

# Dangerous Straits

Published: October 2007

By Peter Gwin

National Geographic staff

“I can smell the sea from here,” says the prisoner. That seems a wild improbability coming from a man in a soundproof cell in northern Malaysia, several miles as the gull flies from the closest salt water. All I can smell in this humid, whitewashed prison is the faint tang of ammonia used to clean the floors.

It is hard to know what to believe of the prisoner’s claims. At times he has declared his innocence and then later confessed to being a willing criminal. He mentions he has three children, later the number is four. His passport lists his name as Johan Ariffin, but Malaysian authorities doubt that’s his real name. His age is noted as 44 (streaks of gray in his black hair make that plausible) and his residence as Batam, an Indonesian island just south of Singapore. Men like him often come from Batam, a guard says. Though his jailers remain unsure who he is, they know exactly what he is: *lanun* (pronounced la-noon). When asked for a direct English equivalent, an interpreter explains that there is none, that it is a word freighted with many layers of culture and history. The short, imperfect answer is: The prisoner is a pirate. He earned that epithet when Malaysia’s marine police captured him and nine accomplices after they hijacked the *Nepline Delima*, a tanker carrying 7,000 tons of diesel fuel worth three million dollars, in the Strait of Malacca. It was one of several attacks reported during 2005 in the 550-mile channel separating the Indonesian island of Sumatra from the Malay Peninsula, Singapore perched at its southern tip.

For centuries, this sliver of ocean has captivated seamen, offering the most direct route between India and China, along with a bounty of resources, including spices, rubber, mahogany, and tin. But it is a watery kingdom unto itself, harboring hundreds of rivers that feed into the channel, miles of swampy shoreline, and a vast constellation of tiny islands, reefs, and shoals. Its early inhabitants learned to lead amphibian lives, building their villages over water and devising specialized boats for fishing, trading, and warfare. Some made their living as pirates, preying on foreign vessels that dared to ply their waters. Armadas of these skilled sea raiders in light, maneuverable craft regularly plundered passing ships and retreated upriver to fortified villages. Their raids yielded troves of gold, gems, gunpowder, opium, and slaves, which they used to build powerful sultanates that dominated much of the Sumatran and Malaysian coastlines. Sailors chronicled the horrors they faced in the strait and nearby waters. One 19th-century episode involved the capture of British Captain James Ross. Believing his ship held a stash of silver coins, lanun forced him to watch as his young son was lashed to an anchor and drowned. Then they cut off Ross’s fingers joint by joint.

European colonizers and their navies brought the sultanates under control in the late 1800s, but the lanun were never eradicated. The 21st-century inheritors of their tradition continue to hunt these waters, mainly in three incarnations: gangs that board vessels to rob the crews; multinational syndicates that steal entire ships; and guerrilla groups that kidnap seamen for ransom. Modern lanun have no shortage of targets. Each year, according to Lloyd’s of London, some 70,000 merchant vessels carrying a fifth of all seaborne trade and a third of the world’s crude oil shipments transit this critical choke point in the global economy. The strait’s geography makes it nearly unsecurable. It passes between Malaysia and Indonesia, known for thorny relations, further complicating the security picture. Some 250 miles (400 kilometers)

wide at its northern mouth, the strait funnels down to about ten miles (16 kilometers) across near its southern end and is dotted with hundreds of uninhabited mangrove islands, offering endless hideouts to all manner of criminals.

Since 2002, the International Maritime Bureau (IMB) has recorded 258 pirate attacks in the Malacca Strait and surrounding waters, including more than 200 sailors held hostage and 8 killed. The insurance arm of Lloyd's classified the strait as a war zone in June 2005. Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia responded by bolstering security in their respective waters, and Lloyd's suspended the rating in August 2006. But counting pirate attacks is murky business. Noel Choong, head of the IMB's Piracy Reporting Centre, estimates that half of all pirate attacks go unreported. "In some cases the ship's owners dissuade the captain from reporting an attack," he says. "They don't want bad publicity or the ship to be delayed by an investigation." As a result, no one knows for sure how many pirates remain active in the Malacca Strait.

