
THE OTTER AMULET (*JIMAT SÉRO*)

Eka Kurniawan

Translated by Benedict R. O’G. Anderson

This story, titled “Jimat Séro,” can be found in *Kumpulan Budak Setan* (A Collection of Slaves of Evil Spirits), a collection of twelve “horror” stories published by Gramedia in Jakarta in January 2010. The first four are by Eka Kurniawan, the next by Intan Paramaditha, and the last by Ugoran Prasad. The first three of Eka’s contributions appeared originally in newspapers and magazines: “Pendjaga Malam” (Nightwatchman) in *Suara Merdeka*, July 4, 2004; “Taman Patah Hati” (The Garden of Broken Hearts) in *Kompas*, August 23, 2009; and “Riwayat Kesendirian” (A Story of Loneliness) in *Esquire Indonesia*, January 2010 issue. The last, “Jimat Séro,” is translated and reprinted here for the first time.¹

— Benedict Anderson

“Do you still often get beaten up?” asked an old friend of mine when we ran into each other at my grandmother’s house during Lebaran.² “Well, no, not any more,” I answered grinning.

He made me think back to the time when I was still a little kid. My mother had just given birth to my younger brother, so Father had parked me at Grandma’s house in the village. In my new school, I was the only one who wore shoes, and the only one who had a pencil-sharpener. Naturally, this was all bad news. With my undersized, frail

¹ The word *séro* is variously translated in Indonesian dictionaries as “otter,” “beaver,” “marten,” and “mongoose.” In an email he sent me, Eka said he intended “otter” for symbolic reasons. To the farmers of Eka’s Sundanese home country, otters are well known to be predators who steal fish from the farmers’ fishponds.

² This is the simple Indonesian word for the celebration that brings the Muslim fasting month to a close. Usually, people who can manage it go back to visit their home village or town.

body, nose full of snot, and often with a cold, I was an easy target for my classmates. Every day they robbed me of my pocket money.

One day three of them beat me up for purposely not bringing any pocket money to school. Grandma got wind of all this. You might think she would call on the school principal and lodge a complaint about these boys; or send me back to be with my mother, which is what I wanted.

But it turned out that Grandma had her own way of handling things. That afternoon she took me to a hut near a spring. Later on, I learned the owner's job was, of course, guarding the spring. The hut was tiny, with smoke curling up from a hole in its wooden roof. Maybe the people inside were cooking over a brazier. Grandma knocked, and a few moments later the door opened.

Before us stood an old man who immediately invited Grandma to come in and sit down. "No need! I'm just dropping by," said Grandma, looking at something behind the old man's back. A boy was standing there, older than I, and looking at us with irritation. "What grade is your boy Rohman in?" Grandma asked.

"Fourth grade," said the old man, turning to face his son. "Go ask your mum to bring us some tea."

But Grandma quickly signaled to the boy not to go, and ordered him to come close. When he did so, she said to Rohman, ignoring the old man: "Listen, starting tomorrow you'll move to Grade Two, and share a bench with my grandson. If anyone gives him a bad time, you can beat the boy as hard as you like."

Confused, Rohman turned to his father, but the old man merely smiled. Then he said: "Don't worry! Tomorrow he'll be in Second Grade."

Such was Grandma's way of solving my problem. From that day on, Rohman dropped down two grades. He was really something else. From the moment he shared a bench with me, nobody dared to give me a hard time. My shoes were now spared the trampling of dirty feet. To be sure, sometimes, outside school, a kid who didn't understand the situation would harass me, but the next day Rohman would beat him black and blue.

Not long afterwards, Father took me back to my mother's place. I didn't understand what was happening. Mother once told me that I'd cried for days on end, begging to be back with Grandma. I didn't know what made me cry, and I also did not know what happened to Rohman: did he jump back up two grades where he belonged, or did he stay where he was when I left? In my new school, sometimes there were boys who gave me a hard time, but I coped with it. In junior high, I had lots of friends, and no one bothered me. In senior high, I slept with several pretty and clever girls. Since this type of girl was rarely fought over, I faced practically no competition. Then I went to university and became a bookworm. I came very close to forgetting that I'd ever had a bench-mate called Rohman. Now I was engaged to Raisa, my boss's daughter, and no one dared to meddle with our relationship.

Then, last Lebaran, I went back to visit Grandma, and ran into Rohman. He asked me a really dumb question: "Are you still often getting beaten up?"

