

Short Story | Putra Hidayatullah

Baluembidi

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Pictured by Idrus bin Harun

WE WERE STILL walking and kicking the gravel when shadows rose from the ground. Dek Gam was gripping a piece of dried bamboo as big as his thumb. His shorts slipped down, so that the crack in his butt could be seen. His eyes were barely blinking.

"Don't kick anymore, Banta. You'll frighten them. They're here." Dek Gam squatted and moved a stone as big as a baby's head. A black centipede scuttled away towards the stony side path.

Pieces of dried wood were scattered about on the banks of the Arakundo River. Dek Gam took one of them and began digging. Each time he pounded the wood into the ground, snot oozed out of his pug nose. Dek Gam had dropped out of school. He was three years older than me, who was in the fourth grade at the time, but my mother said we looked the same age. He was the friend who always invited me to play in the fields or here.

The river still seemed to be overflowing. The big rock where people used to sit while fishing was no longer visible. Two branches drifted by and were caught where the river curved. I saw a buffalo trying to cross to the other side.

I wanted to go home to tell Macut that her buffalo might be carried away by the current. But Dek Gam said we were almost there. Dek Gam said the catfish there were huge. If we were to go back, we would not be allowed to come out again once the sun had set. The Commander had announced a night curfew. In addition, said Dek Gam, even if it were tossed about, the buffalo would not drown. Buffalos can swim.

In the past, my friends and I loved to swim too. I learned how to swim from Dek Gam. In my village, if you did not know how to swim you would be called a sissy. Dek Gam also taught me how to dive. Sometimes we competed to see who could hold his breath longest underwater. But we did that secretly.

Once, my mother figured out what we'd been doing when she saw me come home with red eyes. Then she told me a wicked genie lived in the river; its name was Baluembidi. The genie had been sucking human blood almost every year. Ten years ago, a boy had drowned. Five days later, his pale and bloated corpse floated like a banana tree.

"Do you know about Baluembidi, Dek Gam?"

Dek Gam shook his head and continued digging. His fingernails were blackened.

"My mother said, there are many Baluembidi under that bridge there." I squinted and pointed to an old steel bridge. "Sometimes, it resembles a mat. When you stroke it, it will roll up and bury you under water. After it has completely sucked your blood, only then will it release your body. "

Dek Gam narrowed his eyes, "But I often go there. There are no Baluembidi." He wiped off his snot. Drops of sweat appeared on the nape of his neck.

From a distance, Lhee Reutoh Hill could be seen undulating like a woman's breasts. My mother said, ghosts breed in that hill. They perch on large old trees. The ghosts control every inch of the flowing river. They hide under the calm water. Their hands stretch out like a giant's scarf.

It rained heavily last night. With my arms as my pillow, I was lying in my room observing the drops of rain falling through the hole in the roof. I had placed an empty paint can under it and listened to the raindrops falling, sounding like the ticking of a clock.

When the cold began to pierce my bones, I pulled up the blanket. And I began to dream again of the Commander. In my dream, the Commander was not wearing striped clothes. His hair seemed white. He stood at the door of my mother's room. The Commander was coaxing my mother and pulled her into his arms. "Come on..." His hairy hands stretched out to unbutton my mother's clothes. I stood with my knees shaking. I covered my eyes with my hands. Sobbing, I heard my mother screaming.

The scream came at the same time as the clap of thunder that woke me up. I could not see anything. Everything was as black as ink. I could still hear the sound of rain beginning to subside.

In between, my ears caught a strange sound again. I heard someone shouting for a long time. Gradually the shout faded and disappeared and suddenly reappeared again.

I had also heard it a few nights before. I heard the sounds of someone crying, like a female voice. At other times, it moaned like the sounds of children my age who were being crushed by stones.

I could not bear to hear it; I shut my ears tightly and curled up like the number five. When I shut my ears, I heard another voice. My father once said, if you shut your ears tightly, you would hear the sounds of coals burning in hell. I was so frightened. But I shut my ears. A mouse sneaked under my blanket and hid there.

I was motionless, not knowing what had happened to my ears. The sounds were suffocating my chest. Behind my pillow, I sobbed.

When morning came, I saw mother in the kitchen; squinting while blowing the stove, she said to me, "There were no voices, Banta. I didn't hear any voices. You are being disturbed by Baluembidi. Baluembidi will sneak in and disturb naughty children."

