one hand, the other pressed flat against the wood the way you'd rest a hand on an animal to keep it still. Shavings scattered around his knees like he's kneeling in his own small snowfall. He's been doing this so long that his whole body seems to already know where it needs to be before his mind's caught up with the decision.

That photograph tells me more about what actually makes a jong fast than any photograph of a finished boat, sails up, ever could. Because the speed of a jong gets decided right there, long before it ever meets the wind — on a bare concrete floor, under a pair of hands that have shaped hundreds of these boats and stopped needing to think about most of it.

Somewhere along the way I became a little obsessed with the geometry underneath all of it — the relationship between hull and mast, mast and sail, sail and outrigger, weight balanced against balance itself. Everything touches everything else. Move one thing half a centimetre and something else, somewhere on the boat, quietly changes in response. That's why tuning a jong can turn into something close to an obsession if you let it. You're never really adjusting one part in isolation. You're adjusting a relationship, and relationships, boat or otherwise, don't hold still for you.

The hands remember all of it eventually — not in some mystical sense, necessarily, though there are days it's hard not to think of it that way. They remember pressure. Texture. Resistance. The particular angle a tool wants to sit at against a particular kind of grain. The difference, which you can feel long before you could ever explain it to somebody else, between a hull that's almost right and one that actually is. A child can start learning that difference years before they'd have the words for it — a hand laid flat against a hull, a small knife finding its way into wood, a sail catching wind against a mast half the size of the child holding it.

The body collects the information first. The mind gets around to naming it later, if it ever does. Sometimes I think the builder isn't really making the boat at all. He's uncovering one — the tree already spent decades becoming whatever it was going to become, and the builder's real job is to listen to the grain closely enough to know what

to remove, and what to leave exactly where it already is. You balance one side against the other, work with what the wood's actually offering you rather than what you'd prefer it offered, and somewhere in that negotiation a shape comes up out of the wood on its own.

Then you put a sail on it. And find out, all at once, whether you were actually listening.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

What the Jong Carries

A jong is small enough to hold in one hand, small enough that a stranger glancing down at the beach could be forgiven for mistaking it for a toy. I've never once managed to see it that way myself, not after all these years, and the longer I'm around them the more convinced I become that a jong is carrying quite a lot more than wind.

Some of what it carries you can measure. The hull, the mast, the sail, the outrigger — the geometry of how those four things relate to each other, the specific knowledge of exactly how much wood to remove and how much to leave standing. The wind. The tide. The race itself, which can be timed and argued over and, on a good night at the pondok, argued over again. People do argue about all of it, endlessly, happily — that's most of the fun. But there's a second layer around the jong that resists being measured quite so cleanly.

I've watched small offerings go down before a boat touches the water — rice, betel, a pinch of tobacco, gestures I've learned not to ask too many questions about. Some of it gets explained to you freely. Some of it doesn't, and I've come to understand that the not-explaining is itself part of the tradition rather than a gap in it. There are things here that get shown to you, and things you're simply expected to notice on your own, in your own time, or not at all. I used to want everything explained — we all do, I think, wanting our causes to line up neatly with our effects. I've mostly stopped insisting on that. Some of what happens on this beach exists because it has always existed, because someone was taught to do it by someone who was taught the same thing before them, and the reason, if there ever was a single reason, got lost somewhere upstream of anyone still living. Both things can be true at once — that nobody quite remembers why, and that it still matters enormously that it gets done.

The jong comes out of a much larger maritime world than its own small self would suggest. People along this coast once knew how to read water the way you or I read a room — how to move between islands with confidence, where to find shelter when the sky turned, where fresh water actually was on an island that no chart bothered

naming, how a season announced itself through the particular quality of a wind before anyone needed to consult a calendar. Most of that world has changed almost past recognition. Motors replaced sails. Borders replaced the old freedom to simply go where the water and your own knowledge of it would carry you. Modern life made a great many things faster and, in the same motion, made a great deal of hard-won knowledge unnecessary — and knowledge that's no longer necessary has a way of quietly disappearing, even when nobody ever decided to let it go.

