

Cecep



Peddler, Jackson Pollock, 1930-35

So! You want another story? All right! Ok. Fine. Let's see ... okay, I've got one for you.

Our story begins very late at night, on the very outskirts of the city. A traveling food vendor is pushing his cart. It hasn't been a good night for selling *bakso tahu*, even though some people would argue that he cooks the best tasting *bakso tahu* in the city. Business simply has not been so good that night, mainly because it rained earlier that night and everyone stayed in at home, so good old Cecep is thinking about going home early.

"Good evening, sir." A man steps out of the shadows.

"Hello," Cecep answers him.

"Your food smells delicious," he says and Cecep thinks that he might make a sale, but he is disappointed. "Unfortunately, I don't have any money, so I can't buy any."

Cecep looks at him. From the way that he is dressed, he could be a farmer, maybe. Anyway, he certainly does not look like he is rolling in money and whether it is because of the way that he is dressed, or because it has been a slow night, or simply because Cecep is a good man, he smiles and shrugs and says, "Don't worry, you can have some."

The man looks at him with surprise—not with an expression of hunger, or gratitude, or eager anticipation, but of calm surprise.

So Cecep puts a ladle full of *bakso tahu* on the pot over the stove and after it is cooked, he puts the tofu in a small bamboo bowl and hands it to the penniless man. The latter takes the bowl and picks up a spoonful of *bakso tahu* and puts it in his mouth. He closes his eyes and tilts his head up.

"Mmm," he finally says. "Yes, I think that that's the best *bakso tahu* I've eaten in years." He opens his eyes and looks at Cecep. "Thank you so much. You're very kind."

"I'm glad that you like it."

He certainly does. In minutes, the *bakso tahu* has been eaten and he hands back the bowl to the vendor.

"In my village, no one makes it this tasty. I'll bet they'd love it."

"Where is your village?"

"An hour's walk from here. Why don't you come with me? I'm

headed that way and I know that they'd love to see you."

"At this late hour? Won't they be all asleep?"

"Oh no, we stay up pretty late at night."

So Cecep agrees to go. Maybe he can make a sale or two after all in that village and they set out down the road. They walk along the path, which soon turns into a dirt road. The two men talk about nothing in particular, the conversation drifts back and forth about their families, the village, the weather, cooking, and so on.

Finally, they get to the village and some people come out to see them.

"This man makes the tastiest *bakso tahu* that I think I've ever eaten. It's delicious! He's a very good cook," the guide tells his friends by way of an introduction.

Cecep's professional pride shows in his face and he asks the villagers, "Anybody want to try some? You heard him yourselves, it's good, and you can believe him, 'cause he's from here, you know him."

Several smile but shake their heads slightly. One of them finally speaks up.

"Nobody has any money in this village."

"Nobody?" asks Cecep, crestfallen.

"Nobody."

Well, as you can imagine, Cecep is disappointed, but he is not a man that stays disappointed or sad for too long. He decides that tonight is just not his night for selling food, that it is time to go home. But before he turns his cart and heads on back home, he decides to give them some food. That is the kind of man he is. He is a good man. So, he tosses some *bakso*

tahu into the pot, ladles them into four of his bamboo bowls and hands them out.

The villagers are surprised at his kindness. They pass the bowls around, each one taking one or two spoonfuls. By now, more villagers have joined them and they taste some from the bowls that are being passed around. And here is the funny thing: each villager has the same curious reaction as the first one when he tasted the food. Each one would close his eyes and tilt his head a little back and then open his eyes and exclaims, "Yes, that is good." "Yes, oh, yes, that is truly first rate." Cecep is amused at this tribal custom of theirs.

Well, before too long, the food is gone, the bowls are collected, and Cecep is saying goodbye as he is turning his cart around.

The man who originally brought him to the village steps forward with someone else whom he introduces as the village headman. The latter speaks.

"You've been very kind. We don't have any money at all to give you, but we'd like to give you a little something, anyway." He takes out of his pocket a small handkerchief, rolled up. "It's nothing, really. And because it's not much, we don't want you to open it until you're far from here. We don't want to be embarrassed."

"It's not necessary. You don't have to. I'm just glad that you enjoyed it. Perhaps next time you can pay me."

"We insist," the headman says as he pushes the small handkerchief at Cecep's hand, who, in turn, puts it into his pocket.

"All right. Thank you." With these simple villagers it is almost certainly some good luck charm. Who knows, it might actually bring him luck the next night.

"Oh, one more thing. We know that you're going home. But when you walk back to your home, please don't look back at our village until you've reached the main road. It's a tradition that we have here that we're very strict about. It sounds silly to strangers that come here, I know, but it's a tradition that we insist on keeping."

"All right, very well. Goodbye." It is not really important to him, one way or the other. And he sets to pushing his cart home.

He walks down the dirt road. This time Cecep has no one to talk with, so the trek seems longer and tedious. Besides, pushing the cart down a dirt road is harder than pushing it along a smooth, paved road, anyway. If he had turned around, he would have seen the houses and the people in the village vanishing slowly in a mist.

So, having traveled right up to the main road, Cecep decides to stop for a few minutes' rest, even though by now he definitely wants to get home to bed. He sits down on the road and thinks about what he needs to do tomorrow.

Then, he remembers the talisman in his pocket because the rolled-up handkerchief is making a small bulge in his pocket as he sits and he takes it out, curious to see the good luck charm that these simple villagers put in it.

A small hard pebble seems to be inside and he unwraps it. By the light of the full moon, he sees that the amulet is a small piece of glass, the size of his fingernail. Amused, he picks it up and then realizes that it is not a piece of glass after all and at first his brain refuses to accept what it is, but finally he realizes that what he has in his hand is actually a diamond. A very big diamond. He jumps up and looks behind him at where he came from, but there is no village to be seen. In fact, there is not even a road any more. It is nothing but jungle.

And he has never found that village again.