Home

Phuong Mai

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Home
Phuong Mai
2nd Place, Writing Contest

Notes from our judge:
The sincerity in this piece is astounding. “Home” provides the reader with an honest narrator with whom they can trust, empathize with, and learn from. The characters are also very believable, unique, and the dialogue is realistic and well executed.

I was dragged back to that familiar place; a place that had sheltered me ever since I came into this world. My mother turned the rusty door knob, holding tightly onto my tiny wrist, so tight that my blue veins stretched out against my pale skin she pulled me into the bedroom that I had not seen for the last twelve hours. The breezy wind flew through the window trying to blow out the hot and humid air in the room. The faint pale moon, surrounded by the blackness of the sky, looked lonely. Like the moon, my loneliness and sadness grew when my mother’s dark and heartbroken eyes locked onto mine. My head was full of the pounding of my own blood as I crouched down to hold onto my body, frozen from fear as my mother raised a wooden stick.

I had woken up that morning when the sunlight hit my eyes. The ripped sheet of handmade woven bamboo no longer felt cool against my skin. My whole body was uncomfortably hot and irritated due to the early morning heat. I stood up and walked toward the window to see the back view of the house. Far away, the clear blue sky spread over the green rice field and white ducks flapped on the water. Tiny straw hats were scattered across the rice field, swaying back and forth. My eyes began to move toward the right side of the view, where rows of tall buildings emerged from the trees. My elementary school was somewhere among those buildings.

Every morning when I looked out the window, I always wanted to live on that side of the city someday. Kids in my class always told me about all the excitement they had at the amusement parks or community swimming pools. Every time I pleaded with my dad to take me there, he crushed my heart by saying no or break his
promises of going with me. After a while, I stopped bothering him because I knew I would get the same answer. Sometimes, I tried to remain angry or to act stubborn around him to make him feel guilty, but it never worked out too well. His kind smile always turned the corners of my mouth upwards.

After dressing myself in my mom's simple hand-sewn uniform, I sat down quietly on the edge of the bed. My dad pulled a chair behind me, running his tough hands loosely through my long sleek black hair. A man in his early fifties, he had a sturdy body with a few strands of gray hair hidden behind his leather black hair. I was amused as my dad struggled with his strong hands, trying to braid my hair. My mom usually left for work early, so my dad was the only one who took care of me in the morning until I went to class.

After he finished my hair, my dad took me outside to his motorcycle. He lifted me up on his motorcycle and positioned me in front of him. His rough beard brushed against my pale, pink cheek as I smelled the gasoline fumes coming from the motorcycle engine. As we headed off to my school, I felt really proud of my dad. Like a mother duck looking over her children as they swam in the lake, my dad was protecting both fifty chicken eggs in the boxes we had at home and me behind his seat. Standing at the corner of the street, my parents sold these eggs every day in humid weather to customers. Each cent that they earned was used to support my family, especially for me to attend one of the private elementary schools in the city.

After I waved my dad goodbye, I joined my classmates at the front door and we all headed up to our classroom. Most of the kids around my neighborhood attended school in the rural area. I was one of the few children from the rural side that was able to afford to go to the school in the city. Although all my classmates treated me well and with respect, I could not help but feel full of sadness and jealousy towards the girls in my class with their fancy, floral embroidered-uniforms, compared to my plain uniform, made out of cloth that my mom bought for the cheapest price.

The girl who sat next to me was my new best friend, Lan, whose name meant orchid. Just like her name, she was one of the prettiest girls that I had encountered. She had a tall, slender figure with long,
silky hair neatly tied into a ponytail. Her delicate fingers gracefully moved the pen to write out beautiful lines of sentences in cursive handwriting. While studious students like Lan spent their nights under piles of homework to maintain their high standing in the class, I spent my days letting my imagination and creativity go wild on paper. My art teacher was proud of me for receiving first place every year in the school art competition, but my home room teacher detested me, knowing I was unable to remember anything she had said even a few minutes ago. Lan and I became close friends quickly after finding out we shared a similar interest in art. Whenever both of us were not studying, Lan and I would spend minutes folding cranes and stars, and hours coloring our drawings.

Lan told me that her parents had recently bought a new house and she wanted me to come over to hang out with her. I replied “yes” without hesitation. I felt the excitement as my pulse rushed throughout my body, like an eager child ready to go on an adventure for the first time.

On a daily basis, I would walk home from school alone and play with kids in my neighborhood. It was normal for the young children in the small town where I lived to hang out on the street until the sky turned dark blue because everyone knew each other well. My mom was fine with me playing with my neighborhood friends or staying at their houses, but she never allowed me to play at my school friends’ houses. No matter how much I asked her for a good reason, the only statement she gave me was that she didn’t want to burden their family or to cause them trouble since our family was poor. As a child, I never fully understood why she felt that way.

Knowing that my mom would refuse to let me hang out with Lan, I decided to disobey her because I wanted to experience the excitement and freedom of being away from home. My jaw dropped open when I walked in to Lan’s six-story house. The marble-white tiles felt cool against my tiny feet as I gently stepped on the spiral staircase. The expensive, wooden doors for each room were carved in beautiful, Victorian designs. My home was nothing compared to this.

The flashback of the rusty doors and the bed covered in torn handmade bamboo sheets appeared in front of me. No, no, no, I
screamed inside as I struggled to tear that scene apart. Lan’s house was the home I wanted to live in, fancy and comfortable. Sitting on the bed, I could see through the window puppies chasing one another, like kids playing hide and seek.

