Hope

by Mindy Bui

The trees glistened with the first rays of sunlight. Sunlight shone through the thin yellow flowers of a cay mai. Twelve year old Mai rose to a beautiful day; the sky was clear and blue. Through the small window of the compact room that was her temporary home, Mai could hear the chatter of the people below. When she looked out, her eyes were greeted with the enthralling scene filled with the colors of red and yellow. Music could be heard from a small band playing under the shade of a cay mai tree. Five cay mai were lined on either side of the street, making the view from above look like bright patches of fresh flowers. Red and yellow lanterns as well as red envelopes hung in arch over the main walking area. The green color of bánh chưng piled high on numerous tables gave the entire scene a nice balance and made Mai’s stomach rumble. Messages for the upcoming new year printed on bright red fabrics with stringy edges hung all around as decoration. Men and women wearing ao dài wandered throughout the streets with their children whose faces were beaming with excitement for the upcoming days of food, family time, fun, break, and of course the lucky money.

Rolling up her sleeping mat, Mai once again thought about her mother. The happiness and prosperity of the people outside her house could never deprive her of worries. But Mai was used to waking up having the queasy and fidgeting feeling in her stomach as well as falling asleep each night the same way. The year of the cat was quickly coming to a close and the new year was arriving. Although she longed for the comfort of her mother, especially during this time of year, Mai forced herself to braid back her hair and put on the one ao dài she owned. Despite it being tight, Mai decided that it would work for another year and maybe then she might have enough money to buy a new one. Grabbing the little money that she had been able to save from her afterschool job as a housekeeper, Mai exited the house and made her way to the busy, but cheerful streets.

As Mai was meandering through the streets she decided to buy something to eat and ended up purchasing a loaf of bread. The air was cool and breezy, so Mai picked a small bench to sit on while she nibbled on some bread. She watched families laughing and chatting. Relatives giving out red envelopes to children. Adults bring gifts of clothing and shoes to their kids. Tết was the one day of the year where kids were guaranteed new clothes. On her right, Mai observed a mother and child purchasing bánh chưng to bring back to their home, supposedly having a celebration that night.

Mai missed her mother. Then an idea started to form in her mind. Maybe Mai should surprise her with a small gift when she returns. With something now to do, Mai finished up her food and set off to find a present for her mom with a newfound hope in her heart. She would start out this year with kindness and be the joy of others.