

MY BELOVED FAMILY

(Trần Nghi Âu Cơ)

We are having a family reunion. Yippee. I always love family reunions because everyone always seems to pay so much attention to me. Yes, indeed, they do. They are very attentive to all the weight I've gained, to all my pimples, to my lack of height, to name a few. I feel so very special. But of course, they always fail to notice all of my other attributes, all the *positive* ones, like the few millimeters that I did manage to squeeze out or my ever growing piles of – *writings*, shall we call them? – That blossoms from my maturing ambitions in becoming a writer. It's quite all right, really. One does tend to get used to it after a while. I love them, I do. My family, I mean. They're all extremely lovely in their own way.

At the present moment, however, I must say everyone is slightly less than lovely. My dearest brother, San, has convinced Mother that SBC Yahoo! is the best Internet connection there is nowadays. Mother, who distrusts her own mother, her son and daughter, and all her friends on every single issue, but religiously believes in everything her horoscope has to tell her, changes from America Online to SBC Yahoo! Quite a shock, isn't it? Of course, as soon as she leaves America Online, she begins to distrust it as well. When experiencing technical difficulties logging on to her screen name to check her email, Mother exclaimed, "Stupid AOL! It *knows*. It knows we have abandoned it for SBC. Now it revenges its injustice. It's jealous of SBC Yahoo!" Try as I might to lessen her worries of America Online's evils, she refuses to listen.

Now, a week later, our computer is infested with Spyware viruses, dear Mother cries, "Stupid SBC Yahoo! It's bad. It takes advantages of our trust. I hate it. San, this is your fault, why did you put this stupid thing into our computer? America Online was so

much nicer to us. Make it come back!" Mother's tendency to personify everyday things does give a certain spin to life, doesn't it?

Unlike me, dear San's reaction isn't as calm. He immediately reddens and retorts with indignation, "How is it my fault? Your computer is old, *it's* stupid, not the software. Don't go blaming me. You were careless and weren't careful to watch what sites you were looking at." This, of course, ignited a heated argument that went on for hours. You'd think it would have ended quickly, but it didn't, it went on and on. And standing solidly next to him, of course, agreeing passionately with everything he had to say, was his girlfriend, Van: a small, I mean *very* small, young lady that seems incapable of forming her own opinions on many things and appears to lack her own mind wherever old San is concerned. In the end, Grandmother, who sees no use for such idiotic amusements as the Internet, stepped in to halt the beginning of World War III. Pleasant family I have, don't I?

It was too lucky that the verbal duel had just ceased, because suddenly, there was a knock on the door. Ah, the anticipated Family Reunion had commenced. It's not that I don't like my family; I love them dearly. It's just that their diverse personalities are simply too much for me to handle all at once. Such interesting characters, they are.

I can hear them now. Especially dear Auntie Kieu. Her boisterous aura stirs our normally dead house. Auntie Kieu loves to eat, make and talk about food. She is at the highest level of heaven when confronted with delicious temptations. She never thinks too deeply about anything else. Her mind is almost never distracted by the petty problems of life; she doesn't concern herself with such things. Needless to say, she is a fairly large woman, who might have been beautiful once in her youth, but now holds only that faded beauty that people of her age so often obtains after decades of fatigue had etched its marks.

Her husband, Uncle Tam, on the other hand, is quite the opposite. Not awfully loud, he dims in the shadow of his wife. Presently, he is standing next to the door, holding on to Auntie Kieu's many suitcases that are adorned with flowers and leaves and whatnot. He brings to mind an image of a man, following his dominant wife around at the mall for hours on end, holding his wife's huge, pink purse and her bags of newly acquired bras and underpants in a clear plastic bag. It's clear who holds the upper hand in that marriage.

I reluctantly followed the rest of my immediate family out to the door. I've been through this many times. This is how it usually goes:

Upon seeing my mother, Auntie Kieu screeches, "Oh Thu Van, why are you so dark? You look so old and tired!" And of course, Auntie Kieu follows all of the latest Asian styles obsessively, which makes her very knowledgeable in the fashion department. And according to the style of today, being tan is not the "in" thing. Recovering from her shock of seeing Mother looking like burnt butter, her eyes narrows in on me. I close my eyes in dread, knowing what was coming.