The smell of the savory scent of beef noodle soup from the kitchen increased my appetite. Mrs. Tran, Lan’s mother, walked into the room wearing a floral-print, satin, pleated dress that fit perfectly on her petite-sized body. I had never seen my mom wear a dress or even a skirt before. All she wore was a simple blouse with dark-colored linen pants. Since my mom had a tall, lean body, she would look stunning in a fancy dress like the one Mrs. Tran was wearing, but her humility and generosity were what made her the most beautiful woman in my eyes.

“Phuong, would you like to stay for dinner with us, and perhaps stay a night with Lan?” Mrs. Tran politely asked me. “You girls seem to have lots of fun. You can make a call and ask if your parents are ok with that. Just let them know that I can always drive you back home tomorrow, so they don’t have to worry.”

“Yes, Mrs. Tran. I’m going to call and ask my mom now.” Without a doubt, I knew exactly what my mom would say.

Holding the phone, I nervously pretended to press the numbers. “Hi mom, I’m at Lan’s house, my new friend in my class. I had lots of fun with her family and I was wondering if I could stay overnight today. Mrs. Tran will drive me back home tomorrow.”

Silence.

Forcing myself to smile, I squealed in happiness when my imaginary mom replied yes. I hung up, feeling my heart beat uncontrollably. I was shocked and confused at what I had just done and why I had done it. I knew that this was not a good idea, but my thoughts were unable to pull away from all the excitement that I felt today for the first time. I closed my eyes and shook my head to disperse the heavy cloud that surrounded my head, and quietly joined dinner with Lan’s family.

As I slurped in the last drop of the beef soup, Mr. Tran, Lan’s father, walked over to the refrigerator and pulled out a white cardboard box. He still had on his business attire since he had come
home late from work on that night.

Mr. Tran was in his late thirties, much younger than my dad, but most of the strands of his hair had already fallen off, like a bare tree in winter time. He carefully opened the box and inside was a cake that looked like one of those cakes I had always seen in the window of the bakery near my parents’ vendor booth. I had never thought that I would finally taste this pretty cake, full of colors like the rainbow.

While Mr. Tran cut the cake, I secretly caught Lan rolling her eyes as if she was thinking, *not this cake again.* A mixed feeling swirled inside me as I tried to hold back my tears, not because I was too eager to taste this delicious cake for the first time. It was the fact that I was eating this cake on an ordinary day that made my heart ache. Lan might not know how lucky she was to have everything she wanted, from living in this gigantic house to eating this piece of cake that my taste buds had always desired. Every year on my birthday, I waited anxiously at the door for my mom to be home from work with a present that I always dreamt of, a birthday cake. But she always reached out and gave me the same plain, baked wheat bun that, she said, tasted better than a cake. I would always hide my disappointment with a faint smile.

Before we went to sleep, Lan’s mother read us several fairy tales. By the time the stories ended, I found myself sleeping soundly like a puppy with Lan in her room. I had a long, relaxed sleep until a sobbing noise from downstairs woke me up. As I walked down to find out what was going on, I recognized a very familiar face. It was none other than my mom’s, with a dreadful and tired expression on her face. The glare of her black eyes was so dark and deep that it locked my soul in a cage. She was frantic with distress as she grabbed my tiny wrist and dragged me back home without saying anything.

I found myself back in my room, confronted by my mom and her stick. The room was so still and silent that I heard my mom’s droplets of sweat dripping on the floor. When I saw a shoulder-length wooden stick in her hand, I knew exactly what she was going to do to me, but this time, I did not fight back or defend my mistake as I usually would. This time, an infinite number of reasons could never justify my actions.

*This is it; she is going to hit me.* I curled into a ball, like a pill...
bug, as my whole body trembled with sweat. As I crouched down expecting a painful whip, all I felt was a slight, cool air brushing against my face, as the stick dropped before me. I peeked up at her, and at that moment, my heart shattered. The woman in front of me, who I had always seen as a strong, capable woman, now tumbled before me, like a strong wind had knocked her over.

Her protective arms quivered as she wrapped them around my fragile body. Her eyes were weary as if she had just lost something important in her life. I suddenly felt very scared and everything became blurry as my eyes watered. My head cleared for an instant and I realized how deeply I had wounded her heart. It was the very first time I ever saw my mom cry. She embraced me in her arms and I could hear her trembling voice as she spoke to me.

“I thought I would never see you again. I was scared that I would lose you forever. Now that you’re in my arms, this is all I need.”

I began to cry and unconsciously, the words “I love you, Mommy” slipped out from my lips.

My mom tucked me in bed while still holding me tightly in her arms. Her hair smelled like fresh cool coconuts on a summer beach. I felt the tenderness that I missed as her soft bosom pressed against my cheek. Her breathing was soothing in my ear like a calm river running at night.

As I closed my eyes, my heart clenched as thoughts rushed into my head. I was crazy. I was foolish. I hurt my mom. I did not understand how important my family was to me. I was too young and naïve to understand my parents’ suffering and the sacrifices they made for me. The moment she dropped her stick, I finally understood my mom’s boundless love for me.

Running away to Lan’s house was my way to assure my parents that I would be fine on my own. But now, like a baby polar bear, I was back home, back in my mom’s arms for comfort and protection. In the blackness, I saw a girl running further away from her best friend’s home, running away from the excitement, the adventure. She was running back toward a familiar place, a place that had sheltered her ever since she came into this world. She returned to where her
heart belonged: *home.*