But it doesn't always disappear entirely. Sometimes it survives in the strangest, smallest places imaginable: a miniature boat on a beach. A proportion a builder still remembers in his hands without knowing where he first learned it. A single word for a single part of a boat that outlived every other word around it. A knot. A gesture before a launch. A race, held twice a year, whether or not anyone watching understands what they're actually looking at.

I think that's part of why I ended up so attached to it. The jong is almost absurdly small next to the boats I spent most of my life around. I sailed traditional vessels across a good part of the world before I ever set foot on this beach — kula canoes, time in Melanesia, in Papua, Manus, Milne Bay, among the Trobriand people, in Bali. I photographed them, sailed alongside them, organised expeditions built entirely around finding and understanding them, partly as an ethnographer's project and partly, honestly, just because they're some of the most beautiful objects I've ever seen on water. But the jong did something different to me than any of those larger boats managed. It took the whole enormous problem of traditional sailing and reduced it to almost nothing: a piece of wood, a mast, a sail, an outrigger, wind, and attention. That's the entire equation. And somehow, inside that reduction, is where the jong gets strange again — because it responds to attention in a way I can't prove and can absolutely feel. The better you understand a particular boat, the more precisely you start noticing what she's actually doing under you — a sail filling half a beat differently than it did yesterday, a hull just beginning to wander off true before anyone else on the beach would catch it. I know that's subjective. I'm not confusing it with physics. But subjective experience is still experience, and after enough years of it, it becomes part of how you actually know a boat, alongside everything you could measure.

I don't know where the jong began. Nobody I've asked seems to know either — not the government registry, not the one academic

paper, not the oldest builders I know. I don't know who made the first one, or exactly what it meant to the people who first carried it down to the water. I've made up my own stories about its past over the years, the way you do with anything you love and can't fully explain, and some of those stories are probably wrong in ways I'll never get to correct. I don't mind. I try not to confuse my own imagining with history, but I also don't see much reason to stop imagining just because I can't prove any of it. Some of the secret can stay a secret. What actually matters to me now isn't the answer. It's the transmission.

A child holds a jong for the first time. A builder shows them how to hold it. Someone points out which way the wind is actually coming from. The sail fills, and pulls, and the child feels that pull travel straight up through their own arm. They race it. They lose, usually, the first several times. They try again. Not everything that gets learned in that sequence will ever end up written down anywhere — some of it will live entirely in a person's hands, some in memory, some only in the stories they end up telling their own children one day, half-remembered, slightly reshaped in the retelling the way every good story eventually is. And some of it, honestly, will simply disappear. That's always been the risk with any tradition carried person to person instead of page to page. It's also, I've come to think, the thing that keeps a tradition alive rather than pinned under glass — nothing frozen survives, not really. Only things still moving through people do.

The wind decides, in the end, whatever it's going to decide. And perhaps that's enough of an answer on its own. The jong is small. But somehow, it's carried me an enormous distance.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The People of the Sea

I remember sitting with a man from the Orang Suku Laut once, drinking tea in his house on stilts, in one of those conversations that starts somewhere ordinary — boats, the sea, places we'd each happened to sail past — and slowly turns into something else entirely. At some point we ended up talking about the stars, and that's when I really started paying attention. He knew the islands out there in a way I recognised immediately, and that I'd rarely encountered in anyone since. Not as dots on a map. As places you moved between. Places where you already knew, without needing to ask, where the water was fresh, where you could shelter if the weather turned, which way the wind would be coming from before it arrived. We'd sailed some of the same stretches of water, it turned out — Malaysia, Singapore, up and down this whole archipelago — for entirely different reasons, in entirely different kinds of boats, and somehow still ended up carrying something close to the same map of it in our heads. A map made of water rather than lines.

Then he told me what had changed. He used to move freely between Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia — no different, in his own mind, from moving between rooms in a house. Now there were borders. Passports he couldn't get, permits he couldn't afford, paperwork built for a kind of life nobody had asked him whether he wanted to keep living. The sea that had once been a single continuous world had been carved up into countries, and a place that had felt enormous to him for most of his life had gotten very small, very quickly, without his ever agreeing to it.

