

Diary of a *Con Dâu*

January 26, 2006

So this Sunday is *Tết* and we're supposed to go to Thuần's parents' house to celebrate. Ugh. I can already see how this is going to play out. As soon as I get there, his mother will be all hugs and kisses, but what she's really thinking is more like, *Oh here comes that no-good-for-a-wife-or-mother Huyền who thinks she's so good with her little UCLA law degree. Sigh.* And Thuần's brothers and brother-in-laws? Well, they—like typical Vietnamese men—might attempt a half-hearted “Hello, how are you?” but before I even get a chance to begin answering, they'll just turn their backs and resume their “men only” conversation. As for all the kids, they won't even bother to pull themselves away from their video games unless I've got their lucky red envelopes of *lì xì* money in hand. Of course, as expected, I will make my way to the kitchen to join Thuần's sisters and sister-in-laws. And since they don't trust me to cook a decent meal, I'll probably get some menial task like rinsing the vegetables. Maybe this time, they'll even allow me to cut the cucumbers (since last time Chị Hai made such an effort to school me on the perfect way to slice cucumbers).

God, maybe I should just feign a fever that will leave me bed-ridden. Or, perhaps I'll have food poisoning. Oh wait, then that'll confirm their belief that I can't cook. No I can't do that. Umm... I could fall down the stairs and sprain an ankle or something like that. Or, I could just start mentally preparing myself for the inevitable. I mean, I have been able to survive this for the past seven years, so there's no reason this year should be any different. Besides, it'll be better if I convince myself into going rather than face Thuần guilt-tripping me into it.

-Huyền

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January 27, 2006

Thuần and I just had a fight about *Tết*. He wants me to wear the *áo dài* that his parents bought for me during their visit to Vietnam last summer. He said that his mother and sisters and brothers' wives will all be wearing them, too. I mean, it is a beautiful gown and all—hand-made, sea-foam green silk with wisps of sky blue, and a pattern of delicate silver roses—it's quite stunning. But here's the thing: either his mother got my measurements totally wrong, or she's trying to tell me to lose weight because the gown is way too tight. My throat chaffs against the high collar every time I swallow or try to speak, and I've got to really suck in my tummy in order to button the thing up. There will definitely be no moving or eating in this little get-up.

"I'll feel much more comfortable in a pant-suit set," I told him.

"No, those are your work clothes and this isn't a work occasion. You're not going to see me show up in my *Phở 57* shirt," he said.

He really just doesn't want me to wear a suit because he knows how much I indulge in them. Every woman has a fetish: shoes, handbags, sunglasses, belts, etc. Mine is designer suits. My closet is filled with Armani, D & G, Akris, among many others. I bought him a nice Zegna suit once, but he never wears it. I know he associates suits with my job, and it's like ever since I made partner two years ago, his disdain for my, being a lawyer has gotten worse.

Oh, and not to mention the fact that making partner has only furthered his mother's disapproval of my profession as well. Before we even got married, she said I'd make a terrible wife because instead of helping Thuần out at the restaurant like a good little wife is supposed to, I was busy working on my own career. And when I had Emily five years ago, she decided that I'd be a horrible mother, too, because I was a "work-a-holic." But then, even if I wasn't a work-a-holic, I'm sure I'd still be a bad wife and mother anyway.

January 28, 2006

Diary, you're my best friend and confidant, so tell me something—who the hell does Thuần's mother think she is?! I just got off the phone with her a moment ago. And what did she call about? To remind me, “Huyền, did you clean the house yet? You know you can't start off the New Year with a dirty house. And you must not clean on the day of *Tết*. It's bad luck, you know. You'll sweep away all the good fortune for the New Year.”

“Yeah, well you know what? Your life will take a bad turn of luck if you keep pestering me about how to run my life!” I answered.

Okay, of course I didn't actually say that. But I did think it, and had to keep it in my head until I could tell you now. And before she hung up, she had to stick it to me one more time.

“Oh, and don't forget to dress the children in their *áo dài* too. You know Ba always liked it when all his grandchildren dressed up. And must I also remind you not to wear black? That's bad luck too.”

Of course she can't end the conversation without saying something about the kids. I'm surprised she didn't just straight out tell me to wear the *áo dài* she got me too. Oh wait, she's already done so through Thuần.