### **Ocean Predator**

Which brings us back to Ariffin, who is serving a seven-year prison sentence. A lawyer hired by the Indonesian consulate has been his only visitor. The closest the guards let me get to him is the other side of a scratched, bulletproof window looking onto an interview cell. When the guards bring him in, he isn't the imposing figure I'd envisioned. He stands barely five feet (one and a half meters) tall, and his open collar reveals a faded heart tattooed on his sagging chest. He looks more like a weary pickpocket than a pirate, confused that a foreigner has requested to see him.

He and my interpreter pick up telephones on either side of the window. I explain that I have read about his case. That I have traveled from the other side of the world to hear his story; to ask him why he became a lanun; to hear how it is possible for a handful of men to hijack a ship as large as the *Nepline Delima*. Ariffin sits silently, the telephone pressed to his ear, his eyes shifting between the interpreter and me, his shirt damp with sweat. "The lawyer took all my money," he says finally. "I have no soap. I haven't brushed my teeth since I got here." I offer to leave some toiletries for him with the guards. His demeanor brightens, and slowly he begins his story, or at least one version of it. The plot was hatched in a Batam coffee shop, Ariffin says, when a Malaysian shipping executive approached an Indonesian sailor named Lukman and inquired whether he could organize a crew to hijack the tanker. Ariffin, who went to sea in his teens and rose through the maritime ranks to become a mechanic, had served with Lukman on a few crews. Lately both of them had struggled to find work, and Lukman asked if he wanted in on the heist. It would be an easy job, he promised, because a member of the tanker's crew was in on the plan.

As a young crewman, Ariffin says he was once on a ship attacked by pirates. They waved parangs (machete-like knives), threatened to kill everyone, and took cash and food. He smiles wryly at the irony. "It is very hard for Indonesian seamen. We all need money." He told Lukman he was in. "All we had to do was board the tanker, tie up the crew, and sail to open sea," Ariffin says. They would meet a tanker coming from Thailand, transfer the fuel, and abandon the *Nepline Delima*. Lukman promised Ariffin \$10,000 for manning the tanker's engines. The plan began smoothly. Posing as tourists, Ariffin, Lukman, and two other seamen from Batam pretended to snap photos as they rode a ferry up the strait to the Malaysian port of Pinang. There they met six other men Lukman had recruited from Aceh, Sumatra's northernmost province. "They weren't seamen," said Ariffin. "We needed their muscles." At a nearby

beach, they stole a fiberglass speedboat, painted it blue, and loaded it with gasoline, water and food, two cell phones, a GPS, and five freshly sharpened parangs. In addition, each man brought a ski mask, a change of clothes, some cash, and a passport. After midnight, they slipped into the strait. Meanwhile, the turncoat crew member was sending text messages from the tanker, updating the ship's position, course, and speed. Most important, Ariffin said, "he told us when he would man the watch."

A few hours later, the pirates, wearing ski masks and wielding parangs, commanded the *Nepline Delima's* bridge. The tanker's distress signal had been disabled, and 16 of its 17 crew lay bound and blindfolded in a locked cabin, some of them bleeding. The pirates set a new course for the Thai tanker on the open sea. By the next evening the gang would be on their way back to what Batam pirates call "happy happy," a blur of hedonism, ranging from extravagant amounts of crystal meth and ecstasy to marathon sessions with prostitutes. Or, if Ariffin is to be believed, home to his family. The problem was the 17th crewman. Soon after the pirates had boarded the tanker, Ariffin, guarding the speedboat, heard one of the sailors yell: "Lanun!" Bedlam erupted on the ship's decks as the pirates tried to round up the frightened crew. Lukman and two others were on the bridge. They switched on the public address system and started beating the captain until his shouts for the crew to surrender blared over the ship's loudspeakers. "Please, they are killing me," he cried. Sixteen crewmen eventually gave up. Each was asked his name, then bound and blindfolded. "We had a copy of the ship's manifest," said Ariffin, "we knew one was missing."

