

Title: Makcik Rojak

Written by: Balbindar Kaur Dhaliwal

Date: 20 May 2024

Word count: 596

---

When I was in primary school in the 60s, my father was a jaga in a printing factory on Bukit Timah Road and we were given a room to live in next to the factory. Next to our house was a tall chain link fence that began from the front of the factory all the way to the back where the fence was shrouded by old trees. On the other side was the 7-Mile Kampung where my friends lived. Behind our house was another fence that ran square to the first fence to the other side of the factory. Behind the second fence was a gate with a large sliding bolt and padlock in the first fence. My friends and I couldn't open it so we climbed over the fence every day to get together.

In the kampung, my favourite house was Makcik Rojak's home. This was not her name of course. When she saw us coming into her house with serious looks, she said, "Came to eat?" and we said, "Yes," and nothing else needed to be said.

On that particular day, Makcik made her rojak in the large plastic basin for her son, Akbar, a neighbour's girl, Jin, and me. We sat on the floor and watched her swirl the cut cucumber, sengkuang, pineapple and kangkung, the roasted peanuts, taueh, asam jawa, sugar and belacan. We were patient and asked her to make it very delicious. "Yes, dik, very, very delicious," she said as she checked the taste and added something now and then.

We had our favourites. Once Makcik's rojak was ready, she handed it to us. Akbar smeared his finger through the peanuts and belacan and licked it. Jin liked sugar with belacan. I liked the crunchy, cool and coated sengkuang and so ate it first and as much as I could get. Holding onto a foot, I nibbled on a piece while my free leg swung back and forth. Suddenly, I fell on my back, but I made sure the sengkuang piece was safe. When there was no more sengkuang, I ate the other pieces.

Sad to say, I ate so much rojak that I couldn't climb over the fence to get home in the evening. My father came to the steps of the house and peered inside. When he saw my bloated stomach and face smeared with belacan, he laughed and said, "I've been looking for you. Ate a lot again?"

"Bhai, don't be angry - she likes it," Makcik said.

"Did you eat a lot?" he asked me. "We told you so many times not to eat so much in people's houses. You need a good slap," and rubbed his hands together as if he would.

"Don't scold her," Makcik said. "It's my fault I let her eat so much."

"Makcik, you should have stopped her," my father said. "Don't let her eat so much."

I was so angry with him when he said that. "I don't want to go home," I said bravely and scooted to sit behind Makcik.

"If you don't go home, I'll be angry and I really won't let you play here any more," my father said probably for the thousandth time. I said nothing and even laughed at him. And then he said, "and your mother will be sad. She will cry a lot," and looked sad as if that would fool me.

"I'll go home for mother, not for you," I pointed a finger at him and pulled it through the remaining thick paste and licked it. I meant it too: I didn't speak to him and refused to hold his hand as we walked home.