

## ***Disguises***

by Jean Kwok

On the night Mrs. Chen got lost, she was wearing a golden amulet of the goddess Kuan Yin underneath her clothes, for protection. She took the subway home from the factory in Chinatown. Sitting on the long seat with her feet lightly grazing the floor, she felt the weight of sleep drag her head forward, her permed curls sinking towards the small neat hands cupped politely in her lap. As the half-empty subway car lurched through the tunnel, its movement sporadically flung her head upward. She caught herself from sleep in those moments, looking about her, alarmed, only to have exhaustion fall over her again like a blanket. The swaying of the subway threw her back and forth against the hard seat, the thin fabric of her flowered pants brushed against the shopping bag full of sewing.

One... two... she had to take the subway fourteen stops to get home. The conductor's voice in English was a river of sound in her ear, noise following noise like the falling of water over rocks. Three... four...

Mrs. Chen lifted her heavy head. Five... six... the door opened and her factory supervisor strode out of the elevator with her polyester skirt flicking about her legs, stepping quickly and fastidiously, as though the clumps of fabric dust on the sewing room floor dirtied her high-heeled shoes. As she walked, she waved one wide hand in front of her mouth to clear away the dust in the air -- the other gripped a wadded piece of clothing. The supervisor only came into the work area when there was a problem; otherwise, she stayed in the air conditioned offices upstairs. Mrs. Chen could feel the supervisor's presence passing through the rows of silent women bent over their Singer sewing machines; no one dared look up, their needles racing, piercing the fabric.

The supervisor threaded her way through the pack of women, bright in her silver-toned suit; its light gray material stretched across her fat stomach like the skin of a snake. She stopped next to Mrs. Chen and with fingers thick with rings of jade, snapped open the garment she had been holding -- a skirt. Mrs. Chen, knowing it was not her place to meet the supervisor's eyes, cautiously raised her gaze to the round collar of her shirt, while everyone about her seemed to busy themselves with their work.

"Your seams are crooked," the supervisor announced, wrenching her mouth around the crisp Cantonese words. "This is not acceptable." She

always attempted to speak Cantonese, one of the so-called "sophisticated" dialects, although her accent was painfully rural. She told everyone that she had been born in Hong Kong where the cleanest Cantonese is spoken, but, Mrs. Chen thought, her peasant roots shone clearly through her words.

Mrs. Chen stood up.

"I am so sorry," she said, her pronunciation flawless. She knew the supervisor resented her for the breeding that meant so little in this country. She could see the skirt was one she had labored over at night, sewing between the soft breaths of her sleeping family.

"May I see it?" she asked, taking a step closer.

The supervisor held it away from her. "If this ever happens again, just one more time, you will no longer be allowed to bring work home," she said. "Please remember, Mrs. Chen, you are very new to this country -- we have had much trouble with recent arrivals -- and my uncle is doing you a great favor to allow you to take home extra sewing, and indeed to work here at all. I do not like to see ungrateful employees. You will, of course, not be paid for that entire bundle."

Then, before Mrs. Chen could reach for the skirt, the supervisor took one corner of it in her teeth and the other in her hands, and tore it down the seams, in half. She tossed the pieces onto Mrs. Chen's table as she turned on her heel and stalked from the room.

Mrs. Chen sank into her seat, spreading her fingers to shield her hot face. What crime have I committed, in which past life, to deserve these evil

winds of fate that blow at my back, she wondered. She realized that everyone was watching her out of the corners of their eyes, pretending they had noticed nothing. No one said anything to her. The subway doors closed and her head nodded forward.

The last station sped behind her. The overhead light went out, and the fluorescent flashes from the subway tunnel gleamed in the darkness behind her eyelids, pane after pane like frames of a movie.

Mrs. Chen, then just a girl named Lai Fong, was in China again. She was wearing green silk, preparing with her mother the ceremony for the seven goddesses who protected virginal maidens; it was the last time she would do this, because she was soon to be married. She bent to kneel on the cushion before the goddesses at the altar. Her mother, already kneeling, stopped her with a touch on her arm. Slowly, her mother gazed up at her, and her small rounded features, so much like Lai Fong's, were filled with grief and tenderness.

"My only daughter," she said, "before you pray with me this final time, you must remember this: it is said, one who is human must kneel only before the gods." She paused, and then said fiercely, "Never before anyone else."

The screech of the subway rang in her ears, startling her. Mrs. Chen brushed her forehead three times, to clear away painful memories. She touched the amulet of Kuan Yin hanging from the gold chain around her neck; its shape underneath her blouse reassured her. Everyone knew that pure gold protected you from evil but even more importantly, the monks at Shaolin

Temple had "opened it to the light," so that the goddess could truly live in it, as though it were her temple. The amulet was the only part of her mother Mrs. Chen had been able to take with her when she left China.

More people filled the subway car than she had remembered. Two well-dressed black women across from her chatted, and as one laughed, the long yellow feather on her hat wiggled. A homeless man wearing a cardboard sign with English writing on it had wrapped himself around a pole near Mrs. Chen.

