

## “All of Us” By Kathy Pham 13 min read

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*Illustrated by Christine Wei*

I heard wearing black to weddings was inauspicious, so that must have been why I was vomiting into the hotel’s hydrangea bush while my brother kissed his bride five stories above. My father slapped my back as I coughed up my canapés. We hadn’t seen each

I stood with my back to him, looking for the harbour. Outside Shangri-La, you couldn't see the ocean. Too many office towers stood between us and the waves, but a sea musk lingered. Salt, tar, shrimp, bile. The surface of my eyes burned. I took long drags.

I put out the filter with my bare foot while my mother's heels clattered in my hands. My father followed me back to the hotel with the gait of a hungry ghost.

We shared an elevator with a blonde man in a tan suit. He looked at us once and then not again. After all, who were we but a red-faced girl-woman in a wine stained dress and a worn-down Asian man with a scar veining across his shaved head?

When the doors opened on the fifth floor, the sounds of the wedding flooded in. Vietnamese shouts floated into Mandarin, fish sauce dumped into shark fin soup. I slid the shoes back on. My father offered me his arm. I looked away. He hovered a half step behind.

In the ballroom his voice reached out to me. "When did you pick up my habits?"

I replied, "When'd you pick up your girlfriend?"

He sighed, "Quyen, I want to help you." He grabbed my arm with one hand while fumbling for his wallet with the other. He licked his finger before using it to count out bills. One, two, three, four hundred. Under the chandeliers those crumpled dollars shone gold. I tore away from him.

In Vietnamese, worn from disuse I spat out, "You haven't given me a red pocket in twelve years."

My father flinched. His plastic money rustled when he shoved it into my face. Either his knuckles or the bills smelled of nicotine and Budweiser. I let both hang in the air.

"I heard," he blinked, all filmy irises, "you've been behind on loans."

"Yeah, you'd be familiar," I said. "Save it for the babe in Ben Tre. I know immigration isn't cheap."

“Dad. Sis.”

My father started. “Tuan, what a beautiful—”

“Thanks. Quinn, let’s talk.”

Tom pulled me away by the arm, smile never dropping from his cheeks. Ceremony followed us out. Wedding guests approached in two queues, on the left the Vietnamese, our South-hailing distant relatives. To the right, Chinese, from Beijing. *There’s a difference*, Tom told me once. Not much, I thought. Same wine, new vintage, provincial blends notwithstanding. He shook hands and dimpled his thanks without breaking stride.

When our procession ended, we were outside the elevator. My brother deflated by letting out a breath he had been holding perhaps since when he’d said his vows and with it, his body folded inward.

“What happened with dad?”

I showed him a pearly smile. “We’re just making up for old times’ sake.”

He furrowed his groomed eyebrows. “Can you just avoid him, please?”

“I didn’t even know he was here. It’s not my fault he was outside smoking while I was getting some air.”

“Look, I had to convince Charice to put him on the guest list.”

“You didn’t even ask mom, did you?”

Silence. Then I laughed and laughed until my voice echoed through the vestibule. He waited until I stopped to catch my breath and put his hand on my shoulder. His grip was firm, the kind you’d use to grab a misbehaving puppy.

“This is an important day for all of us. Not just me.”

mom's knock-off Gucci bag hanging off the back of her chair. A waiter removed a half-eaten plate of lobster from my table. Its shell drowned in butter sauce, similar to the vomit that lingered in the back of my throat. I, my mother, her favourite sister, her youngest brother and his wife were all seated together. My mom hissed at me, "Where were you? You missed the best dishes." The others pretended not to hear.

She spoke in Vietnamese, but I answered in English, riposte and retreat. "It's not like we're paying for it."

"You still have wine on your chest."

"Blame that on the girl who spilled it on me." I swigged the half-drunk, room temperature Heineken I'd left behind.

My mother narrowed her eyes at me. "This is an unlucky day." Under the chandelier lights her purple eyeshadow sparkled. "Why must you continue to spit on your brother's future?"

"Tom landed mainlander money, what does luck matter now?" And if most of it was clean, who were we to care if a bit of it wasn't?

My mother's lip curled. "You think you know about luck, girl?"

I laugh. "You're just pissed they went with the Chinese fortune teller's advice instead of yours."

My mother looked as though she'd like to spit in my drink before my uncle interrupted, "Let's enjoy ourselves, Nhi. Your son's wedding has been wonderful."

Her sharp gaze fell on him. "Because of me!" He recoiled. "I ate misfortune for them, so they could have easy lives, and how do they treat me?"

She didn't believe in any of that fate shit until grandmother died. Easier to owe the gods than the sharks. I wanted to shout at her, "Don't blame anyone but yourself," but instead I gripped the neck of that green bottle as the rim hit my lips and I drank, glass braced against teeth.

My aunt hushed the table. "I won't say you're wrong, but we're here to celebrate, not dwell on the past."

The steak bled as I forced chunks down my throat, tugged down my esophagus with swigs of beer that tasted more like water these days. My aunt told me to slow down. I chewed until the meat leavened to dough in my mouth.

I rested on my elbows in the washroom. Beside me, a half-empty, green glass bottle. Flush crept up my chest, splattered my collarbones and burned from my chin to my temple. My veins had opened and pushed my pulse to the surface of my body. Pressing my tongue to the roof of my mouth I tasted tobacco stains same as the wine on my dress, blacker than black.

The toilet flushed. The Chinese girl who dumped her drink on me earlier emerged from the stall. She kept her head down, as if she just wanted to wash her manicured hands and go.

My voice echoed in the marble-tiled chamber. “What, no face left?”

“You ran into me.” Her glare cut sideways. “Drunk bai chi.”

I drew myself up. “Oh, you think you’re better than me?”