The two of us sat on Grandma's veranda and filled each other in on everything that had happened since we were parted. Said Rohman: "Every time I go back home, I always visit your Grandma to ask how you are doing." I merely smiled and tapped him on the knee. He then continued: "Even today, I often get worried that someone is beating you up."

I laughed and once again tapped him on the knee. "Don't go overboard like that!"

But with a serious face, he stared at me and asked: "Where are you staying now? I'll bring you an amulet."

"An amulet?"

"Yes, an amulet. It'll make you invulnerable to fists and weapons."

The amulet is now in my hands. It's name is Otter Amulet. According to Rohman, who came to my apartment for this reason, the name comes from the fact that it is made from an otter. Or maybe a weasel or a mongoose.

As I really didn't know what I should do, I asked Rohman whether I should pay him. How much? Rohman simply laughed and shook his head. "No," he said, "you don't have to pay a cent." He'd given me the amulet because he was genuinely worried for me. "Just remember," he said, "I promised to guard you." But since he could no longer guard me, the best he could do was to give me the amulet.

I wasn't used to accepting anything without paying for it, so I asked him about his job. Maybe he had a kid of his own. Maybe, like many other villagers, he was trying to park the kid with me, so the boy could get a job in the firm where I was employed, or in an office owned by somebody I knew. But it became clear that he needed nothing from me. He had already become the boss of a copra business in south Banten, and his eldest son was still only eleven years old. So he really and truly needed nothing from me.

I forced him to stay over with me one night, and I took him on a quick tour of Jakarta, just for fun. Then he went back to his job.

And now, the amulet is with me. The otter amulet.

For several days, I tried not to pay it any attention, but the more I tried to forget that I owned an amulet, the more I kept remembering it. The amulet was wrapped in a small cotton pouch, with a loop of string to hang it from, the size of a bracelet. I'd inspected it carefully, and for sure it looked like some kind of dried animal. There was no sign at all that it had any magical power. So I doubted whether it could really protect me.

Before he left, Rohman had said to me: "You have to carry it with you if you want to feel its power. Just stick it in one of the pockets of your pants, that'll be enough."

But I'd usually let it sprawl on my desk, next to my computer.³

Eventually, I had the idea that the only way to be sure that the thing could be useful was to test it. But before that I had to be sure of one thing. Ten days after Rohman's visit, I phoned him.

"So far as I know, every amulet has its taboos," I said. "Tell me what I am forbidden to do."

Rohman laughed. "You don't need to worry about anything."

All my life I'd never been in a fight. Of course, this didn't mean I never had trouble with some guys. But in every situation, I tried to solve the conflict without coming to blows. My friends would say that I was sharp enough to turn enemies into friends. But to be honest, there were times when I had to take evasive action. More exactly, give in.

When I first started to think about testing the amulet, I pictured to myself various people who had got my back up and ought to be taught a lesson: the taxi driver who pretended to be lost and took me round and round, then demanded a sky-high payment based on his meter; the small-time thug who held me up in Tanah Abang a long time ago when I first arrived in Jakarta; and maybe a colonel whom I saw drive his car into an old woman on a street corner and then speed off without any sense of guilt.

With a little anxiousness, I took the otter amulet from my desk and for a moment or two rubbed it gently in the palm of one hand. Did I really believe in all the nonsense said about amulets? It didn't seem strange that someone like Rohman could own an amulet, even make one himself. But I couldn't imagine how a tough little kid could grow into a man full of magical knowledge and capable of offering me an amulet. Still, after I thought it over, it all became less strange, in fact.

It was known that his father, the guardian of the spring, had various magical powers, and Grandma and Grandpa believed in him. My father and mother never spoke about such things, and I myself wasn't much interested, though I knew they existed.

I put the amulet into the left-hand pocket of my pants. It was the best place, since I never put anything else in that pocket. The amulet would never accidentally fall out (for example, if I bent over to pick up some small change or fiddled with my cellphone). For a few moments I tried to sense whether the amulet was giving me any signs.

But there was nothing.

I began to have my doubts. Had Rohman really made me invulnerable to fists or weapons? Who knew, maybe if I tried to test it, I'd end up black and blue. Lucky, too, if I didn't get killed on the spot.

I felt dizzy, and glanced at a razor blade.

³ In his email, Eka said that the amulet is intended to be a smallish, dried bit of an otter's body, not the whole animal.

"No, you will bleed if you cut yourself. The amulet only works if someone beats you up or tries to wound you with a weapon."