He gingerly peeled his hands from the pole, as if it caused him pain to do so, and holding out his left palm, began to make his way through the car. His rancid smell, like sour milk, reached her before he did, and she tried not to breathe too deeply. Spittle clung to the sides of his mouth, suspended in droplets in his rough beard, but his lips were full and red, as though they alone had not lost their hold on life. When he stood in front of her, she studied his dirty face, and she was not afraid. It is said, she thought, that we must all be beggars for one life, we only hope that that life has already past.

She opened her change purse and pressed a quarter into his palm. She had none to spare but in this world, she mused, the times when you are able to give are so few that when you can, you must; the gods always view compassion kindly.

"Haf nice day," Mrs. Chen said, smiling. This was one of the few English phrases she had managed to learn.

The homeless man closed his fingers around the coin, his stare not leaving her smile as though it surprised him more than the quarter. He turned to the two women sitting across from her. They had stopped talking to watch Mrs. Chen. Now, they also took out their purses and gave him some change. As the homeless man went on his way, Mrs. Chen nodded to the women and they smiled back before resuming their conversation.

Mrs. Chen settled into her seat and closed her eyes. The subway car clattered; it was as though she and the women and the homeless man were all in a carriage together, riding to the same place. But where were they going? We are the Monkey King, the monk, and their two companions, seeking enlightenment on a road filled with demons and goddesses in disguise, she thought, and the voice of the English-speaking conductor sounded like her father's voice in China when he would tell her stories that she was too tired to understand. Then it seemed to her that the homeless man had put his head on her shoulder and they were resting together, sleeping, with the women across the way looking on.

Suddenly, she sat up. What stop was this? This must be number fourteen! This should be the right one but why did everything seem so unfamiliar? Where should she get off? The black women were gone; there was no sign of the homeless man. Mrs. Chen grabbed her shopping bag and hurried out of the train just before the doors closed, hoping this was indeed her station. Mr. Chen always scolded her for being overly imaginative. But as

she stood on the platform, with the rush of the subway wind at her back, she realized that she had never seen this place before.

She watched the few passengers make their way to the stairs. Then, from behind her, she heard the sound of footsteps. She panicked and fled for the exit, the shopping bag bumping against her legs. She had been mugged only a few weeks ago; she was the last one leaving the subway platform and a teenager in a leather jacket had blocked her way. He pulled out a long knife and held it in front of his body, half-hidden by the folds of his coat. His eyes horrified her. They were pale blue, blue as she'd only seen in the eyes of those blinded by cataracts in China, yet this man was able to see, as if he were some sort of demon. Without a word, he gestured with his knife. She gave him her purse; he took it and ran.

Mrs. Chen reached the token booth, passed it, and raced up onto the street. She stood outside the subway station, gulping in the cool night air, holding onto the stair rail. She looked around. No one had followed her. A desolate avenue lined with streetlamps stretched before her, the concrete buildings smothered in graffiti, interrupted by long alleys. In the distance, a dark figure walked down the block, only to quickly disappear around a corner. A skeleton of a car, windshield broken, stripped of all four wheels, loomed next to the subway entrance. She did not recognize anything.

This was a terrible place. She took the amulet out of her blouse and clutched it. A low wind whistled through the avenue, setting stray pieces of litter skittering across the concrete. She went back to the token booth.

She was relieved to see the clerk, a heavy man with a gray goatee, through the murky glass; he was an official, he could help her. She went around to the front of the booth and rapped on the glass with her knuckles.

"Hello? Hello?" she said.

He was talking on the phone and when he saw her, shifted so that his back was to her. She tapped on the booth more insistently. He waved for her to wait. She searched through her purse to find the piece of paper with her street address on it. Her son had written it out for her, just in case she got lost.

"Hello, hello," she said, her voice growing shriller.

Hunching over the phone, the clerk ignored her.

"HELLO!" she screamed.

He turned around. Mrs. Chen quickly pushed the crumpled paper towards him. He studied it, and said some words to her in English.

"No," she said, "no understand."

He repeated what he'd said, only louder. She shook her head. The man ran his fingers across the top of his puffy hair, then pointed at the receiver he was holding, like she was keeping him from something. She pressed her ear as close to the glass as she could. She tried to understand something, anything, of what he said, but it was just babble to her.

"Dank you," she said, "Bye bye." The man shrugged and returned to his phone conversation.

She slowly climbed to the street. *Please, Kuan Yin, let me get home to my child and husband...* she prayed. There was a pay telephone on the corner. She walked to it as fast as she could, put down her bag, fumbled for a quarter and dialed her home number. Her husband answered on the first ring.

"Big Brother Chen?" she said. She never called him by his first name because that would be disrespectful, even though they had been married more than ten years.

"Where have you been?" he asked angrily.

"I don't know -- I'm lost." She leaned against the side of the phone booth and began to sob.

"How could you be so stupid?" he yelled, as he always did when he was afraid. "Your son is here, waiting for his dinner -- why don't you ever pay attention to where you're going? Where are you?"