Meanwhile, the sea had picked up. Ariffin tied the speedboat to the tanker's railing and scrambled aboard to find the engine room. It was there, an hour later, that he got a frantic call from Lukman on the bridge. The missing crewman had escaped in their speedboat, stranding them on the tanker. Ariffin ran the *Nepline Delima's* engines at full throttle trying to reach international waters, but even at top speed the tanker could make only about 12 miles an hour (19 kilometers). Within a few hours the Malaysian marine police had cut off their escape. Ariffin went up on the deck and lit a cigarette. "There was nothing to do," he said. "Allah had his hand on that sailor."

A guard signals that our time is up. I hurriedly tell Ariffin about my plans to visit Batam. The guard puts his hand on Ariffin's shoulder. The prisoner squeezes the phone. For the first time, I notice his muscular forearms. He speaks quickly before the guard leads him away. "He said go to the coffee shop behind the Harmoni Hotel," says the interpreter. "Tell the seamen there that John Palembang said hello. And don't forget about the toothbrush."

### **Cinderella's Dark Sister**

"You want girls?" the cab driver asked on our way to Nagoya, one of Batam Island's largest towns. "Drugs?" he caught my eye in the rearview mirror. "I can get for you. Everything. No problem." If Singapore, just seven miles (11 kilometers) to the north with its glittering skyline and robust economy, is Southeast Asia's Cinderella, Batam is her dark sister. The two are located across from each other where the Malacca Strait feeds into the smaller Singapore Strait, and a ceaseless parade of ships, more than a thousand a week, passes between them. Most do business in Singapore, home to one of the world's preeminent free ports and expanding financial and technology sectors.

In the 1980s Indonesia tried to mimic Singapore's success and began to transform Batam, one of the Riau islands off Sumatra's eastern coast, from a malaria-ridden fishing outpost into a tariff-free zone for

entrepreneurs. Developers carved golf courses out of jungles and built casinos to lure tourists from Malaysia and Singapore. Investors backed factories and strip malls, office parks and apartment blocks. Indonesians flocked to boomtown Batam to find work. The island became a hub for maritime brokers, who hired sailors for shipping companies. Batam, however, lacked Singapore's strict rule of law. Patronage and corruption took hold, and the island quickly became a haven for an exotic assortment of gangsters, smugglers, prostitutes, and pirates. Illegally harvested timber, embezzled diesel fuel, stolen cars, drugs, weapons, and poached animals moved through its ports. Drove of Singaporean men ferried over on weekends to visit the growing number of brothels filled with impoverished girls. Meanwhile, some of the maritime brokers quietly engaged in their own side business: recruiting pirates for Asian crime syndicates. In 1997 the boom went bust when the Asian financial crisis hit. The investment money evaporated from Batam, leaving the island littered with abandoned construction sites. Unemployment rose, driving more people to the black economy. Though in the past couple of years investors had begun returning, the island still harbored a large class of residents who could only be described as desperate. I asked the cab driver about the coffee shop behind the Harmoni Hotel. It's in Jodoh, he said, referring to Nagoya's seediest precinct. "Many murders there. Better you call me and I bring girls to you."

### **Phantom Swiftlets**

The first sounds one hears during a morning walk through Jodoh's narrow avenues are the whistles of swiftlets. Even the vendors hawking fruit, secondhand clothing, and used appliances smuggled from Singapore can't compete with the ebullient birdsong. It is one of Jodoh's many deceptions: the mating calls are taped and broadcast over loudspeakers to attract real swiftlets to build nests in the empty top floors of numerous buildings. The nests are harvested and each sold for hundreds of dollars to restaurants for bird's nest soup.

Another deception is the "coffee shop," a euphemism for the gambling dens where seamen meet brokers, trade gossip, drink beer, and bet a numbers game. However, in the year since Johan Ariffin, née John Palembang, has been in prison, much had changed in Batam. Most notably, Indonesia's new police chief has cracked down on gambling on the island, much to the detriment of the tourist trade, which relied on the stream of Singaporeans who filled Batam's resorts. When I arrived at the coffee shop behind the Harmoni, its windows were blacked and the front door was chained. This might have dimmed my hopes for finding John Palembang's friends had it not been for Jhonny Batam. I'd been given his name—one of his names—by someone he trusted. He was described as a gentleman of opportunity. A ship captain by trade, he had piloted vessels for both legitimate companies and less scrupulous entities. He was said to know every ship in port and every coffee shop deal in Batam. If anyone knew John Palembang, it would be Jhonny Batam.

