

Maniam the Milo Man

Maniam rose early, long before the rooster serenaded the hens with its wake-up call, for today, like every other day, he was going to be busy. As his feet touched the earthen floor of his wooden house in Buntong he wondered, as he did every morning, when life would get better for them all.

As he stood up, the wooden planks, that served as his bed creaked and his wife muttered to herself as she turned away from him and faced the badly fitting, rough-cut timber walls. Sluicing himself down with water from the stone jar that stood in the corner of the makeshift shed they laughingly called their bathroom. Maniam wrinkled his nose at the stench emanating from the bucket toilet. Obviously the night soil man in his yellow overalls had not yet reached this far flung part of Buntong.

Ablutions over, he returned to the house, where his bleary-eyed wife was preparing roti canai and dahl for the family's breakfast. Gratefully he saw his snow white uniform, freshly pressed, with the charcoal iron the evening before, and neatly folded on the chair. Shouting to his children to be quick he sat down and munched his food, hardly tasting it, while his thoughts turned to the day's labour that lay ahead.

This was to be a day like any other. First, fill the massive Milo cans that hung on each side of the front wheel of

his trusty Raleigh bicycle. This had been the most expensive purchase of his whole life and he was sure that before too long he would manage to pay off the loan. But times were hard and there never seemed to be enough left to cover everything.

Then he would don his uniform of white cap, shirt trousers and shoes and pedal off into the darkness to his first port of call, Yuk Choy School in New Town. From there he would follow the same route from school to school, calling out "Milo, Milo" as he came close to the gates. He loved to see the happy faces as they rushed towards him clutching one-cent coins in their sticky hands and shouting his name while jostling with each other to get closer to the cans. Of course these were the ones who actually had a few cents pocket money a week, unlike those he never saw, as they had nothing to

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spend. Poor kids he would often think and then his thoughts would turn to his own children, for whom he could barely afford to put rice in their stomachs, let alone allow them the luxury of pocket money.

The morning would pass quickly and well before lunch the cans would be empty of that magic potion the youngsters loved so much. Promising the disappointed young faces, some close to tears, that he would see them tomorrow, he would pedal away slowly towards his home.



Back in Buntong his wife would help him to fill up the cans with freshly made Milo while he would gobble down some plain rice, before returning to Town for the afternoon school round. How much longer could he keep this up he wondered, for every day seemed more difficult than the last, but with a family to feed he just had to keep going. Deep in thought, he hardly noticed that the children had joined him at the table, but their chatter suddenly pulled him out of his reverie. He smiled, as a new vision entered his head; the end of the day when, as he arrived home, the children would dash out to welcome him, clamouring to tell him about their adventures at school. Oh! How he wished he could spend more time with them.

As he finished the last morsel of food, it was only the children in his mind's eye that gave him the will to rise from the table - and start the long day ahead.