Mother did not hear the voices. Nobody heard the voices except me. I felt as if I was living alone. I left mother so as not to be reminded of the voices again. Without her knowledge, I did not go to school. I ran towards Dek Gam's house.

The sun has yet to set. "Look!" Dek Gam placed a worm as large as my little finger on the palm of his hand. The worm wriggled like the tail of a mouse. Dek Gam rose and took a taro leaf, added a handful of soil and placed some worms in it.

"Hold this." Dek Gam wiped his sweat with his left arm. It seemed he didn't hear what I had said about Baluembidi. He took a worm and cut it with his black nails. Dek Gam spat several times on the fishhook. Cottony clouds moved slowly up above. An eagle flew in circles and screeched.

"The fish there are huge. The other day I got a fish as large as my father's thigh."

I followed Dek Gam. He left slim footprints behind him. Dek Gam never wore shoes.

"If the Baluembidi exist, why don't they eat the fish?" Dek Gam blew out the snot that was flowing from his nose.

"Maybe those are magical fish, Dek Gam."

"No. I have eaten them. Nothing happened. The fish are big because nobody goes fishing there anymore, Banta."

We stopped when we neared the old steel bridge. Near the river was a wall, the remains of an old bridge. Dek Gam asked me to hold the hook. He climbed the concrete. I followed behind.

We sat side by side. The wind blew into our hair and faces. The water here seemed calm. Dek Gam whistled and threw his hook. Far across the river a few cranes were drinking.

"The Commander almost died near that stone."

"Dragged by the Baluembidi?"

"No."

"That stupid man could not swim," chuckled Dek Gam.

"Really?"

"What a pity he didn't die."

Since the arrival of the Commander, my father, Dek Gam's father and almost all the men no longer went to work in the fields. They ran and hid in the jungle.

I did not understand why the Commander must hunt my father the way our fathers hunted the rats in the fields. Mother said, the Commander's men have recorded the names of all the men here. He said the men in the village were not obedient. Mother said, if I were disobedient, they would record my name too.

When they first came here, the Commander and his men walked around on foot. Whenever they saw a rooster or a parrot in the homes of the villagers, they would take them to their headquarters. They gave the birds new names, the names of our fathers.

One afternoon, when Dek Gam had gone to this river alone, he bumped into the Commander. He told me the Commander asked, while joking with his men, "You have a sister, don't you? Is she beautiful?" On another day, I heard young people whispering among themselves before they disappeared from the village. They said, "The Commander and his men don't just look for birds. They also look for pretty chicks in the village." I did not understand what he meant.

I saw red clouds on the horizon. The sun was setting, almost parallel to the hill. The image of the Baluembidi still had not gone from my head. Every time I closed my eyes, I saw a Baluembidi in my mind. It had a large, green body and a long tail. Its teeth were sharp like the teeth of a shark, and its huge, red eyes bulged out.

"If you were to compare him to a fish, the Commander was like a salted fish, he couldn't swim," chuckled Dek Gam. "I saw it with my own eyes. When he almost reached the center of the river, he shouted, help... help..." Dek Gam mimicked the Commander's strange accent.

"Ssst. Not so loud. They're up there," I said. They have extremely sharp ears that make us frightened even of the walls in our own homes. Up there, not far from the bridge, they had built their headquarters. They asked the villagers to arrange gunny sacks filled with sand. They said, the sand could withstand attacks and could not be penetrated by bullets. Above the sacks, they placed rifles in inverted V rows; the muzzles pointing to the road.

"There are no Baluembidi here, Banta. The Commander who could not swim was not taken by the Baluembidi. Why should it take us? You don't believe me?"

Before I had a chance to reply, Dek Gam's hook was pulled by something. The string on the hook drew nearer. I felt my heart quicken. Dek Gam tried to pull it but failed. My breath caught in my throat when a catfish as big as an adult's thigh hung in the air.

"Wow!"

I released it from the fishhook. We caught one fish after another. I placed them inside the rattan basket.

Before the sun had set, the basket was filled with fish. The last catfish we caught was still flapping about with the desire to return to the water. The smell of fish rose. It had been a long time since I had seen fish this big. While I was still counting, Dek Gam climbed down slowly from the concrete and went to the riverbank. He removed his clothes and went into the water.

"Look, Banta!"

"No, Dek Gam!"