"I don't know."

"You have to stop that crying," Mr. Chen said. His voice grew more quiet. "Listen, don't be afraid. We have to find out where you are and then we will come get you. Let me put Sonny on the line."

She wiped her eyes on her sleeve and tried to pulled herself together. Her child must not know how upset she was.

His voice seemed much higher over the phone. "Mommy, where are you?"

"You have to help Mommy," she said. Sonny was only nine years old but he was as smart as the boys a grade ahead of him. He was learning

English so rapidly. She described her surroundings but he did not recognize them.

"I know," Sonny said. "Can you spell the name of the street by you? Can you see the street sign?"

She found it but the word was very long. She had never been that good with the English alphabet.

"M... I.... no, E... and then A... no, R..." she began. In the middle of her spelling, she had to put another coin in the telephone. Finally, she came up with something that Sonny thought could be the name of a street.

"But I don't know where it is," he said.

"Do you have any maps?" she asked.

"Yeah," he said. "Let me check in my geography book. That has maps."

She could hear him getting off the chair and running to his books. He was gone for a few minutes. Mrs. Chen looked at her amulet, glinting brightly against her dark blouse. She brought the golden goddess to her face and laid it against her cheek.

She heard shuffling, then Sonny came back on the phone.

"Mommy?" he said. "I can't find it. It's not in my book. I'm sorry." He started to sniffle. "When are you going to come home, Mommy?" he asked.

"Shhh... don't cry," she said, trying to sound calm. She could hear Mr. Chen cursing in the background. "Mommy will be fine. I will walk around and maybe I will recognize something. Just tell your father that I will call soon."

She hung up before she had to speak with Mr. Chen again. It would be more frightening to talk to her husband; he was just as helpless as she, and he would not be as easily comforted as Sonny. Her quarters were almost gone and she did not want to waste another. Perhaps she shouldn't have given one to the homeless man, she thought. What was kindness in this world? She rested her head against the telephone for a moment. *I invite the goddess Kuan Yin, she said under her breath, from the Shaolin Temple in the hills of Canton, to come to me now; so soon as I ...*

She felt a hand close to her ear reach for the amulet, as though it were trying to take it before she could finish her prayer. Mrs. Chen screamed and ducked at the same time. Grasping the shopping bag, she swung it in a circle, felt it hit, heard the sides rip. She hugged the bag and fled towards the subway station, hampered by its bulk. Someone or something seemed to race away in the opposite direction. *So soon as I call her, she gasped, running, so soon will she appear....*

As Mrs. Chen rushed to the steps, she caught a glimpse of features that looked Chinese. She skidded to a stop.

"Mister! Mister!" she shouted.

The young man turned, surprised. "Yes?" He was Chinese. He must be a student, with his thick glasses and a green bookbag slung over his narrow shoulder.

Mrs. Chen almost cried from relief. "I am lost," she said, breathing hard, "and someone just tried to take my necklace."

"My Cantonese is very bad," he said in Mandarin.

"We are both Chinese," Mrs. Chen said, part in Mandarin and part in Cantonese, "Please help me."

She explained the situation to him, her voice breaking -- how she was lost and almost robbed, how she couldn't follow the token booth clerk, how her son and husband couldn't help her -- using as much Mandarin as she remembered and filling in the rest with Cantonese. She put her bag on the ground and took out the piece of paper with her address on it. The young man listened and nodded; he seemed to understand her story. He took the slip of paper and the two of them went into the subway station. As they approached the token booth, the clerk recognized Mrs. Chen, rolling his eyes.

The young man spoke to the clerk in English and showed him her address. Then he said to Mrs. Chen, "The train you were on must have been re-routed. They probably announced the change but you did not understand. What you must do now is take the train over here for two stops and then switch..."

But Mrs. Chen was frantic. She clutched his arm, shaking her head. He stopped speaking and looked at her fingers buried in his jacket. "I will go with you," he said.

Mrs. Chen sighed and then offered to pay for his token, but he put one in the slot as he waved her hand away. When they got on the subway, the young man took out a book and began to study, only peering at her occasionally to check that she was all right. She was too exhausted to even

try to make conversation. *Kuan Yin, thank you for your aid....* The student escorted her the entire way to her own station. Mrs. Chen asked him to come to her house, so she could at least give him something to eat to repay his kindness, but when she passed through the gate, he did not follow.

She turned back to him. "Thank you," she said.

The young man grinned and bowed, his schoolbag slipping off his shoulder. She bowed in response but by the time she straightened, he was gone.

When Mrs. Chen got home, Sonny threw himself at her and cried, while Mr. Chen roughly patted her on the arm. They were quiet as she told them how the young man had helped her, how he must have been sent by the gods. Mrs. Chen lit incense at the altar in their kitchen to formally give thanks and noticed there were extra incense stubs in the holder -- Mr. Chen had also prayed for her.

"We were afraid for you," he said. "We thought we might have lost you."

Later that night, she had to stay awake to do her work. She bent to sew the pieces of the torn skirt together, joining again the severed parts with thread.