At first, contacting him was like chasing one of Jodoh's phantom swiftlets. Calls to his cell phone went unanswered until finally one morning he phoned to say he was stranded on Bangka Island, south of the Malacca Strait. Some "business" had gone badly, and he was broke. I agreed to wire him \$80 for a plane ticket back to Batam. As agreed, Jhonny Batam appeared the next day on a backstreet near a row of butcher shops. Animal blood ran in the gutters beneath the stifling odors of fresh meat. Jhonny, a handsome, bearish man in his 50s, wore an immaculate white sports shirt and pressed slacks, his wavy black hair perfectly coiffed. A fake gold Rolex dangled around his wrist, and he might have passed as a golf pro if not for the tattoos inscribed on his knuckles. In a nearby restaurant, he said he knew John

Palembang, whom he called a low-level seaman. The coffee shop grapevine had laughed at news of the *Nepline Delima* fiasco. “Amateurs,” Jhonny scoffed. He began to describe his own career, how he had piloted tugboats and a ferry before taking the helm of a small cargo vessel. In time, he built a network of friends among sailors and harbor workers. Along the way he took side jobs, smuggling untaxed garlic, cigarettes, electronics, and drugs. In the 1980s, he relocated to Hong Kong to work for Chinese crime syndicates. There his repertoire broadened to include making large cargoes “disappear.”

He estimated that 75 percent of heisted cargoes were inside jobs involving the ship’s crew, often the captain. “That’s why most are not reported,” he said, explaining that shipping companies often write off these losses rather than suffer bad press and risk losing their insurance. It works like this, he said. A ship broker would call him and say there’s a customer who needs diesel fuel. “I know a crewman on a tanker,” Jhonny says. “I call his hand phone and ask him if he is happy. If he says yes, no problem. But if he says no, I tell him I make him happy, and then we make a plan.” But the crewman won’t work legitimately again, I said. He laughed. “Seamen have lots of names. Some have three or four passports. No problem.”

Over two weeks, I interviewed several of Jhonny’s former crewmen spread among the Riau Archipelago and a captain who knew him in Hong Kong. All corroborated what Jhonny told me. One sailor said he trusted Jhonny because “he never lies. He always pays what he says he will pay. Sometimes the legal ships don’t do that.” In my hotel room, we laid a map of the Malacca Strait on the bed. Jhonny’s thick fingers traced the coastlines with practiced familiarity. He pointed to places with obscured shoals and noted currents and unmapped islands. “This area,” he drew his finger around Batam and Singapore, “too many patrols now.” He moved his finger to a spot south of the strait, “now the best place for shopping is here.” “Shopping,” Batam argot for the lowest level of piracy, is roughly equivalent to robbing a liquor store. Even the smallest cargo ships and tankers carry sizable amounts of cash, used to buy supplies in port and to pay the crew. Often these ships are older and have less security than newer, larger ships. Sometimes, Jhonny says, the captains are running their own scams, conserving fuel by going slow, then selling the excess to passing ships and pocketing the cash. He explained that shopping trips are carried out by teams of “jumping squirrels,” pirates who use wooden boats called *pancungs*, rigged with powerful engines, to stalk the ships at night and climb up the sides and rob the crew. I tell him I would like to meet a jumping squirrel. “It’s possible,” he said, and dialed a number.