*Sigh.*

I mean, she swears that I don't even act like a grown woman who can figure things out. I may not know everything when it comes to being the ideal *con dâu*, but then again, this is America and we're in the 21<sup>st</sup> century for God's sake. Maybe I just don't want to be your little

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slave. My family didn't come here so that I could subject myself to the oppression of the old ways.

But I'm not saying that I want to cut off all ties from my roots. No, of course not. I am a woman, a daughter, a sister, a wife, and a mother. But above all that, I am a Vietnamese woman.

*-Huyền*

January 29, 2006

Well, this year, *Tết* wasn't the same as every other year. It was actually very different. It was the first year that Ba wasn't with us. After he lost his battle with cancer last summer, Thuần's family gatherings have been different. The holidays were tough. I mean, during Thanksgiving, it seemed like there was nothing to give thanks for. And Christmas, well Thuần's family is Buddhist, so they don't celebrate Christmas. And today, I think all of us really felt the loss more than ever.

When we got to Thuần's parents' place in L.A. (after an hour and a half of sitting in traffic on I-5 North), the house wasn't as it usually was. There was no sign of the normal hustle-bustle of the years before. Rather, the kids huddled quietly, watching *Star Wars* in an unused bedroom. The men sat at the long formal dining table and played a hand of cards in silence. The T.V.—which usually blared a Chinese martial arts movie dubbed over in Vietnamese—was turned off, collecting dust. And Thuần's mother sat alone in the living room. She gazed off into the direction of the bàn thờ, where Ba's picture was displayed. A bundle of incense burned next to a plate holding a fruit offering. Apparently, the family had already ceremoniously invited Ba's spirit home for the New Year's celebration.

“*Chào Mẹ,*” I said, giving her a fragile hug and a peck on the cheek.

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She turned to me, and her aged watery eyes seem to look right through me and even past me. Her eyes were black and empty. “Oh. Uhh ... hi *Con*,” she managed to say. Hmm, that’s weird. *Con*? She’s never addressed me as her own child before. She’s always just called me by name.

Puzzled, I walked into the kitchen to where the rest of the women were. But there was no clanging of pots, no washing of dishes, no giving of orders. Thuận’s sisters and sister-in-laws sat around the small round informal dining table, talking softly about how the kids have been. No one had even started cooking anything for lunch yet. They glanced over at me, but said nothing. I didn’t expect them to, and it’s probably good that they didn’t. I wouldn’t have had anything to say in return anyway. Instead, I stood at the kitchen sink, looking out through the small window above it.

Seven years ago, I stood in this very kitchen with Ba at my side. He was teaching me how to cook *Phở Gà*. This lesson was nothing like Thuận’s mother’s lectures. She structured them like she was scolding a little child, but then I was her student. And she only gave them when I didn’t ask. Ba’s lesson, on the other hand, was a whole other ballgame.

He took me to the grocery store with him, showing me the necessary ingredients for a perfect pot of *Phở*: a whole chicken, chicken bones, onions, ginger, star anise, cloves, cinnamon sticks, black peppercorns, rice noodles, bean sprouts, basil, limes, and cilantro. When we returned from the store, he insisted that I do all the actual steps while he would guide me along (unlike Thuận’s mother, who hovered over me every time I cooked, and then eventually took over).

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Bring a large pot of water, along with the chicken, onions, ginger, star anise, cloves, cinnamon, and peppercorns to a boil, and then simmer for half an hour. Remove the chicken, and continue cooking the broth for three hours. Add fish sauce and a pinch of salt to season. De-bone the chicken, and tear the meat into large shreds. Cook the rice noodles in boiling water. Serve with bean sprouts, basil, and cilantro as garnishes. Squeeze in lime to flavor. Enjoy.

As I learned later on, this lesson wasn't really to *teach* me how to cook *Phở*. And it wasn't to belittle my cooking ability either. Rather, it was Ba's way of bringing me into the family. When my daughter reads this diary someday, that's how I want her to remember her *Ông Nội*.

“Huyền, are you okay?” Chị Hai asked, rising from the table.

“Oh yeah, I'm fine,” I replied. “Hey, let's start cooking, yeah?” She smiled, slightly nodding. And with that, I began to rummage through the cupboards for the largest pot I could find.

-*Huyền*