The fishing economy around him told the rest of the story without either of us needing to say much more. Catch weighed, packed in ice, sent off toward Tanjung Pinang, sold at prices that barely covered the trouble of catching it. Fish kept alive in pens. Crabs in buckets. Grouper, snapper, everything eventually folded into a market he had almost no say over. He and his family knew the sea more intimately than anyone I've ever met knew anything — and knowing the sea, it turns out, guarantees you nothing at all about what happens to whatever the sea gives you. Some families were tied to

the very buyers they owed money to, selling their catch straight back to the people they were in debt to, a cycle nobody in it had really chosen and nobody in it seemed able to simply step out of.

It wasn't romantic, sitting there. There was real poverty in that house. Real debt. Real trouble with something as basic as clean water. But there was also an independence in that household that I don't think I've seen matched many other places — generations of accumulated knowledge, held onto because it had always been necessary, whether or not the world outside still valued it. At the edge of the village stood four old charcoal ovens, unused, half-forgotten. I stood in front of them for a while, imagining what they might become again if anyone ever had the resources to try — not a museum behind glass, nobody looking at anything they weren't allowed to touch, but something people could actually walk into and be part of. Knowledge is a great deal more interesting alive than it is preserved.

I think about that conversation almost every time I'm tuning a jong on the beach at Teluk Bakau. The connection feels obvious to me now, in a way it wouldn't have before I sat in that house. The jong is tiny. The world it comes out of isn't. Wind, tide, stars, current, the memory of a particular island, the knowledge of exactly where water can be found on it — the jong carries a small fragment of all of that forward, a genuinely small fragment, and I try not to overstate what one little boat can actually hold. For the man I was sitting with, none of that knowledge was a game. It was simply life, unglamorous and demanding and his. We race the knowledge. He lived it. I don't ever want to lose sight of that difference, even as I keep insisting the jong is worth taking seriously.

Perhaps I understand a little of it, in my own way, because I've spent enough of my own life at sea to think of myself as something like an Orang Laut without any actual claim to the name — not by blood, only by years of habit. I know something of what it means to think automatically in terms of wind and weather, distance and current, stars and the next possible place to find shelter. I know what it is for the sea to stop being scenery and become, instead, your road, your workplace, your whole way of understanding exactly where you are in the world. These days I live on the beach rather than on the water, and I've noticed that the habit hasn't left me even though the ocean mostly has. I still wake up and check the wind before I check anything else. Old maps don't switch off just because you've stopped needing them every day.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Naga Languit and Moana

Not every boat in this story is a jong. Zakir showed up one day with a *kolek* — a hull, a mast, and a sail cut from a sheet of plastic so large it looked more like something meant to cover a roof than to catch wind. Six metres of hull, low in the water, built for a very different kind of sailing than anything I'd learned on this beach. A jong needs nobody aboard. A kolek needs a crew, and ours, in the beginning, barely qualified as one.

We called her Naga Languit — sky dragon, more or less — and she needed work before she'd earn the name. No rudder came with her, so we built one, a length of wood shaped into a paddle and lashed on to steer by main strength rather than by any proper fitting. The hull wanted attention too, seams that needed closing before she'd hold water out rather than in, and we packed them the old way — wood dust worked into the gaps and set with *minyak tanah*, kerosene, the whole boat smelling faintly of it for weeks afterward. That plastic sail didn't last. What replaced it came from an unlikely place: my friend Paul, who I've known since I was six years old, gave me a length of parachute cloth that had belonged to his father, a genuinely accomplished formation parachutist in his own right. I cut sails out of that cloth for years afterward — not just for Naga Languit, but small ones for the sampan layar too, wherever a sail needed cutting and I had the fabric to spare.

The sail I eventually cut for her was modelled on a jong's — the same proportions, the same instinct — and it turned out to be a mistake, or at least a compromise we never quite fixed. It was a racing cut, built for speed rather than sense, too much canvas for a boat that already asked a great deal of the people aboard her. Naga Languit was never a boat you could relax on. She was wildly, almost comically unstable without a crew moving as a single organism — if one person shifted their weight so much as a foot, everyone else had to feel it and answer instantly, or she'd go straight over. We capsized her more times than I'd want to count in those first months, over and over, in full view of a beach that must have found it thoroughly entertaining. What actually got her sailing properly was help from the Orang Laut

out of Berakit, who understood a boat like this in a way none of us quite did yet and taught us, patiently, how to move.