### **Bulletproof Jumping Squirrels**

It was dark when a slender young man with bleached highlights in his short dark hair and a small silver hoop in his left ear knocked on the door. He looked stunned to be greeted by a foreigner and grinned nervously at Jhonny, his smile marked by the black, ragged edge of a rotted front tooth. “Is this dangerous?” he asked. Jhonny introduced him as Beach Boy. With his bronze skin, athletic physique, and large waterproof watch, he looked the part. Just ten months out of an Indonesian prison, Beach Boy had served two years for his role in hijacking a barge carrying more than a million dollars’ worth of crude palm oil. After making off with the cargo, his gang scattered. But Beach Boy’s accomplices betrayed him to the police. Once in custody, he says he was interrogated, beaten, and shot in the leg. He rolled up his left pant leg to reveal a fist-size scar on his calf. “The bullet is still in there,” he said. Yet the most painful consequence of his prison term, he said, was the loss of his family. His wife wrote him in prison that she had left him for another man.

I asked Beach Boy why he had become a pirate. “I can’t get work,” he said. Jhonny explained that Indonesian sailors often lacked the maritime certifications required to work on commercial ships. For years, young men like Beach Boy relied on older seamen to teach them the trade and then obtained counterfeit credentials to avoid the expensive training needed to become legally licensed seamen. But in recent years the international shipping community had clamped down on such practices, leaving many experienced Batam sailors unemployed. I pressed him on how his team was able to board ships undetected. “We use magic,” he said. “We cast a spell to make the crew stay asleep. We can be invisible, bulletproof.” He pointed to his head. “It’s a power that you learn.” Then how did you get shot, I asked. “They fired twice,” he said. “I resisted the first bullet but wasn’t strong enough for the second.”

Later that night at an outdoor café, Jhonny and I loitered over a few beers, and he revealed that he believed in mathematics, not magic. He borrowed a pen and on a napkin demonstrated how he could reduce my telephone number, or any seven-digit figure, to the number eight using a series of equations. “It looks like magic,” he said. “But it is mathematics.” Numbers, he said, always had fascinated him. As a boy he’d memorized several of these numeric parlor tricks and later taught himself algebra and geometry. At sea he’d come to trust numbers far more than superstitions. They told him how far he traveled, when to turn, how much fuel his ship needed, how hard the wind blew. Numbers were predictable, accountable, reliable—qualities that were hard to come by in Jhonny’s world. He continued to doodle on the napkin and asked if I’d heard of the golden mean, which he described as a ratio discovered by Greek mathematicians that represents perfect balance. Riau seamen had their own golden mean, he said, which measured the tipping point between working within the bounds of the law versus working illegally. As long as this Malaccan version of the golden mean favored robbing ships, there would be pirates in the strait.

### **Pirate Training**

A few days later, Jhonny, Beach Boy, and I caught a cab to the port. Beach Boy had arranged to show me how a team of jumping squirrels boarded a ship. He said there was an uninhabited island not far from Batam where he occasionally trained. At the end of a sun-bleached jetty, two muscular young men, “Muhammad” and “Hakim,” waited for us in a wooden pancung. Beach Boy explained that these boats were ideal because their weight and shape let them cut through a ship’s wake, unlike fiberglass boats, which were much lighter and would bounce in rough water. We sat in the boat, two by two, and I ended up next to Muhammad. His round cheeks and perfect teeth gave him a boyish appearance, but weeks before he had completed a two-year prison term for his role in a shopping trip. “Are you ready to learn how to steal a ship?” he asked.

With the sun beating on our shoulders, Hakim steered out of the harbor and made for a dense forest that appeared to be floating on top of the water, one of the strait’s innumerable mangrove islands. It seemed an impenetrable mass of gnarled roots and tangled limbs, but Hakim found a little cut and piloted the boat into the labyrinth. It was cool inside the mangroves, and we slipped in and out of deep shadows following the watery path until it opened on a cloister of stilt houses. “*Assalamu alaikum*,” Hakim called out. No answer. He cut the engine. Beach Boy grabbed a limb and held the boat steady as Hakim drew a parang, its curved blade glistening with oil used to keep it razor sharp. With quick, latent blows Hakim chopped out a two-foot section of a root and tossed it into the pancung.

