

## **“The Friends of Kwan Ming”**

**A Chinese Folktale by Paul Yee**

**When his father died, the peasant Kwan Ming was forced to sell his little plot of paddy and the old family house to pay for the burial. After the funeral, Kwan Ming looked around at the banana trees surrounding the village, and saw that he had nothing left to his name—not even one chipped roof tile. He had just enough money to buy a steamship ticket to the New World, where he had heard jobs were plentiful.**

**“I can start a new life there,” he told his mother. “I will send money home.”**

**The voyage lasted six weeks, over rocky waves and through screaming storms. Kwan Ming huddled together with hundreds of other Chinese deep in the ship’s hold. There he became fast friends with Chew Lap, Tam Yim, and Wong Foon—men from neighboring villages. If one friend took sick, the others fetched him food and water. If one friend had bad luck gambling, the others lent him money to recover his losses. Together the four men ate, told jokes, and shared their dreams for the future.**

**When they arrived in the New World, everyone scattered throughout the port city to search for work. Kwan Ming hurried to the warehouse district, to the train station, and to the waterfront, but doors slammed in his face because he was Chinese. So he went to every store and laundry in Chinatown, and to every farm outside town. But there was not a job to be found anywhere, for there were too many men looking for work in a country that was still too young.**

**Every night Kwan Ming trudged back to the inn where he was staying with his three friends. Like him, they, too, had been searching for work but had found nothing. Every night, as they ate their meagre meal of rice dotted with soya sauce, the friends shared information about the places they had visited and the people they had met. And every night Kwan Ming worried more and more about his mother, and how she was faring.**

**“If I don’t find work soon, I’m going back to China,” Chew Lap declared one evening.**

**“What for, fool?” asked Tam Yim. “Things are worse there!”**

**“But at least I will be with family!” retorted Chew Lap.**

**“Your family needs money for food more than they need your company, Wong Foon commented, “Don’t forget that.”**

**Then a knock was heard at the door, and the innkeeper pushed his way into the tiny attic room.**

**“Good news!” he cried out. “I have found a job for each of you!”**

**The men leaped eagerly to their feet.**

**“Three of the jobs are well-paying and decent,” announced the innkeeper. “But the fourth job is, well...” he coughed sadly.**

**For the first time since they met, the four men eyed each other warily, like four hungry cats about to pounce on a bird.**

**“The biggest bakery in Chinatown needs a worker,” said the innkeeper. “You’ll always be warm next to the oven. Who will go?”**

**“You go, Chew Lap,” said Kwan Ming firmly. “Your parents are ill and need money for medicine.”**

**“The finest tailor in Chinatown wants an apprentice,” continued the innkeeper. “The man who takes this job will be able to throw away those thin rags you wear.”**

**“That’s for you, Tam Yim,” declared Kwan Ming. “You have four little ones waiting for food in China.”**

**“The best shoemaker in Chinatown needs an assistant,” said the innkeeper. “He pays good wages. Who wants to cut leather and stitch boots?”**

**“You go, Wong Foon,” Kwan Ming stated. “You said the roof of your house in China needs repair. Better get new tiles before the rainy season starts.”**

**“The last job is for a houseboy.” The innkeeper shook his head. “The pay is low. The boss owns the biggest mansion in town, but he is also the stingiest man around!”**

**Kwan Ming had no choice but to take this job, for he knew his mother would be desperate for money. So off he went.**

**The boss was larger than a cast-iron stove and as cruel as a blizzard at midnight. Kwan Ming’s room was next to the furnace, so black soot and coal dust covered his pillows and blankets. It was difficult to save money, and the servants had to fight over the leftovers for their meals.**

**Every day Kwan Ming swept and washed every floor in the mansion. He moved the heavy oak tables and rolled up the carpets. The house was so big, that when Kwan Ming finally finished cleaning up the last room, the first one was dirty all over again.**

**One afternoon Kwan Ming was mopping the front porch when his boss came running out. In his hurry, he slipped and crashed down the stairs. Kwan Ming ran over to help, but the huge man turned on him.**

**“You turtle!” he screamed, as his neck purpled and swelled. “You lazy oaf! You doorknob! You rock-brain! You’re fired!”**

**Kwan Ming stood silently for a moment. Then he spoke.**

**“Please sir, give me another chance. I will work even harder if you let me stay.”**

**The boss listened and his eyes narrowed. Then he coughed loudly.**

**“Very well, Kwan Ming, I won’t fire you,” he said. “But I will have to punish you, for you have ruined this suit, and scuffed my boots, and made me miss my dinner.”**

**Kwan Ming nodded miserably.**

**“Then find me the following in three days’ time!” the boss ordered. “Bring me a fine woolen suit that will never tear. Bring me a pair of leather boots that will not wear out. And**

**bring me forty loaves of bread that will never go stale. Otherwise you are finished here, and I will see that you never find another job!"**

**Kwan Ming shuddered as he ran off. The old man's demands sounded impossible! Where would he find such items?**

**In despair, Kwan Ming wandered through the crowded streets of Chinatown. He sat on the raised wooden sidewalk because he had nowhere to go.**

**Suddenly, familiar voices surrounded him.**

**"Kwan Ming, where have you been?"**

**"Kwan Ming, how is your job?"**

**"Kwan Ming, why do you never visit us?"**

**Kwan Ming looked up and saw his three friends smiling down at him. They pulled him up and pulled him off to the teahouse, where they ate and drank. When Kwan Ming told his friends about his predicament, the men clapped him on the shoulder.**

**"Don't worry!" exclaimed Tam Yim. "I'll make the woolen suit you need."**

**"I'll make the boots," added Wong Foon.**

**"And I'll make the bread," exclaimed Chew Lap.**

**Three days later, Kwan Ming's friends delivered the goods they had promised. An elegant suit of wool hung over a gleaming pair of leather boots, and forty loaves of fresh-baked bread were lined up in neat rows on the dining-room table.**

**Kwan Ming's boss waddled into the room and his eyes lit up. He put on the suit, and his eyebrows ached in surprise at how well it fit. Then he sat down and tried on the boots, which slid onto his feet as if they had been buttered.**

**Then the boss sliced into the bread and started eating. The bread was so soft, so sweet, and so moist that he couldn't stop. Faster and faster he chewed. He ate twelve loaves, then thirteen, then twenty.**

**The boss's stomach swelled like a circus tent, and his feet bloated out like balloons. But the well-sewn suit and sturdy boots held him tight like a gigantic sausage. The man shouted for help. He tried to stand up, but he couldn't even get out of his chair. He kicked his feet like a baby throwing a tantrum.**

**But before anyone could do a thing, there was a shattering *Bang!***

**Kwan Ming stared at the chair and blinked his eyes in astonishment. For there was nothing left of his boss.**

**He had exploded into a million little pieces.**