

THE FOOTBRIDGE

By W Goodwin

A week from now on this jungly island—coconut palms overhead, outrigger canoes on the water, volcano looming—I'm to meet the headman, and I need to acquire a piglet for the accompanying feast. On my way to the island's marketplace to find the seller of piglets, the path runs next to an almost overflowing irrigation canal. The opaque water hisses; the soles of my feet press into the spongy earth. Yesterday I saw a water buffalo cooling off in the torrent.

I come to an exceedingly simple footbridge constructed to provide shaky access to the village on the other side of the canal. This rudimental overpass for feet barely clears the rushing water. A stout wooden stake driven into the mud at the midpoint of the waterway supports two planks, one from the far bank and the other from the nearside. The two boards meet end-to-end on top of the stake where a few nails hold them in place. The shore ends of each plank rest on the boggy banks.

The far plank is painted blue. The one on my side is pink. I wonder why. Every time I walk this well-traveled path to the market, I hope to see villagers traversing this thin two-tone footbridge. I want to ask them why the planks are painted those particular colors.

A kerfuffle on the far side of the water attracts my attention. A noisy crowd is gathering around a woman standing close to where the blue board touches the far bank. She's wrapped in the pastel-colored fabric worn by all the women on this humid island. She's gripping the handles of a wheelbarrow. There's a half-full burlap rice bag inside. It looks like the woman intends to push the barrow across the narrow footbridge. She's giggling, and the crowd's acting slaphappy silly.

I see the barrow-wielding woman gather her composure, inhale deeply, and start pushing the barrow. The wheel bumps up onto the footbridge. The woman carefully places one foot before the other as she begins rolling the wheelbarrow over the faded blue plank.

Watching from the pink end of the footbridge, I expect the people in this little vignette to hush in trepidation, but I'm still a newcomer to this culture, and I fail to anticipate their overarching sense of fun. Mirth fills the air as the woman reaches in the center of the now-sagging blue plank. Though she's only inches above the water, she's laughing.

The daring woman approaches the middle of the footbridge. Without the slightest hesitation, she bounces the barrow's wheel over the protruding nail heads and crosses onto the pink plank. The crowd behind the woman begins shouting something at her. She can't look, but I can. What I see is a water buffalo downstream from the presently occupied two-tone footbridge, and it's lumbering toward the canal. The shouting becomes more urgent. She finally chances a glance downstream just as the immense buffalo splashes into the canal. Sending waves over the bank,

most of its body disappears beneath the water. The buffalo huffs and struggles against the current but it's gaining ground. It's getting closer to the woman on the plank. She comprehends the threat, leans forward, and quickens her pace. Hard to tell if it's from bravado or folly, but she's kicking up her heels. It looks like she's dancing on water, her partner a wheelbarrow. The rubber wheel flirts with the edges of the narrow plank. The barrow wavers. The woman staggers. The pitch of the crowd's shouting rises an octave.

The optimistic, barrow-pushing woman and the snorting, wave-pushing buffalo are converging on the pink end of the footbridge. In a few more seconds, either the woman will roll her wheelbarrow off the end of that rosy plank, or the beast will take out the bridge and its occupant. I step aside to make room in case she succeeds.

And then, right in front of me, the wheelbarrow comes bouncing off the pink plank and onto the soggy turf. The crowd cheers madly. The buffalo halts just inches before the footbridge, so near I hear its labored breathing, see the twitching of its bristled snout, sense its disappointment... The woman takes a quick look at the water frothing around the buffalo's broad chest before turning and giving me an exultant smile.

"Apa kabar! I am Sushila. I think you want to buy lil' peeg, yes?"

Before I can reply, a strident squeal arises from the shifting rice bag inside the wheelbarrow.