Getting a full crew together to practise was its own kind of miracle every single time — everyone's got a life beyond the beach — but once we had it, we had it, and we took her out further than I'd probably have admitted to anyone at the time was sensible. We sailed her once all the way to Nikoi Island, a real crossing, open water the whole way, and I don't think a single person outside the boat understood how much of that trip was pure improvisation held together by a crew that had simply learned, through enough capsize, to move as one body. Nobody who wasn't aboard ever knew how close it sometimes came to going wrong. That's the kind of thing you only tell people afterward, if you tell them at all.

These kolek haven't disappeared, even if Naga Languit's own particular chapter has mostly closed. They're still sailed, still raced, once a year, on Independence Day, in the waters near Batam — a fleet of them, manned and full-sailed, doing what ours once did on a much smaller and far less dignified scale. I've seen them race rarely off Dompok and Tanjung Pinang too, and it's a genuinely rare sight now, rare enough that I make a point of being there when I know it's happening. A whole different scale of the same idea that lives in every jong on this beach — wood, wind, and a sail cut by hand, except this time with a crew standing inside the wager instead of watching it from the sand.

Naga Languit's own hull never raced again after that stretch, but her mast didn't retire with her. It found its way into an entirely different boat a few years later, through a man named Philippe, who came into this story the same way most people eventually find their way to Teluk Bakau — through the jong itself. He'd spent time in French Polynesia and come away fascinated by traditional sailing there, and somewhere along the way he found a page I'd written online about jongs. That's what actually brought him to Bintan. He wanted to build a boat.

What we built together took Naga Languit's old mast and set it into a new hull entirely — Malay below the waterline, Polynesian in the outrigger, two traditions that had never met before meeting in one boat. We named her Moana, after my daughter, and because *moana* is also the Polynesian word for the deep blue ocean itself, which meant the name fit twice over without either meaning crowding out the other. She can be sailed alone or with a full crew

aboard, practical when she needs to be and, when she doesn't need to be anything at all, a true poet's dream on the water.

Philippe eventually carried the jong itself all the way back to Brittany, and sails small Riau racing boats on the other side of the world now, which still makes me smile every time I think about it. But the boat was never really the main thing he gave this project. He watched it grow, from outside, in a way none of us on the beach every day quite could, and more than once, in the years when I genuinely doubted whether any of this was worth the trouble it took, his conviction that it was mattered more than he probably ever realised. His passion fuelled mine. Mine, I'd like to think, fuelled his right back.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Zakir

Zakir was a short man — short enough that when he built me a place to keep my wood, he built it to his own size, and it never once occurred to either of us to make it fit me instead. I had to duck every time I went in, and I still catch myself doing it out of habit, years after the shed itself stopped existing in that original form. I filled it with whatever the sea handed me after a storm — driftwood, branches split open by weather, pieces bleached white by the sun that I couldn't yet say what I'd do with. Some of it became sculpture, eventually. Most of it simply waited, the way wood does, patiently, for as long as it takes. Zakir was patient in exactly the same way, in his own fashion.

The shed grew up around us without either of us quite planning it. First there was just the place for the wood. Then a bar. Then a kitchen. Then tables, filling in the gaps between. The roof never changed height, though — it stayed exactly as low as Zakir had built it for himself, and everyone who walks in still has to bow their head a little, whether they know why or not. Planet Samudra grew out of that low-roofed shed, and people come there now who never knew the man who built the first version of it. They sit under the lights, eat, drink, talk, entirely unaware of the low ceiling's original reason for being what it is. I look around sometimes and think about that — about a man building a whole future business by first building himself somewhere to keep another man's driftwood.

Zakir wasn't the hardest worker I've ever known, and I can say that because it's true, and because I said versions of it to his face often enough that he'd have laughed rather than argued. What he had instead was something harder to put a number on. He cared, properly, about jongs — cared enough to travel all the way to Bengkalis, nearly directly across the strait from Melaka, chasing down boats built the traditional way by builders he trusted more than the ones closer to home. He had family out there too, which probably made the trip easier to justify to anyone who asked. I suspect he'd have gone anyway. Some things don't need much of a reason.