In that case, I thought to myself, there's only one way to put it to the test. After thinking all this over for a while, finally I went off to work. No problem, and anyway, really, there was no need to put the amulet to the test. Since I was afraid that the amulet wouldn't function as Rohman had promised, there was no reason to quarrel with anyone. I could get on with my life in the normal way, exactly the same as before I'd been given the amulet.

I was now twenty-nine, and fine without the amulet. With this thought in mind, still, I don't know why, I kept the amulet in my pocket.

I walked back to my apartment shivering. I didn't know how much of a mess I'd made of my appearance. People looked me over with suspicious stares. I didn't care and kept on walking. I checked my hands. Dried blood everywhere. My shirt, too, was stained. I could see that my fingers were all stiff, and I didn't think I could move them. They moved on their own. Shivering like me.

What I pictured was Nasrudin's body slumped in a corner of the bathroom. Blood oozing from the corners of his lips. I was so happy to see this blood. But it turned out that the blood wasn't as red as I imagined. The color was darker than red. Red is the color of the flag⁴ and the blood's color was not the same. It looked more like that of a rotting rosebud. And I was glad this color oozed out from the corners of Nasrudin's lips.

"That's for your filthy mouth," I said. I'd hated him for a long time. He was always buttering up my boss, and was always trying to denigrate me. He always had a way of arguing against my ideas and turning them round to make it sound as if they were just the jokes of an idiot. I knew my boss was taken in by what he said, and looked at me sadly. The only thing was that, since I was engaged to Raisa, no one could shake my position in the office. Even so, honestly, I wanted just once to teach Nasrudin a lesson.

These memories made me start shivering again.

That day I did my utmost to infuriate him, and I waited to see if he would hit me. It happened in the bathroom after most of our officemates had gone home. He didn't hit me, so I provoked him once again. Finally he came up to me and put his hands on the lower edge of my shirt.

"What do you want?"

I spat in his face.

For a moment he was dumbstruck. Of course, he wouldn't have expected this from me. He mopped his face with his shirt sleeve without relaxing his grip on the lower edge of my shirt. He stared at me. I smiled at him with derision. He continued to stare

⁴ The reference is to Indonesia's red-and-white national flag.

at me. I stared back at him. These moments were very tense. I waited to see what he would do.

Then—blam—he punched me on the jaw. The blow forced me back a few steps, but I felt nothing. I smiled and went up to him.

He hit me again, but I didn't feel a thing. He punched me again. I took it as if I were a sand-bag. He went on hitting me for about ten minutes, or maybe it was thirty? He was totally bemused that his blows had no effect on me. Finally, I launched a counterattack.

One blow sent him flying off beside the door. The second produced a bruise on his temple. The third sent him staggering. After who knows how many punches, he collapsed in a corner of the bathroom and blood began to issue from the corners of his lips.

"Mercy! Mercy!"

I left the bathroom. I smiled. Then I laughed. Then shivered.

I was still shivering, but also overwhelmed with glee, when I unlocked the door to my apartment. As I went inside, I got the feeling there was someone there. It must be Raisa, I thought, Raisa had a key and could go in and out as she pleased. Sometimes she would sleep over, and at times like that we would of course make love. She'd leave in the morning, returning to her parents' place.

I turned on the lamp and saw her there on the bed. Naked.

Strangely enough she wasn't alone. She was with a man, also naked. They were screwing, and I merely sat down on a sofa and watched through the open door of the bedroom. I felt myself getting aroused, too. My head was spinning.

I took off my shoes, then pulled off my socks. I looked at my hands, still stained with blood. I peeked once more at Raisa and the man with her. I heard her sighs of pleasure, which I knew so well. I'll ejaculate in a few moments, I thought.

And so it happened. I leaned back. It looked like man on top of Raisa had finished too. He got off the bed and came up to me.

"Hey! So you're back?" he asked me. I knew his voice very well. Rohman. His genitals were still hanging down between his upper thighs.

I didn't reply, I wasn't sure whether I was asleep or not. Maybe something in-between.

Later on, I remembered what had made me cry, day after day, at Grandma's. That night, I saw Grandma on her bed along with the old guardian of the spring. Grandpa just sat there on his rattan divan. His gaze terrified me, and I started crying from that night on.

How could I have forgotten him? But on this night, and for years afterwards, I remembered. But I was glad too. I was glad to see that blood on my hands. I was glad

to see Raisa bathed in sweat on my bed. I was glad to see Rohman walking, stark naked, with his genitals hanging down, toward me. Most of all I was glad to have the otter amulet in my left pants pocket.