

Water Over the Doorstep

Everyone in Kuala Krai knows the river rises in December. Knowing it does not make it ordinary.

5 min read

Before you read

- **monsoon** — a season of heavy rain brought by a change of wind
- **surge** — a sudden strong rise or rush of water
- **evacuate** — to leave a dangerous place for a safer one
- **silt** — fine mud and sand left behind by moving water
- **salvage** — to save what can still be used after damage
- **improvise** — to make or do something with whatever is available



A row of houses in Kuala Krai with brown floodwater halfway up the doors, a boat moving along what was a street

¹ My grandmother measures floods in furniture. The 2014 flood was a wardrobe flood, she says, because the water reached the top of the wardrobe in the front room. The one before that was a table flood. By that system, the one I am writing about was a chair flood, which sounds small until you have waded through one.

² We live in Kuala Krai, in Kelantan, where the northeast monsoon arrives every year between November and January. It is not a surprise. The rain comes in off the South China Sea, the Sungai Kelantan rises, and everyone who lives near it watches the river the way other people watch the news.

³ That Tuesday it rained without stopping for nineteen hours. By the evening my father had already moved

the motorcycle onto the raised platform behind the house, which is what he does when he thinks the river means it.

⁴ We spent that night carrying things upstairs. Not everything — there is no time for everything, and no room. My mother has a rule she repeats every year: documents, medicine, photographs, rice cooker. In that order.

⁵ I argued for my schoolbooks. She let me take them, then pointed out, not unkindly, that the school was under the same rain and would understand.

⁶ By midnight the water was over the doorstep. By two in the morning it was at my knees in the front room, and the electricity had gone, and the sound outside had changed — not rain any more but a low, moving noise, like a lorry that never arrives.

⁷ At first light a boat came down what used to be our road. It belonged to Pak Rosli from the mosque committee, who has no particular training for any of this and does it every year regardless. He took my grandmother first, then came back twice more. The relief centre was the secondary school on higher ground, where somebody had improvised a kitchen out of two gas burners and a great many borrowed pots.

⁸ We were there for six days. I want to be honest about those days: they were crowded, and they were boring, and both of those things are easier to admit now than they were then. People I had never spoken to shared a classroom floor with us. A boy from my year taught half the hall a card game he had made up, which was unfair in his favour, and nobody minded.

⁹ The water went down more slowly than it came up. That is the part people outside Kelantan do not picture. What it leaves behind is silt — a layer of fine brown mud over everything, inside cupboards, inside shoes, inside the casing of the television. It dries like cement. You cannot sweep it; you have to wash it out with more water, which feels like an unkind joke.

¹⁰ We salvaged more than I expected. The photographs were dry. The rice cooker worked. My schoolbooks, which I had argued so hard for, came back swollen to twice their thickness and were thrown away, and my mother did not say a single word about it, which was worse than if she had.

¹¹ People sometimes ask why we stay. It is a reasonable question and it has a dull answer: this is where our family is, where the land is, where the work is. We raise the house, we raise the platform, we move the motorcycle in November. The river has its season and we have ours.

¹² My grandmother is already describing it as the chair flood. Filing it, I think, in the only archive she has ever needed.



A family carrying boxes and a rice cooker up a narrow staircase by torchlight

Part A Choose the best answer

Circle the letter next to the right answer.

1. How does the narrator's grandmother describe different floods?

- ☐ (A) By the year they happened
- ☐ (B) By how high the water reached on the furniture
- ☐ (C) By how many days they lasted
- ☐ (D) By how many houses were damaged

2. Why does the father move the motorcycle onto the raised platform?

- ☐ (A) Because the road is closed
- ☐ (B) Because he judges the river is going to rise seriously
- ☐ (C) Because the mosque committee asked him to
- ☐ (D) Because there is no room in the house

3. What is the mother's order of priorities when moving things upstairs?

- ☐ (A) Rice cooker, photographs, medicine, documents
- ☐ (B) Schoolbooks, documents, medicine, photographs
- ☐ (C) Documents, medicine, photographs, rice cooker
- ☐ (D) Medicine, rice cooker, documents, furniture

4. Why does the narrator say washing out the silt 'feels like an unkind joke'?

- ☐ (A) Because the mud is too heavy to lift
- ☐ (B) Because you need more water to clean up after too much water
- ☐ (C) Because the silt comes back the next day
- ☐ (D) Because nobody will help with the cleaning

5. In paragraph 7, 'improvised' means that the kitchen was:

- ☐ (A) built by professionals in advance
- ☐ (B) made from whatever was to hand
- ☐ (C) donated by the government
- ☐ (D) set up inside a boat

Part B Write your answer

Answer in two or three sentences.

6. The narrator says the six days were 'crowded' and 'boring', and that admitting this is easier now. Why might it have been harder to admit at the time?

7. Pak Rosli 'has no particular training for any of this and does it every year regardless'. What is the writer telling us about him, and about the community?

8. The mother says nothing about the ruined schoolbooks, and the narrator says this 'was worse than if she had'. Explain why.

9. The writer calls the question 'why do you stay' reasonable, then gives it a 'dull' answer. What is the effect of describing the answer that way?

Part C**Think deeper**

There is no single right answer here. Say what you think, and say why.

10. The family prepares for the monsoon every year, but still loses things. Is preparation that cannot prevent loss still worth doing? Give your reasons.

11. The narrator chooses to end on the grandmother's naming system rather than on the damage. Why do you think so, and what would be lost if the passage ended at paragraph 10?

12. Describe something that happens regularly in your own life or area that outsiders find unusual but you treat as normal. Why does familiarity change how it feels?

Answer key

For parents and teachers

Part A

1. B — By how high the water reached on the furniture | 2. B — Because he judges the river is going to rise seriously | 3. C — Documents, medicine, photographs, rice cooker | 4. B — Because you need more water to clean up after too much water | 5. B — made from whatever was to hand

Part B

6. At the time it would have felt ungrateful or trivial next to the danger and the loss; distance makes it safe to say ordinary discomfort was part of it. Accept answers about guilt, embarrassment, or not wanting to complain while being helped.

7. That the response depends on ordinary neighbours acting without being asked or trained, and that this is treated as routine rather than heroic. Accept answers naming community reliance, repetition, or quiet dependability.

8. The silence leaves the narrator alone with the mistake; a remark would have ended it. Accept answers about kindness that stings, or about guilt being sharper when nobody blames you.

9. It refuses drama and treats staying as practical rather than brave, which makes it more convincing. Accept answers noting that an undramatic answer sounds honest.

Part C

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

10. Strong answers distinguish preventing loss from reducing it, and point to the specific things preparation did save (documents, photographs, the motorcycle, the people). A weaker answer only says preparation is sensible. Prompt with: what would the same flood have cost with no preparation at all?

11. Look for an answer about tone and continuity — ending on the archive makes it a recurring part of life rather than a disaster. Ending at paragraph 10 would leave loss as the final impression. Any defensible reading of the ending counts.

12. Any honest personal answer counts if it gives a reason. The skill being practised is explaining familiarity — a strong answer says what specifically stops feeling strange and why. Prompt rather than correct.

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