Zakir and Rajuna had four daughters, no sons. The youngest more or less adopted the whole enterprise before she could properly walk, following us to every beach, every race, always a few steps behind wherever the action actually was. Somebody started calling her Princess early on, and the name simply stuck the way the good nicknames do. She was always watching, even when nobody thought to notice she was watching, and I suspect she learned more from all those afternoons trailing us around than any of us gave her credit for at the time.

Once word of that first race in Teluk Bakau got around, rivalry followed almost immediately, and Tunas Muda became the group we measured ourselves against most closely. It got serious. It never got poisonous, and that distinction mattered — a good rivalry sharpens you, sends you back to the workshop asking real questions. Why's his boat faster than mine? Why does mine wander off line where his holds true? What did he actually change? Zakir and I were plainly competitive with each other, our names attached publicly to those boats, wanting to win the way you want to win something you've put real hours into. And for a good long stretch of years, we did. Zakir would sometimes work through an entire night before a race — take a jong apart, adjust something almost too small to see, put it back together, look at it again, take it apart a second time if the look on his face said it still wasn't right. He could spend hours getting a single hull to sit exactly the way he wanted it to sit. I never had a fleet as well maintained in my life as I did in those years, because he knew those boats the way you know something you've built with your own hands a hundred times over, and he could see things in them that I still, honestly, couldn't.

Friendship and money never mixed cleanly, and we both learned that the hard way more than once. Sometimes a player didn't have the means to get himself home after a race, and I'd end up buying him a jong on the spot rather than watch him stuck. Sometimes I simply lent money outright. It came back occasionally. More often it didn't, and I learned, slowly and a little expensively, that money lent in this particular small world had a quiet habit of becoming money given, whether or not that was ever the plan. I don't say that with any real bitterness — it was simply part of the cost of doing this the way we did it. And in the one place it actually mattered between the two of us, Zakir never once came up short. Our name was on the line every time we raced together, and we were winning some of those races. I haven't

won one since he died. I've noticed that. I'm still not entirely sure what to do with the noticing.

One of the people who came into this whole world through Zakir was Ibrahim, young back then, who started out building small jongs for us when Zakir began commissioning boats from builders out in Bengkalis. I remember watching him work at the time without any real sense of what he'd eventually become to all of this. You rarely recognise, while it's happening, which of the people around you will end up carrying the whole thing forward. It only becomes obvious years later, in hindsight, once they already have.

Zakir got sick more than once — stomach trouble, the kind of illness where having enough money genuinely determines whether you get ahead of it or simply learn to live alongside it. His family wasn't wealthy by any measure. Rajuna worked through all of it without much complaint, then or since — she still works, at the café, most days I go by. After a second round of treatment, and then a third, tubes running into his stomach by the end, Zakir died. It was, as far as I can remember, an entirely ordinary day. I couldn't tell you what the weather was doing, which is a strange thing to admit, because I can usually tell you exactly what the weather was doing on almost any day that mattered to me.

That was the first death I'd been close to in that particular way. I'd pulled dead men out of the sea before — fishermen, other seamen, more than once, and each time it stayed with me afterward, the way that sort of thing does. But those men were strangers to me. I was handling somebody else's grief when I handled theirs. Zakir was different. I helped wrap his body in white cloth myself. I sat through the prayers. I watched his family gather around him the way a family does. And I cried, more than I think I'd ever cried for anyone before him. I hadn't understood, until that day, that grief could be physical in quite that way — that holding the body of someone you loved stays in your hands afterward, long after the body itself is gone. Nobody had ever told me that part. Perhaps nobody can.

The school didn't come back together easily after that. For a while I put my trust in a hot-tempered man who could build a jong competently enough but didn't really understand one — didn't have whatever that finer register was that Zakir had always carried, the difference between a boat that floats and a boat that actually wins. Some of what we'd built together disappeared during that stretch. Boats sold off. Things simply taken while I wasn't watching closely enough. I kept what I could hold onto, enough to keep a real fleet

together, and I waited, without being entirely sure what I was waiting for. It's only recently that I've found someone genuinely willing to learn the whole of it properly — someone patient enough to put in the time it actually takes. Not a replacement for Zakir. Grief doesn't work that way, and it would be wrong to ask it to. People don't replace people. But knowledge can still move from one set of hands to another, and a boat can still be built again the right way, and a sail can still catch the wind the way it's supposed to.

