

The Night the Trees Blink

Thousands of insects on one riverbank, and not one of them out of time.

7 min read

Before you read

- **sampan** — a small wooden riverboat
- **synchronise** — to do something at exactly the same moment as others
- **mangrove** — a tree that grows in salty mud at the water's edge
- **larva** — a young insect, before it changes into an adult
- **jetty** — a small landing place for boats at the water's edge
- **drift** — to move slowly without using power
- **rhythm** — a pattern that repeats evenly



A sampan drifting on the dark Selangor River at dusk

¹ Pak Cik Rahim does not start the engine. He pushes us off the jetty with a pole and lets the river do the rest.

² "Noise frightens them," he says. "And light. Put the torch away, Hafiz."

³ So we drift. The Selangor River is wide and brown by day, but at eight at night it is only a darker piece of the dark. I can hear the water against the side of the sampan and nothing else.

⁴ Then we turn the bend at Kampung Kuantan, and the trees switch on.

⁵ That is the only way I can describe it. Along the bank stand rows of berembang trees, a kind of mangrove that grows with its roots in the salty mud. Every leaf of every tree seems to be carrying a small cold light, and all of the lights go on together, and off together, and on again, two or three times a second.



Berembang trees lit by thousands of fireflies flashing together

⁶ They are fireflies — kelip-kelip, Pak Cik Rahim calls them. Thousands of them. What makes the Kampung Kuantan fireflies famous is not that they glow. Fireflies glow in many countries. It is that these ones synchronise.

⁷ A single firefly flashes to be noticed. On this stretch of river, each male watches his neighbours and adjusts his own timing until he matches them. Neighbour by neighbour, the matching spreads along the tree, until a whole bank is beating like one slow heart.

⁸ Nobody taught them the rhythm. There is no firefly in charge. Each one is only copying the ones beside it, and the pattern appears out of all that copying.

⁹ I ask why they bother. Pak Cik Rahim shrugs. "One light is easy to miss," he says. "A whole tree is not."

¹⁰ The fireflies need two things, and they need both. They need the berembang trees, which is where the adults gather. And they need the muddy bank underneath, where the larvae live and feed on tiny snails before they ever learn to fly.



The riverbank at Kampung Kuantan from the water, trees glowing

¹¹ That is why the people here argue about the river so often. Clear the mangroves for a jetty and the adults have nowhere to gather. Change how the water flows and the mud turns too salty, or not salty enough, and the snails go, and then the larvae go, and the lights go out a year later without anyone touching a single tree.

¹² On the way back, Pak Cik Rahim finally starts the engine. I look over my shoulder. The bank is still blinking, patient as a clock, keeping time for nobody at all.

Part A Choose the best answer

Circle the letter next to the right answer.

1. Why does Pak Cik Rahim push the boat along instead of using the engine?
 - A the engine is broken
 - B noise and light disturb the fireflies
 - C the river is too shallow for the engine
 - D he wants to save fuel
2. What makes the fireflies of Kampung Kuantan unusual?
 - A they are brighter than other fireflies
 - B they glow during the daytime
 - C they flash at the same time as each other
 - D they live inside the river mud as adults
3. How does the flashing become synchronised?
 - A one leading firefly sets the timing for the rest
 - B each firefly copies the timing of the ones near it
 - C the movement of the water sets the rhythm
 - D they are born already flashing in time
4. Where do the firefly larvae live and feed?
 - A high in the berembang leaves
 - B on the surface of the river
 - C in the muddy bank below the trees
 - D in the roof thatch of the village houses

Part B Write your answer

Answer in two or three sentences.

5. Explain why the fireflies could disappear from this stretch of river even if nobody ever cut down a berembang tree.

6. Pak Cik Rahim says that one light is easy to miss but a whole tree is not. Explain what he means about why the fireflies flash together.

Part C Think deeper

There is no single right answer here. Say what you think, and show where in the passage it comes from.

7. The writer says there is no firefly in charge, and the pattern appears anyway. Can you think of something people do that works the same way — a pattern nobody organises? Explain how it is similar.

8. Visitors bring money to Kampung Kuantan, but boats, lights and jetties can harm the fireflies. Using one detail from the passage, say what you think the village should do, and why.

Answer key

For parents and teachers

Part A

1. B — noise and light disturb them | 2. C — they flash at the same time | 3. B — each copies its neighbours | 4. C — in the muddy bank below the trees

Part B

5. Because the larvae depend on the mud and the snails in it. If the water flow or the saltiness changes, the snails go, so the next generation of fireflies never grows. Accept any answer linking the larvae or the mud to the loss, not only the trees.

6. A single flash is a weak signal, but thousands flashing together are easy to see, so the group is more likely to be noticed than any one insect alone. Accept answers about being seen, attracting a mate, or standing out.

Part C

These answers vary. Mark the reasoning, not the answer.

7. Strong answers name a real example — a crowd clapping in time, traffic settling into lanes, a queue forming — and explain that each person is copying those nearby rather than following a leader. Prompt with: who is in charge of that?

8. Mark the reasoning. A strong answer uses a detail from the text (torches off, engines off, mangroves left standing, the mud undisturbed) to support a view either way. A weaker answer gives an opinion with no link to the passage.

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