

THE WISHING TREE

Matilda Aquila Chia

matilda.chia@gmail.com

AH NI walks along a road barefoot, his stubby little legs pit-pattering on the rough pavement. Behind him he drags a little basket of home-made pastries and in his right hand a little bell. He looks around himself and stops at the door of a temple. He carefully picks up a cardboard sign from his basket labelled "home-made Kueh! \$1" and sets it beside his basket. He looks around and starts to ring the bell.

The street is very quiet except for a few pious worshipers who mill in and out of the temple doors, but none pay Ah Ni any attention. He continues to ring his bell, smiling and looking around for a customer.

It is hot and Ah Ni starts to perspire. He clutches his stomach as it suddenly makes a growling sound. His face scrunches up in hunger and he looks towards the pastries with longing. But then he opens his money-bag that is hanging on his neck: it is still empty. He sighs and looks up at the sky, mopping his brow again. He looks into the dim depths of the temple behind him and starts to pack up to escape into the shade. He then drags his items into the temple and finally comes to a stop under the shade of a big tree in the middle of the courtyard, which is labelled "The Wishing Tree".

The tree has little white papers with writings on it tied to the branches, flapping in the wind. It looks ancient and mysterious and little Ah Ni just stares up at it in awe.

There is no one about except a middle-aged business man, dressed in a smart shirt and pants. His hands are clasped together in prayer and his head is bowed. Ah Ni sees a booth with spare white strips of paper and some black pens, and excitedly runs to it. He picks up a pen and scrawls "kindness for the world" on to it and happily tries to tie it to the tree.

However, Ah Ni is too short and his short legs won't bring him anywhere near any of the branches. He sticks his paper into the ground at the base of the tree, shrugging. That will do. Ah Ni resumes his stance next to the businessman, and copies his posture: hands clasped, head bowed. He wishes with all his heart.

In the serene quiet of the temple courtyard, suddenly an exceedingly loud stomach-growl is heard. Ah Ni quickly clutches his stomach in embarrassment. He looks up at the man beside him, hoping he didn't disturb his prayers. The man opens his eyes and looks at Ah Ni, but instead of looking annoyed, he smiles.

(CONTINUED)

The man looks at Ah Ni, then at his basket of pastries. He takes out from his pocket a dollar, and gestures "one" to Ah Ni, holding up his finger and pointing. Ah Ni beams in surprise and quickly picks up a pastry for the man, his first customer. The man smiles and bites into it on the spot. His eyes widen as he tastes the pastry and he finishes the whole thing- it is delicious!

The man takes the basket from Ah Ni's side and passes him a wad of money-more than the basket's worth. Ah Ni is shocked as he counts the thick stack of \$10 notes. He looks shocked as the man pats him on the head and smiles in thanks. He then turns around to leave.

Ah Ni cannot believe his luck, his jaw dropping. The man turns around again- he forgot something. He takes out one pastry and passes it to Ah Ni to eat, nodding. He then spots the paper by the foot of the tree. He picks it up to read, laughing. Then patting Ah Ni's head again, the man pockets the paper and with the basket in his arm, leaves.

Ah Ni holds the money to his chest, still shocked, and nibbles slowly into the pastry. Quietly, a smile breaks into bloom on his face. His wish came true immediately!

CUT TO:

2

EXT - TEMPLE - AFTERNOON (YEARS LATER)

2

Ah Ni, now a successful businessman, pulls up to the temple in his shiny Cadillac. He straightens his suit as he enters the temple, making his way to the Wishing Tree. In his hand he carries a paper bag printed with the brand "Ni's Kuehs". Upon reaching the tree, he takes out a beautiful box from the paper bag, filled with pastries and sets it at the foot of the tree- an offering. He then stands and clasps his hand together in prayer, head bowed.

Suddenly, a dry cough and moan is heard, disturbing the temple's tranquility. Ah Ni opens his eyes and looks up, spotting an old man sitting, half-hidden, against the back of the tree. Ah Ni quietly walks over. The man seems to be asleep, but his face is in pain and he clutches his stomach, as if in hunger. Ah Ni reaches into his paper bag and quickly pulls out another box of pastries, setting it in front of the old man. He gives a gentle shake to the old man's shoulder, and those tired, weak eyes open. Seeing how weak he is, Ah Ni picks up a pastry and puts it to the man's mouth, feeding him. The man remains silent as he chews on the pastry, but his eyes well-up in gratitude.

After helping the man finish eating the pastry, Ah Ni looks at his watch- he has to go. Before leaving, he takes a wad

(CONTINUED)

of whatever money he has in his pocket and presses it into the old man's hand, nodding. As he turns to go, the man coughs again. When he turns around, Ah Ni sees the man holding up a folded piece of crumpled paper- a thank-you note, no doubt. Ah Ni smiles and takes the paper from the man, pocketing it without reading. He bows and leaves.

CUT TO:

3

EXT - TEMPLE - EVENING (DAYS LATER)

3

Ah Ni runs into the temple, dragging a big basket behind him, to the Wishing Tree. He looks around but the courtyard is empty. The old man is nowhere to be seen.

The wishing tree is so full of wishes some have fallen to the floor to be blown away. Ah Ni picks up every single piece and ties them back to the tree. When that is all done, he himself pulls out a crumpled piece of folded paper from his pocket. It is yellowed with age and fragile. Ah Ni gingerly opens it again, straightens it out and ties it gently to the tree.

Flapping in the wind, the paper reads, scrawled in a childish hand-writing: "kindness for the world".

Ah Ni looks at it, his eyes with a faraway look in them. He shakes his head and smiles to himself. Slowly, Ah Ni opens the basket- it is filled with "Ni's Kuehs" pastries. He takes a cardboard sign from the basket and sets it beside the basket. It reads "Free home-made Kueh! Please take one."

He finally turns to the tree, assuming the usual stance: his hands clasped and head bowed. He stands under it, his face calm and peaceful. The wind blows softly and all that is heard is a gentle rustling of paper and leaves. Ah Ni opens his eyes and makes sure everything is in place. With one last look around the Wishing Tree, he turns and leaves.

FADE TO WHITE.