It's a political world too, whatever else it is — the respect the players themselves have for what we're doing is real and undeniable, but plenty else around it gets complicated fast. What I keep coming back to is this: not every seed we planted in those years sprouted. Plenty didn't. But enough of them are growing now that the actual work in front of me stopped being about building more jongs a long time ago. It's about holding onto some real purity in the event itself, and about building bridges — between villages, between generations, between whatever's coming next and whatever Zakir started on a beach with nothing but wood and a low roof he built to fit himself.

I still duck when I walk under that roof. I catch myself doing it sometimes without meaning to, and for just a second he's there again — short man, low ceiling, wood everywhere, telling me I've put something in the wrong place, and me arguing back that I haven't. That's how I'd rather remember him than any other way I could choose to.

EPILOGUE

The Wind Will Come Again

I used to think I was trying to save the jong.

I'm not sure that's true anymore. Somewhere along the way the reason changed, quietly enough that I couldn't tell you exactly when. My own children became part of all of this without my really noticing it happening — they grew up on this beach, watched the boats, touched them, played with them, watched grown adults get completely serious about something that, to a small child, is simply beautiful: a little boat, a sail, the wind moving both. Maybe that's exactly how it should work. You don't start by explaining the history to anyone. You start by putting the boat in their hands and letting the rest arrive later, if it arrives at all.

Every year the same beach fills again, and every year it's a slightly different beach filling it. Some faces I've known for twenty years show up like clockwork. Some are new, showing up for the first time, not yet sure what they've wandered into. And some people who were always there simply stop coming, for reasons you don't always get told and don't always ask about. You learn to hold both things at once without either one cancelling the other out — the real happiness of watching everybody gather again, and the quieter awareness, underneath it, of exactly who's missing this time. Sometimes I think about Zakir. Sometimes I think about the others who are gone. And sometimes, when the jongs are out and the wind's doing exactly what it's supposed to, I let myself imagine that they're all still somehow part of it, in whatever way that could possibly be true. I can't prove that. I'm not trying to. I just like the thought, so I keep it.

I still cry sometimes watching the races. It happens most years, and it never announces itself in advance — I'm standing there watching a fleet move across the water and something opens up in me that I didn't see coming. It isn't sadness exactly. It isn't happiness either. It's closer to beauty, plain and immediate, and for a moment everything else — the money, the politics, the arguments, the boats that were lost, the people who left — falls away entirely, and what's left is wood, wind, water, sails, and a beach full of children running. I don't need another reason beyond that. Maybe the actual work was never

building the boats in the first place. Maybe it was always making sure somebody else would want to pick one up next — that a child would watch an older player and think, quietly, I want to do that, and that one day that same child would show it to another child, not because anyone told them they had to, but because they wanted to. That's the moment I know something's actually survived. Not when it gets written down. Not when it ends up behind glass in a museum case. When somebody wants to do it again, unprompted, on their own.

There are mornings on this beach when the tide's out so far the sand seems to run on forever, and everything is completely quiet — no boats yet, no children running down toward the water, sometimes not even enough wind to move a piece of string. I stand there in that quiet and I still believe, every time, that it's all still possible. I don't fully know why I trust it as automatically as I do. Maybe because I've watched it happen too many times not to. A quiet beach. Then somebody arrives with a boat. Then another. A sail goes up, then a second one. Children come running from wherever they'd wandered off to. Someone's already hunting for a spare piece of wood. Someone's fixing a mast that broke on the walk down. Someone's arguing, happily, about whose boat is actually faster. And within the hour the whole beach is alive again, the way it always eventually is.

