

SPRING 2010

KARTIKA REVIEW

MEDITATIONS ON “HOME”



LAC SU

CÁ KHO TỘ

When I was four in Vietnam, my father was wanted by the Communists. My family was forced to flee the country in a hail of gunfire, leaving a life of comfort and prosperity behind. I remember the escape from our beloved Vietnam in episodic flashes that still rattle me with post-traumatic stress to this day. I reconcile these anxious feelings by thinking about the last meal Grandma Ne fed me before we left. It was porridge with braised sardine in caramel sauce, or *cá kho tộ*. The fish sauce, sugar, shallots, chili, and ginger Grandma Ne used to cook the sardine caramelized over time at low heat on her coal briquette stove.

It was a great last meal before our family—and three hundred other refugees—escaped Vietnam. While we ran towards a rickety fishing boat, the Communist soldiers blasted bullets and grenades at us. The next thing I knew, we were stranded at sea in the midst of a typhoon with two other fishing boats that eventually disappeared.

Miraculously, our family eventually immigrated to Los Angeles where—despite high hopes for a paradise as beautiful as our lost homeland—we found out that the American Dream was not all it was cracked up to be. Living

in squalid conditions and barely making ends meet, my family struggled to create a new home in America. But we were alive and together. We couldn't ask for more. American food didn't entice me; the taste was unfamiliar, and it didn't remind me of a place I once knew. Ma continued to cook Vietnamese food, and my favorite—just like Grandma Ne made it—was *cá kho tộ*. I grew up in America eating *cá kho tộ* at least once a week until I left home for college.

Now in my thirties, I have a family of my own. We live a good hour-and-a-half away from my children's Grandpa and Grandma and don't see them quite as often as we would like. When I married my Mexican-American wife, the repast I was accustomed to at the dinner table was replaced with American-style meatloaf and pasta, and a variety of Mexican dishes. These are my wife's home-cooked favorites that her mother taught her.

I rectify my craving for Ma's home-cooked meals by eating out at local Vietnamese restaurants. Most of the restaurants have all the Vietnamese dishes that Ma would cook for me—but they aren't Ma's cooking. I feel something is missing. Every so often, Ma calls me out of the blue. When I hear that it's my mother on the line, my first question to her is always . . .

“Can I come home for some of your *cá kho tộ*, Ma?”



Lac Su received a master's degree and Ph.D. A.B.D., in industrial organizational psychology from the California School of Professional Psychology. He is a senior executive for TalentSmart – a global think tank and management consulting firm, and he lives in San Diego. His professional work has been featured in *BusinessWeek*, *Fortune*, *The Tribune*, *Globe and Mail*, and various online and academic journals. *I Love Yous Are for White People* is his first book.