Dek Gam laughed and ran down the rocks. He removed his shorts and dove into the river. Then he raised his head from the water and said breathlessly, "There aren't any Baluembidi, Banta. Come on..."

Dek Gam dove and floated. He flapped the water with both his legs. It had been so long since I swam in a river. Dek Gam had been swimming for almost half an hour and nothing had happened. I could no longer resist the urge to swim. In a few minutes I found myself in the water. The cold finally spread throughout my body.

Dek Gam splashed water in my face. I splashed water back into his. We chuckled.

"The Commander almost drowned here."

My mother's story flashed through my mind, of how the Baluembidi dragged your legs first and then drowned your body before releasing it after two or three days.

But I did not feel anything. Nothing pulled my legs. There were no Baluembidi. Mother had intentionally frightened me so that I would not play in the river. Dek Gam invited me to do what we had not done for a long time: see who could hold his breath longest in the water. Dek Gam looked on while I dived, counting the seconds. Deep in the water, I saw something wrapped up at the bottom of the river.

"There's something there!"

"What?"

Dek Gam swam towards me and began to dive. I saw air bubbles appearing on the surface of the water. Dek Gam was dragging something heavy with all his strength and pushing it urgently to the edge.

A gunny sack with an unfamiliar name written on it. Dek Gam's knees were shaking while opening it. His lips paled for a moment. I saw the form of a naked man with his hands and legs tied up with strings. I saw that the corpse had already become bloated with a hole in the forehead.

"There are many other gunny sacks down there!" Dek Gam's voice was hoarse.

Dek Gam looked up into the sky. He had subsequently found his father's corpse in one of the gunny sacks. His face was flushed. His voice choked. He fought back tears. But then he sobbed while hitting the sand repeatedly. And his cries changed, becoming like the long moans that I heard every midnight after that afternoon.

My throat hurt. My chest felt heavy. I could not hold back my tears. I thought of my mother. It was clear Baluembidi existed. Baluembidi with weapons. Baluembidi who had shot our fathers, placed them in the gunny sacks, weighing them down with stones, and who had drowned our fathers at the bottom of this river. []

NOTES

Baluembidi: a mythical evil genie that lives in the water and sucks human blood

Dek Gam: a nickname for boys in Aceh

Macut: aunt (mother's sister)

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Hair of A Virgin

AFTER RETURNING from the night of worship, where he was tasked with tying the mouth of a rooster with a strand of virgin hair, Darwis lay down. Thirsty, he drank a bottle of wine. Suddenly, the world spun around him, intertwining. He was rolled into a dark ocean until he stopped at a strange point.

"Where am I?" He groped around the dark space, with cold iron walls. His heart pounded. Fear seized him. "What kind of place is this? Why am I here?" He continued to question in confusion. "Help!" He shouted. His voice echoed. No answer came.

Faintly, he heard his own snoring. What a strange world, he thought. He only realized he was in a dream world. He knocked on the walls several times, leaving echoes like sounds in a tunnel. He continued to knock until exhaustion, hoping someone would respond. All in vain. Too tired, he fell asleep and was carried into another layer of dreams, where he found himself trapped in the body of an old wanderer on the deck of a ship sailing above an endless desert. The wind blew storms of sand, forcing him to squint. The man on the ship looked different from others. When he walked, he moved backward with precise steps, never bumping into anything as if two other eyes were attached to the back of his head.

As the day grew brighter towards evening, turtles flew from unexpected directions. They followed him because the pockets of his robe were always filled with magical seeds that could satisfy small creatures. He did not speak much, except at certain times when he felt certain words in his mind were more valuable than silence. Otherwise, he would close his mouth. If the day was too hot, he would pull out and wrap his endlessly long tongue around his head like a turban to protect himself from the sun and the heat of the desert.

No one knew his age. According to his confession, for over fifty years he had not slept. He once thought that the remaining years of his life were intended by the universe for him to sleep alone. For now, he considered the inability to sleep as a message from God for him to continue moving and never stop wandering. Occasionally, he saw fish flying amidst the desert wind, forcing him to be alert to avoid them hitting his head. However, if hunger struck, he would simply pick a few fish as big as an adult's thigh caught on the ship's mast. The fish were left to mature under the sun's heat. They never ate much, just enough. Fullness made the head dull and was forbidden by what they believed. "My religion is conscience. Every journey that brings us into contact with the unknown is worship," he explained to people. That was also the reason why he never stopped wandering. The further he walked, the closer he felt to God.