I've dreamed for years of seeing sails filling this whole coast again — not just Teluk Bakau, but the villages all around it, Batam, Tanjung Pinang, Penyengat, Bengkalis, Karimun, Lingga, across into Singapore and Malaysia, wherever this particular knowledge and these particular boats still have a place to land. I don't mean some careful reconstruction of an imagined past. I don't actually know what that past looked like in any complete way, and neither, if I'm honest, does anyone else. What exists instead is fragments — stories, boats, techniques, a handful of words that outlived everything around them — and then whatever imagination fills in around those fragments. I've filled in plenty myself over the years. Some of it's probably wrong. I've made my peace with that. The questions are as much a part of the journey as any answer would be.

What I do know is what I've actually watched happen, in front of me, for going on fourteen years now. I've watched people build these boats by hand, watched them tune a hull until one impossibly small adjustment changes everything about how she sails. I've watched old men teach younger men who didn't yet know they were being taught. I've watched children put their hands around a hull with absolutely no idea yet what they were holding, and then watched those same

children come back the following year, and the year after that, already different, already a little more theirs. I've watched a mast that once belonged to a boat called Naga Languit find its way into an entirely different hull, sailing now as Moana, in Philippe's hands, half a world from here. My own children grew up on this exact beach without starting from any real understanding of what a jong even was. They started with their hands — picking one up, turning it over, setting it into the water, feeling the wind take hold of it for the first time. The words came later, if they came at all. Perhaps that's closer to how transmission actually works than anything I could have planned. Not by being told. By touching something first, feeling its weight, feeling it resist you, feeling it move. The hand arrives before the question does. The mind gets there after.

I've spent a great deal of my life at sea, on boats built to cross real oceans, and now I live on a beach instead, close enough to the water that the difference sometimes doesn't feel as large as it should. I don't check an anchor every night anymore. But this place still feels like a deck under me some mornings, and I still wake up and look straight at the sky before I do anything else, still think automatically in terms of wind and tide the way I always have. Perhaps that never really stops in anyone who's spent long enough doing it. None of us, if you want to take the thought all the way out, is really standing still anyway — the Earth is turning under all of us regardless, circling a sun that's itself circling the middle of a galaxy, the whole arrangement moving at a speed that makes our long, serious arguments about whether a mast sits a centimetre too far forward look almost sweetly ridiculous. And yet those small arguments still matter enormously, because life happens at exactly that human scale — in the hands, on the sand, in the particular quality of a particular wind on a particular afternoon.

I've lost boats. I've lost money. I've lost people, Zakir first among them, and I lost, along with him, the best-kept fleet I ever had. I've watched things I thought were solid come apart entirely, and I've watched the school itself nearly disappear more than once. That's probably why I don't believe much in permanence anymore, not really. I believe in continuation instead, which is a different thing entirely. Something breaks, and somebody repairs it. Something gets forgotten, and somebody else, eventually, remembers it back into existence. Somebody dies, and somebody else picks up the tool they set down. Somebody leaves, and somebody new arrives to take the space they left open. A child grows up on this beach, and one day that same child is the one showing another child how to hold the boat properly

for the first time. That's enough for me. I don't need it to be more than that.

There have been mornings when the wind simply didn't come. We waited. Nothing. We waited longer still. And then, sometimes, without any drama at all, it arrived — not dramatically, just a small movement at first, a wrinkle across otherwise flat water, a sail trembling once before it decided anything. Then the first boat moves. And the moment one boat moves, the rest of them follow, the way they always do. I've learned to trust that pattern, not blindly, and not because I believe everything always works out in the end — it doesn't, and I've seen enough of life by now to know better than to pretend otherwise. I trust it because I've watched the wind come back, again and again, more times than I could possibly count, across enough years now that the pattern itself has become a kind of proof.

I still don't know the secret of the jong, if there ever really was one single secret to know. Maybe the actual secret is that nobody ever knew the whole of it at once. A builder knew one piece. A sailor knew another. Someone remembered a proportion nobody had written down. Someone else remembered exactly how to tie a particular knot. Someone watched the wind more closely than anyone else on the beach that day. Someone tried something nobody had tried before. Someone passed all of it, whatever they'd managed to hold onto, to a child standing nearby who happened to be paying attention. And the knowledge kept moving, the way it always has, the way I suspect it always will, provided somebody keeps showing up to catch it.