We navigated out of the mangroves and headed for a small island about a mile away. Once ashore, Beach Boy disappeared into its dense jungle. The rest of us remained on the beach, which had a broad view of the shipping channel. Nine vessels chugged through the strait, including a liquefied natural gas tanker that towered over the others like a skyscraper. The Singapore skyline loomed beyond. “A few years ago this was a favorite place to begin an attack. Now there are too many patrols,” said Muhammad, flashing his perfect teeth, “but there are other places.” I asked him why he’d gotten into piracy. “Partly for the money,” he said, “but it is fun, an adventure, like James Bond.”

Beach Boy emerged from the jungle with a 20-foot-long (6 meter) bamboo stalk. He stripped the shoots off the bamboo, while Hakim used the parang to hew the mangrove root into a footlong spike. When they finished, Hakim lashed the spike at an angle to the end of the bamboo. “This is how we climb onto the ship,” Beach Boy said, motioning to a nearby tree as if it were the side of a ship. “The *tekong* [driver] maneuvers the pancung right up to the stern,” he said, lifting the pole and hooking the spike onto an upper branch. In one fluid motion he grabbed the pole with both hands and pulled himself upward, lifting his legs, then clasping the bamboo with his feet and driving his body upward inchworm fashion. In seconds he reached the top and then slid down the pole. “This is how five jumping squirrels can all board a ship in less than a minute.” He handed me the pole. “Now you try.”

I kicked off my shoes and copied the technique. The bamboo’s natural joints offered a good grip, even when wet, and its stiffness made it easier to climb than a rope. To reach the decks of taller ships, Beach Boy said they would lash two or three bamboos together. I reached the top and slid down. “You could be a pirate,” Muhammad said. The others laughed. I started to put on my shoes when I felt a powerful grip on my shoulder and a cold blade of a parang on the back of my neck. “Then you grab the first sailor you see,” Muhammad barked in my ear, “tell me where the money is.” My heart skipped a beat before I realized he was just demonstrating the next step in an attack. “And the sailor will follow you like a water buffalo.”

Back in the pancung, we headed for Batam, but as we approached the harbor, Hakim veered toward one of the hulking cargo ships anchored just outside. Crewmen were hanging wash on the railing. Beach Boy waved, and the sailors lazily waved back. Hakim maneuvered the pancung to the ship’s stern and drew up beside the rudder. “This is the hole,” Muhammad said, his voice echoing off the steel hull. “The crew can’t see us here.” I looked up and saw that the curving hull shielded the pancung from the deck. “When the ship is moving, the water is very rough here.” He pointed to a spot on the surface over the ship’s massive propeller. “The tekong has to hold the pancung steady while we raise the bamboo and climb up. That’s why the tekong always gets the biggest share of the money.” “But you have to board the ship, subdue the crew, find the money, and not get killed,” I said. “That’s easy,” he said. “Are you ready to try?”

### **Happy Happy**

Back in Batam, Jhonny and Beach Boy offered to show me where pirates would go to get “happy happy.” Jhonny and others told me that after major heists pirates would often jet off to luxury hotels in Jakarta and blow big wads of cash on unimaginable indulgences, including a strip club where you could eat sushi off the bellies of the dancers. But after a shopping trip, Batam pirates might celebrate at one of the local karaoke bars. “We will go to Die Nasty,” said Jhonny. Beach Boy nodded.

Late that night, the three of us walked through Jodoh's dark streets, where beckoning young women in low-cut blouses vamped under lighted signs advertising karaoke. We arrived at our destination, which turned out to be a club called Dynasty. The dank room smelled of clove cigarettes and was dimly lit with orange bulbs that cast a lurid glow. A waitress escorted us to a table and brought over beers. Beach Boy scanned the menu of songs that customers could request to sing. Along the far wall, a row of young women sat beneath a line of spotlights. Each wore a round badge with a number. They giggled coquettishly, competing to make eye contact with us. "Karaoke hostesses," Jhonny explained. He went over to the women and made his way down the line, smiling and chatting. Finally he returned with a young woman who settled between Jhonny and me. "What your name?" the woman asked in heavily accented English, patting my thigh. I told her and mentioned that I was here just for the karaoke. "Yes," she said, "everyone come to Die Nasty for karaoke."