“I am. We know your dad, he came begging us for money years ago. How do you think your brother met Charice? Fuck knows what —”

I slapped her. She raised her arm and I saw that her manicure came to sharp points, like a cat’s paw. I anticipated, stepping backwards so the slap carried her stumbling forward.

I said, “So you’re that loan shark bitch I keep hearing about.”

I grabbed the bottle and hovered between her and the door. She tried to shove past me. I dumped Heineken on her. She pushed me until I slammed against the wall. She screamed. I screamed with her. We tangled into each other, grabbing and pulling until someone else came in and carried her away. I saw her clearly then: ink splatter hair and smeared lipstick. We both wore black with matching stains of pitch black swirling down our dresses. Hers might have been velvet, but that just meant beer clung to it better.

he did. The mounting chorus of two hundred of his closest friends, family members and inextricable others accompanied my brother's display of completion. He drew all five feet and one-hundred pounds of his new wife into his arms and planted a kiss on her, pretty in white. Even my mother clapped, pride crawling up her throat and emerging as a broad, half-denture smile.

I stumbled over to mother and said, "Hey."

My uncle stood to grab me. "Quyen, are you okay?"

One of the aunties tittered, "Maybe you should sit down."

Uncle again, "Let's get her cleaned up."

My voice, as I crush against my uncle's side. "Guess nobody's told her yet."

My mother, finally, "Told what?"

Mirth brewed in the depths in my stomach.

"Tommy invited dad." I let the laughter trickle out. "Isn't that funny?"

Pity in uncle's eyes, "Nhi."

Mother demanded of someone, "Go get Tuan."

I side-saddled the chair, splaying my legs over the side while the rest of me twisted toward my mother and brother. The aunties and uncles fled, wisely.

"Why would you do this?" Red smeared mom's cheeks. "You've worked too hard to let him destroy us again."

Tom held his head in his hands, gelled hair spiking through his fingers.

"He called me. I couldn't ignore him."

“He is a cheating, lying drunk. He used you, he—”

“I know what he is.”

I groaned. “He didn’t fuck up by himself.”

“You!” His fist hit the table and the plates rattled. “Shut up. I know you don’t give a shit about family, but I do.”

I drank. “Blood is arbitrary.”

Tom looked at me for a long beat. I stared back, but his edges wavered in my underwater vision.

“When’s the last time you said anything with substance?”

I didn’t answer.

“Forget her, Tuan. What are you going to do about your father?”

“I can’t just kick him out.”

I stopped watching them then. The people seated by us glanced over, leaned over their dessert course to whisper about why the groom might be fighting with his mother and sister while his beautiful new wife waited on the dais.

“Are you going to wait until he ruins your wedding?”

*“About the sister, wasn’t she at some kind of art school? What a waste. She got into a fight with the bride’s spoiled cousin earlier. That one is still mad she wasn’t in the wedding party.”*

“He promised he wouldn’t drink, and even if he does he’s far enough away.”

*“The mother tried to demand that the wedding be pushed back. She probably hates the in-laws. They definitely hate her reputation at the casino. Hell, maybe they’re all too familiar.”*

*That father, wasn't he involved with a gang? Explains the scars. I heard he owed some tough people a lot of money. You think it had to do with the wife? But they managed to get out, somehow.*

My mother's voice broke. Ringing in my ears. Strange men making demands at our door. My brother hitting the floor. There are wounds on the bodies of the men in my family that I still pick at, trying to find the flesh beneath. If I find it in them, maybe I'll finally be able to see it in myself, too, the origin of this hurt.

Tom looked at me.

"I had to."

My mother covered her eyes when she began to cry. How could she understand that? These are not the fortunes they print in numerology books or the ones they call out in baccarat.

I stood.

Tom asked me, "Where are you going, haven't you done enough?"

*Enough.* The anger wasn't enough. All the green bottles weren't enough. The sex and the art and the adrenaline added up to exactly nothing. Distractions could never lead to conclusions.

After this I remember only in strands, tangled and out of order, my history a VHS torn to ribbons. I wandered around the ballroom. The verb they use is "searching." My pulsing weight bobbing through the crowd. A fat bald face, burning as he stood to yell at someone at his table. The red soled heel of the sharp woman hooking her arm through a young man's. Several empty bottles of Hennessy and a senior wearing a blooming silk shirt. I bumped into a waiter with a slicked-back pompadour. At one point I fell, finding the spinning golden filigree on the cream-vaulted ceiling.

I'm told my mother and brother were still sitting together when it happened. I can imagine him watching her, not sure what he could say to make her stop crying and trying despite that. I don't think she ever stopped, even after she got what she wanted.



palm.

“Hi, dad.”

He smiled back. Then he got up from his chair and started to introduce me to the other exiles, hangers-on. One of his arms came around my shoulder, another gripping that Budweiser he always favoured, the kind he’d ask me to fetch for him from the fridge, the one that stank of piss on his breath.

I remember kissing my dad on the cheek while he was sleeping once. I remember the stubble, the nicotine, and his unmarked face. I remember loving my father. For all that remembering, I can’t forget the long nights in an empty house, strange people in our living room, my mother telling me to never, ever open the front door, and still coming home to bottles and broken glass under our feet and screaming that never ceased. Him and her, they wagered us at those tables. What a surprise when we didn’t come back whole from the barter.

I hit him with the bottle and those scars like carved veins opened again. I want to believe there would have been a shatter like a bang, loud enough to cut the ballroom in twine, but there wasn’t. Just the whimper of glass shards dancing over skin. I opened my mouth and nothing of substance came out. Peering at my open palms I hoped that they, too, would scar.

CREATIVE WRITING

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## 1 COMMENT

CHARLES BEAMS

REPLY

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