

Street Vendor

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When I was watching the TV, the street scene of a small Asian country caught my eyes. I have been there. On the screen, protesters are being attacked by the riot police. It was not at all like that when I was there. It was many years ago.

I was on a business trip. After the business meetings were over, I ventured into the bustling market area. At one corner, there were several street vendors. One of them was selling a bunch of standing sage figurines. The figurines were all over the small table and some of them were almost falling off the edge. Instinctively, I reached one of them and slid it so that it would stay safely on the table.

Accidentally, I knocked down another figurine. It fell and broke into two pieces. It was not a lucky day. I looked at the street vendor. He was a short old man with millions of wrinkles on his face, just like other street vendors there. He stared at me for a while and said, "You broke, you buy." He didn't look upset or angry. The tone of his voice was just matter of fact. He must have seen many foreign visitors and must have encountered a situation like this hundreds of times.

"Well, I'm sorry that I dropped that one. But actually, I was just trying to save the other one right here." I tried to explain what I was doing. I don't know if that made any sense. He didn't change his calm expression. Just then, a short woman, probably his wife, showed up. She mumbled, "Huh, another foreigner broke another figurine." I tried to explain the situation to his wife as well. She just shrugged.

Then, still in his matter-of-fact tone, the street vendor said, "I bring police." I was

astonished. This was nothing that serious. I had no clue what he was going to do with the police. To my surprise, his wife mumbled, “Bad idea.”

Since I didn’t want to leave the “crime” scene, I stayed right there. Another street vendor brought a policeman. I didn’t immediately recognize him as a policeman, though. His “uniform” was more like that of a factory worker. His hat was more like the one for a train conductor. He had no radio or gun. The only thing that would make him a policeman was a wooden club tacked under his belt. He was short and had millions of wrinkles like the street vendor. He was also as calm as the street vendor.

The policeman listened to the street vendor, who spoke in the local language. He then listened to my explanation without changing his expression. After that, he seemed to be thinking, as if he was trying to solve the most difficult question on the final exam of the police academy. I was puzzled.

Eventually, the policeman said, “You buy it.” Of course, my response was, “What?!” He again paused for a while. He then said, “This is good souvenir. You remember this place.” With that, he left.

The street vendor picked up the broken figurine. Then, he carefully wrapped it with newspaper, as if it had been intact. He handed it to me as if nothing had happened. I noticed that his wife rolled her eyes. Still unable to understand all these, I paid for the broken, standing sage figurine.

And of course, I do remember that place.