Beach Boy selected his songs, and the waitress came over with the microphone. The music began and the lyrics to Led Zeppelin's "Stairway to Heaven" were projected onto a large screen. "There's a lady who's sure all that glitters is gold, and she's buying a stairway to heaven." Sitting in the dark, holding the microphone close to his mouth, Beach Boy seemed transformed. He closed his eyes and crooned in a pleasing tenor. "Ooh, it makes me wonder." The girl next to me leaned close. I could smell her perfume mingled with the alcohol on her breath. "Please can you help me? I am ugliest girl at Die Nasty. I have no customer in two week." She said she had to pay the owner of the club each month for room and board and to reimburse the cost of her travel to Batam from her village in eastern Java. I slipped her a little cash.

Jhonny finally took the microphone. By this time there were a few empty bottles in front of him, and his mood was effervescent, joking with the karaoke hostesses, teasing the waitress, buying drinks. He sang an old Rod Stewart song, "Sailing," but halfway through I noticed he wasn't following the English lyrics. He seemed to be singing in Indonesian and making up the words as he went. Everyone was laughing until the chorus came back, and he returned to the lyrics on the screen. He waved his arms, motioning us all to join in, and soon everyone at the Die Nasty was in Jhonny Batam's thrall.

### **The 17th Crewman**

One sailor who was never charmed by a pirate was Mohamed Hamid. He was the crewman who escaped from the *Nepline Delima* and led the police back to rescue the crew. I went to visit him at his home in Malaysia, far from the Malacca Strait. The experience had pushed him to abandon a promising career as a sailor at age 28. He asked me not to reveal his village because he fears retribution. We sat on mats on the porch of his father's stilt house, and he recounted what he called the most frightening night of his life. He heard the captain's pleas over the loudspeakers and was on his way to the bridge to surrender when one of the pirates suddenly put a knife to his throat. "I thought this is my death," he said, but instinct took over and he hit the pirate with an elbow, jumped down three flights of stairs, and scurried under some pipes on the main deck. He lay there reciting Muslim prayers, trying to compose himself, when he saw the rope tied to the railing leading to the pirates' speedboat.

He described his escape as almost comical. He caught his foot on the railing and fell into the speedboat. Then it took several agonizing minutes to cut the thick rope with a dull pocketknife. Afterward he lay sweating in the bottom of the boat as it drifted from the tanker into total darkness. Feeling his way to the

stern, he traced the wires from the motor to the ignition switch. Clouds obscured the stars that would have guided him to land; rain began to fall. In the distance he could still hear the cries of his captain over the tanker's loudspeakers as the pirates beat him. "I prayed to Allah, 'You brought me this far, please show me the way.'" He cranked the engine and hoped he was headed toward help. Less than 24 hours later, Hamid was hailed as a hero. He had reached the Malaysian island of Langkawi and had been able to guide the marine police back to the *Nepline Delima*. After a tense standoff, all ten pirates surrendered. Eventually nine of them received jail sentences. One pleaded not guilty and is still awaiting trial. The shipping executive and the alleged conspirator on the *Nepline Delima* were arrested. Both say they are innocent. Their trials are pending. Hamid was stunned to learn of the charges against his fellow crewman. "It was like finding out the devil is your brother."

### **Two Months Later**

I was back in the U.S. at a wedding reception when my phone vibrated with a text message from Jhonny Batam: "Got job as master on motor tanker . . . Jhon." Guests were climbing on stage to sing with the band, and for a moment I was back at the Die Nasty watching Jhonny and Beach Boy sing karaoke. No pirate attacks had been reported in the Malacca Strait since I left. Indonesia and Malaysia had called on foreign governments to help fund their patrols. Without more resources, it is unclear how long the cash-strapped Indonesian navy will maintain its current level of vigilance.

As for the fate of this tanker, maybe, I told myself, Jhonny had embarked on a new path, thankful for legal work, loyally serving his new employer. But if there were more money to be made working another angle, I could hear him say, one must be true to the pirate's golden mean. After all, Jhonny Batam is a gentleman of opportunity.