The insomnia, which he actually thanked, had made him thinner. One day, he heard whispers from his body claiming to be too tired, abused by his spiritual ambition.

"I must be fair," he thought. But how could he lay down if his eyes couldn't close at all? Instead, he was overwhelmed by guilt. "Isn't a bed that doesn't give sleep better used for worship?" He then rose and continued his journey.

However, he couldn't force it. A sense of exhaustion along with a hint settled in his conscience. He paused by a tree, closed his eyes, murmured, and nodded. Then, unexpectedly, he removed his own eyeballs and placed them into the pocket of his robe. Surprisingly, he fell into a deep sleep. Subsequently, as the sun began to set, he routinely removed his eyeballs and slept until dawn approached.

One day, during his journey through the barren desert, accompanied by a stick made from a tree branch, he saw a ship sailing towards him. He was the first person to successfully board it. Then, one by one, strangers who didn't know each other followed suit. "Where are we sailing to?" One of the strangers wondered in his heart. After being alone for so long, and not speaking to anyone except his own conscience, on the deck of the ship, the old wanderer sat surrounded by strangers. They were ready to hear the turbaned man's tale. "We are sailing towards the afterlife," he replied.

When the sun was less scorching, the old wanderer removed the turban of his tongue from his head and recounted his experience traveling alone in the desert until this strange wooden sailing ship approached. "I am also looking for my grandmother," he said. "When I was still alive in the world, we met several times. She came into my dreams." The people around him frowned. They speculated whether they knew the grandmother. "Perhaps in a past life, you have met," he said.

"Even before death, she knew that she would later visit her grandchildren and great-grandchildren through dreams. She had already arrived in the afterlife. She deliberately came to tell stories that she couldn't tell while alive. She had kept those stories in her heart. They were so tightly sealed within her that they had never been touched by words, as she told me. Also, because she sealed them so well, she could die normally, and her body would be treated as that of a noble person," the old wanderer said. Only after she died could she express the contents stored in her mind. The old wanderer recounted how he had received the presence of his grandmother from his great-grandfather in a dream. He saw an old woman who was so kind to him. "I have kept this story hidden for a long time," she said. "Perhaps the situation is still the same, so don't tell anyone. I don't want them to exhaust you," the old woman continued. "Do you know that the ritual of tying the mouth of a rooster with the hair of a virgin girl is something heretical?" the turbaned tongue man shook his head. His great-grandmother said, "Although it has been mandated, it is not a command from God."

How could he say something that deviated from what the priests had mandated and had been passed down through generations? At that moment, he began to doubt and wonder if it was indeed his great-grandmother or a devil in disguise? His grandmother added, "You could be punished if you tell this, but I couldn't sleep peacefully in the afterlife until I conveyed this. In the afterlife, this unspoken truth becomes a stain. That's why I came to tell you so that you don't have to follow blindly without using your mind."

You know, there is a primary energy emitted by the universe when time is at the exact midpoint between late night and early morning. That's when the morning prayers are held. That's also when the roosters are too noisy. The crowing of the roosters disturbs the solemnity of the prayers. That's why the priest caught the rooster and tried to silence it, but no one knew how until a woman, one of his congregants who happened to be unmarried, plucked a strand of hair from her own head and instructed him to tie the rooster's mouth with it.

Since that night's events, the subsequent disciples, without using their minds, caught roosters and tied their mouths with the hair of virgins as a requirement for worship. Not long after, the priest himself died, and the ritual was mandated to his disciples. Everyone then gathered as much hair from virgin girls as possible, even considering it a form of worship. They believed that the more strands of hair they obtained, the greater the reward they would carry to the afterlife.

Meanwhile, the ship continued to sail above the desert sands. No one knew the whereabouts of his grandmother. Suddenly, he heard his conscience telling him that they were close. They would descend, meeting those who had left the world earlier. However, the ship struck something, throwing him off so that he detached from the old wanderer's body.

He awoke and saw spilled wine on the floor. He regained consciousness and remembered the last thing he did, which was gathering the hair of virgins for the worship requirement. He began to doubt and couldn't resist committing an error, which was to share his newfound belief with others, tantamount to inviting death to come. With the recommendation from the priests, he was beheaded by order of the king. []