

King of Fruit

by George Opacic

Sitting in the passenger seat of a Mercedes 600 in downtown Kuala Lumpur is disconcerting for a Canadian. As a former British colony, Malaysians drive on the left-hand side of the road. Kenny's foot keeps wanting to brake.

The driver, David Hui, owns the road. He drives like it and he does partially have a claim to that title. His father is the Assistant Deputy Minister of Transportation.

Kenny has been hired to help upgrade certain of the country's engineering skills. He has a whirlwind schedule that takes him from office to office, meeting first with the dignitary who is the particular firm's owner and then with the people who actually run the engineering practice. David, owner of a thriving import-export business and one of the few lawyers in town, has been delegated to ferry him around.

Sometimes they take a break.

"So, I will indoctrinate you, my friend, into the ancient ritual of the Durian. Ok?"

"Fine by me, David. What the heck is it?"

"Durian is the King of Fruit. It has tastes so sublime that they cannot be described by any simple comparison. It is not *like* this taste or that taste. It is more akin to the flavour descriptions of fine wines."

"It tastes like wine?"

"No no no. By that I mean the *way* one discusses wines of this region or that, and aged in certain ways, and having a spectrum of certain flavours. Durian is quite simply unique. Fine cheeses may receive such culinary description. And, while seafood, or in your country, beef, may be regaled in like manner, only Durian in all the world may be rightly placed beside wines and cheeses as deserving of legend status."

Kenny looks at his new friend to see if he is pulling his leg.

"Durian is that good, eh?"

"My friend, you cannot understand this until you have witnessed it with your own tongue. So I will *tell* you a few things about Durian and then, when you taste it, you will begin to understand.

"First, remember the coconut we had at the sacred caves?"

"Oh, yeah. They weren't the standard hard-shelled things we get in North America. They *were* delicious!"

"Ok. Now Durian is a somewhat bigger fruit. Our Malaysian Durian is different from fruit that carries the same name in other countries like Indonesia or the Philippines. Of course it so much better!" He grins proudly.

"Ours has a similar light green leathery shell as the coconut but with dull spikes over it all. Inside, there are either four or five sections full of an ivory-coloured pulp. Except for the centre of each section, which

gently cradles the fruit. These are about the size and appearance of lightly boiled eggs – without the shell. Are you with me?”

“So far so good.”

“And the whole fruit, prior to opening it, smells horribly of sewer stench.”

Kenny does a double take. But David is not smiling.

“David, you’re not providing me with that element of tantalizing possibilities that would necessarily induce me to partake of the King of Fruit.”

“Ha ha! Wait for it. You see, Durian is the prized fruit, not only of man, but also of the Men-of-the-Jungle.”

“You mean orangutans?”

“Precisely so. Now, because orangutans are spread so thinly throughout the jungle, Durian must broadcast their availability, at the proper time, in a manner that may be best distributed over such a vast and difficult-to-traverse area.”

“So they stink like a sewer? Couldn’t they have chosen something nicer, like mint or or...”

“My friend. They did not *choose*. The nature that is within them is their only arsenal.”

“Ok, whatever. So how do you get all those lovely flavours to your tongue when all you can smell is a sewer?”

“My friend, remember, first, that one does not *taste* a wine with one’s tongue. Wines are tasted, primarily, with the nose.”

“That makes it worse, doesn’t it?”

“Durian is a mystical fruit, as you will see.” David gets animated, waving an arm, and sometimes both, before him. “Once opened by an expert, you will notice *no* smell! Then, with the fruit on your palette – don’t bite it just yet! – you will wonder at the delicate flavours and textures, one after the other, that chase themselves about your tongue. And besides, have you ever seen what the grapes look like for that delightful Canadian drink, Ice Wine, prior to pressing? They are an ugly mess of molding, half-shriveled, cobwebbed and frozen fruit!”

Wondering how the Mercedes has stayed on the road, with all the gesturing, Kenny keeps his own eyes steadily ahead. “Ok, so, first it stinks to high heaven, and then things chase each other around my tongue. Maybe we should just go back to that veggie restaurant in Selangor.”

“Ah - Americans! Sorry, *Canadians*...”

“Hey, you know *me*! I’m open to new ideas. It’s just that the Durian marketing department needs a good wordsmith.” As they approach a sharp bend Kenny’s hand rises off his thigh to hover closer to the steering wheel, but not obtrusively so.

“You must understand what will occur, in an intellectual sense, my friend. Otherwise, you will be inclined to lump things into categories. Without this brief description you would have smelled the broadcast signal of the fruit and thought, this thing has gone royally BAD!”

“Yeah. Whatever.”

They continue driving for about half an hour, mostly in silence, with Kenny enthralled by the lush scenery of jungled hills, farmland, terraced slopes, and curious (to him) construction techniques for buildings. Kenny is continually taken aback by the openness of the ground floors. The need to keep out cold air is replaced by the need to allow breezes through buildings to cool them down. Occasionally, David points out land his family owns, or the names of villages.

They get to a gravel road that cuts through flaming green jungle. The road is set up over the jungle floor on at least two and a half metres of fill. There is nothing but brilliant green leaves all around them.

The jungle, beaten back from the roadway by about a hundred metres of wiry grass, contains wild mixes of broad-leafed plants and, surprising to Kenny, a large number of small-leafed plants – not unlike the deciduous forests of his home.