So I keep going down to the beach. I still look for the wind. I still watch the boats, and I still get genuinely excited every single time some new child discovers that a small piece of wood can suddenly, improbably, come alive in their hands. Somewhere in the middle of nearly every race it happens again — I look out at the sails catching the light, sometimes only a handful, sometimes what feels like hundreds, and I feel that particular mixture I've stopped trying to name precisely. Memory. Beauty. Gratitude. Something underneath all three that doesn't quite reduce to any one of them. I still cry sometimes. I've stopped being embarrassed about it. There are considerably worse things a person could be moved to tears by than this.

I don't know what will ultimately happen to the jong. I don't know if the next generation will care the way this one does, or the way I have. I don't know whether these races will still be happening in fifty years, or what, along the way, will simply be lost. But I've seen enough,

by now, to believe that something of it will remain regardless — that it won't look exactly like what we have today, and maybe it shouldn't. The boats will keep changing. The people will keep changing. The wind will do whatever the wind's always done. But somewhere down this same coast, somebody will pick up a piece of wood one afternoon and wonder, the way Zakir must have once wondered, what it could become. Somebody will put a sail on it. Somebody will carry it down to the water. And somebody else, standing on the sand, will watch it happen. Then the wind will come. The sail will fill. The boat will move. And for a few seconds it'll look less like a boat than like something genuinely flying.

That's when I'll know the story isn't finished. It never really was. The tide is turning again as I write this. Somewhere down the beach, right now, a child is already untangling a sail. I think I'll go see what happens next.

GLOSSARY

Malay and Indonesian words used through this book, gathered here in one place. Most are glossed once, in passing, the first time they appear — this is just a place to come back to.

anak — literally "child" — the outrigger float on a jong.

Bahasa Indonesia — the Indonesian language.

dangkung — a traditional dance performed at races and festivals.

Datok — a Malay honorific title, roughly "elder" or "esteemed one."

djong — the older, larger word — an ocean-going trading ship of old Java and the Malay world, distinct from the small racing jong.

Festival Laut — "Sea Festival" — the annual festival on Penyengat island.

gotong royong — communal mutual help — people working together simply because that's what you do.

Gurindam — a traditional Malay poetic form.

ibu-ibu — "mothers" — an affectionate term for older women, grandmothers.

Idul Fitri — the holiday marking the end of Ramadan.

jong — the small, hand-carved, unmanned racing sailboat this whole book is about — steered by nothing but the set of its sail.

jong kate / jong katil — regional names for the same boat tradition, up in Natuna and on the Riau mainland.

Kantor Desa — the village government office.

kelompok — a village or community racing group — a team.

kepala desa — the village head.

kolek — a larger, traditional manned sailboat, raced with a live crew aboard — unlike the jong.

kolek sauh — a local traditional sailboat whose hull and rig the jong is thought to trace back to.

Kepulauan Riau — the Riau Islands province of Indonesia.

Laksamana — admiral — a Malay court title.

Maharaja — great king — a Malay court title.

Mati lampu — "the light has died" — a power cut, common enough to be its own phrase.

minyak tanah — kerosene.

Nakhkoda Ninggal — "the captain who has departed" — a jong's name, once.

Naqshbandiyya — a Sufi order with a long presence on the east coast of Sumatra.

Orang Suku Laut / Orang Laut — "people of the sea" — the traditionally seafaring people of the Riau Archipelago.

Panglima — commander or chief — a Malay court title.

pasang — the rising tide.

Raja — king.

Ramadan — the Islamic month of fasting.

sampan layar — a small traditional sailboat.

Satu, dua, tiga — "one, two, three" — the count at the start of a race.

Sekapur Sirih — the betel leaf and lime offering — respect and hospitality; also the formal name of Michel's own kelompok.

selatan — the southwest monsoon, and the race sailed under it, from roughly June through September.

surut — the falling tide.

Taktido — an artist collective, named for "tidak tidur" — "no sleep" — after their first short-notice collaboration.

Tunas Muda — "young shoots" — a rival kelompok, and the school's earliest serious rivalry.

utara — the northeast monsoon, and the race sailed under it, from roughly December through late March.