"Oh Au-Co, sweetie, you must cut down on the candies and sweets. Your plus size can't get you too many boys at school. And your pimples and oily skin are very unbecoming of you, my dear. I have some medicine," she turns to her husband, "Honey, did we bring some of that cream, maybe we could give Au-Co some, she certainly seems to need it."

I grit my teeth to hold my struggling tongue with great difficulty. Unable to control my rebellious tongue, (I swear! It has a mind of its own!) I say, "Your streaks of white hair goes very well with your pale skin, as well, my lovely Auntie. And I am awed by the amount of make up you cake on your face to hide all those blemishes. I'm starting to believe it's an art. How *do* you do it?" She

stares at me, shocked at what I have dared uttered from my pitifully chapped lips or perhaps disbelieving my ignorant rudeness; Mother and Grandmother rushes in to cover up my unforgivable behavior; Van smiles in pleasure at my foreshadowed punishment; and dear old San's eyes widened, trying to look stern and controlling his laughter at the same time, which I must say, results in a very funny "squished" looking type of face.

Sadly, that's what I would have *liked* to say. Unfortunately, what really happens is that I grit my teeth to hold my rebellious tongue with great difficulty. I say, "Thank you, Auntie Kieu. I'm sure your cream would help my disgusting skin out quite a bit. And I was planning on running twelve miles tomorrow to burn off all this junk food I've been stuffing my face with, would you care to join me?" At this, Mother lets out a deep breath, relieved that I was somewhat civil; Grandma nods fervently in agreement; San saves my self-degrading response in mind, storing it for ammunition against me later; and Van snorts skeptically at my ability to run twelve miles and eyes my thunder thighs with joy. A nice, loving family greeting is accomplished.

After having dumped all of Auntie Kieu's belongings on my bed, our happy family troops out to the kitchen to have a nice, old-fashioned Vietnamese dinner. Here, Auntie Kieu criticizes our kitchen arrangements, our furniture, our new paint job, the cooking, etc. When everyone's grown bored of her constant lectures and complaints on...everything, old San starts telling of his brave job experiences (He is currently a security guard at the flea market.) aided by his faithful girlfriend, who hangs on his every word, providing flattering comments that never cease to sicken me.

"I single handedly stopped a huge fight today. It must have been eight guys on each side. – "

"My god, Hon! That's sixteen guys. How did you ever manage?" Oh, joy. She can add! We must celebrate!

"It was hard. Each guy about a head taller than me and buff as anyone – " They were, now, were they?

"Really?! Oh Darling, you could have been hurt." Dear! What would we have done then?

"Well, I took that chance. All of them were pretty riled up, you know. It was hard getting them to listen to me, but I risked it." Somebody, please.

"Oh, honey bunch, you are so brave." So very brave.

"Finally, when they figured I was serious and they ran off with their tails between their legs."

At this point, Van gasps and clutches her heart, prompting my brother to continue, "It's my duty to protect my fellow men." From this, I conclude that old San watches way too much cop shows.

Following his speech, there was an awkward silence. Even Auntie Kieu seems dry of words. No one seemed to mind the suffocating silence except me. So bravely, I venture the words, "So, President Bush wins again. Aren't we all happy?" For a split second, they all stare at me, absorbing my words. Then, boom.

"Bush? That poor man, I pity him."

"What a mistake!"

"Well, NBC News says that..."

"I think he did reasonably well."

"Well?! You fool, he did not do well, look what happened!"

"Yes, Kieu, my dear, don't go upsetting your– "

"He is the worst thing – "

"Yes, Hon, the worst thing – "

" – That has ever happened – "

" – Yes, Sweetheart, that's ever happened – "

"Bush won?"

Oh dear. What have I done? My lovely family is everywhere. They agree on nothing. They differ in every possible way. For all you know, they could have come from five completely

different families. I adore them. Absolutely wonderful people. Couldn't find any more aggravating people anywhere, even if you tried. I could go insane listening to them bicker all day long. Too bad I'm already insane. That's why I'm here, in this dark room by myself, imagining a family reunion that never happened. Or did it? See, now I'm muddled.

(November 4, 2004)

[]