They come to a place that is no different from any part of the long causeway they've been on, except that there is a pile of fruit husks on one side that rises higher than the roadway. The Mercedes slows. David taps the horn gently. He reaches for something in the centre compartment. Kenny has a sudden thought that David is going to pull out a gun. Instead, he pulls out a bottle of insect repellent and hands it to Kenny. Having already been the subject of a vicious attack by mosquitoes at a local metalsmithy, Kenny silently lathers the stuff on and hands the bottle back.

While rubbing on the repellent, David looks around the area carefully. Seeing the person he was expecting quickly hurrying up to the road, David turns off the engine and gets out. As Kenny opens his door he is slammed by the heat and humidity of the jungle. They both begin to sweat, developing similar patterns of darkness on their shirts. Biting flies and mosquitoes find them, then hover in anger a short distance from the effect of the repellent.

The Malay native has a vicious-looking machete slung at his belt. His clothes are minimal and are as colourful as constant aggressive washing without machines can keep them. He is shorter than the oriental stature of David. Beside Kenny, he is the height of a ten-year-old.

He and David exchange greetings in Malay. Kenny thinks he recognizes some of the words, nodding and smiling when the conversation appears to be directed at him. David gives the Malay an instruction, which sends him quickly back down the flank of the roadway.

He disappears into a small hut some distance away, on the edge of the jungle. There, a number of large green fruits have just been placed in a mesh bag by his wife. The Malay brings the bag, at a jog, back up to the road.

Kenny suddenly remembers not to breathe too hard, but the odour isn't as strongly overpowering as he'd been expecting.

"David, that's not so bad. In fact... you know, that's the same smell that plagued us when my wife and I drove down to Cape Canaveral to see the second launch of the space shuttle. Whatever it was, that damn smell was all up and down the Florida coast that year."

"So, you see – it is not to be feared, eh?"

David turns to the bag of fruits, choosing two. Nodding, the Malay takes a knobby Durian in his hand, pulls out the machete and, with blinding speed, goes whack-whack-whack, splitting it open in exactly in the right place to reveal, as David had said, a fibrous white pulp gently cradling what looks, to Kenny, for all the world like a poached egg in each section.

With furrowed brows, Kenny says, "It doesn't smell anymore!"

The Malay produces the ubiquitous tablespoon – a utensil used to eat any of the larger fruits throughout Malaysia. Kenny had become used to the habit of using the same spoon with the others, only using his right hand, with only a quick wipe on the shirt if at all.

David is given the first taste. He pops the spoonful, whole, into his mouth. Savouring the flavours before biting down on it, David smiles and nods for Kenny to try one.

With the soft fruit in his mouth, Kenny nods, thinking the texture, too, is like a poached egg. Slowly moving his tongue over the yielding surface he notices distinct but delicate flavours. He probes with a bite. The flow of flavours keep coming, subtly and with a remarkable variety of... of *colour*, is the only word he can think of.

He swallows, then instantly regrets it. The delicious flavours linger for a short time, producing a desirable after-taste.

"Ohh. I loved that!... Shouldn't have gulped it."

Another one is ready for him on the spoon.

"Yes, thank you." He tries to remember Malay for *thank you*. "Terima kasih."

A broad smile appears across the Malay's face, displaying a few missing teeth.

The next fruit is taken much more deliberately. David is doing the same.

They work their way through the two Durians, then Kenny remembers his manners. After all, while Kenny is under his charge, David will not allow him to pay for anything. When the Malay offers to cut up another one, Kenny shakes his head with a broad smile.

"David, thank you so *very* much. You were absolutely right. Durian *is* the king of fruit." Then, reluctantly, politely, "But these two must be enough for now."

"So, what did you think of the Durian?"

David pays the Malay. Receiving more than he'd been expecting, the Malay bows deeply and quickly, numerous times, touching his forehead in David's direction.

On the way back to the car, Kenny nearly forgets again, reaching for his non-existent keys as he gets into the "wrong" side of the car.

"That was absolutely worth the trip, David." He shuts the door. The cooled air hits him hard.

"Whew! I was just getting used to the heat outside..."

"Durians would be a great hit in Vancouver, David. Have you looked into..."

"Not possible. Not permitted. Durians are not even permitted on public transportation in Malaysia."

"Because of the smell."

"Correct. Well, actually, some *are* being shipped to North America. But it is as the difference between a proper coconut, which you had the other day, and the dried up lumps that we ship around the world. You cannot obtain the true flavour of the Durian unless you eat it from the hands of the person who just picked it from the jungle.

“That person has been collecting and selling Durians all his life. I am a regular customer of his – I will go to no other because I know what kind of Durians he provides, at what level of ripening, and of what quality. Everybody has his favourite source. Like everyone has their favourite wine chateau.

“So what did you think?”

Kenny pauses. “At first, I was looking for some strong tingling on the tongue, like pineapple. You know, pineapple *was* there along with pears and a hundred other flavours, but they were so delightfully subtle! Like you said, they chased each other around my tongue... I don’t think I can describe it in a simple sentence – except to say a very sincere thank you, for the experience. I most certainly am a convert to the King of Fruits!”

A satisfied smile and a brief nod from David, as they drive back out of the jungle.

The Malay has run quickly back to his wife, proudly holding up the money. She doesn’t smile. Taking the colorful bills from his hands as she looks around nervously, she turns back into their hut to carefully hide the money from thieves. Following his wife, he runs into her as she stops in the entrance. She turns to look back at the road.

“That pile of shells. It is too conspicuous. My sister says that gangs of thugs are coming down from the north. You will have to spread the shells around so that it does not look like we are so wealthy.”