

*Five Ways to Disappoint Your  
Vietnamese Mother*

Diana Nguyen.

*Step One: Become an Actor*

Like many Asian parents, my mum bought me a piano when I was three years old. So from early on in life, I was a performer. I danced, sang and acted in primary school. My mum was proud of me. I know she was proud because I heard her gossip:

'Oh, Diana, she sings. She is having her piano exam tomorrow. I put so much money into her piano and ballet classes.'

In secondary school, I continued to perform. It was in my blood. But by Year 11, my mother's support started to alter:

'Why you singing?'

'Why you watch video clips?'

'They sluts, you want to be slut?'

'Why you not studying?'

My mother's dream was for me to be rich, successful and healthy. She wanted me to be a doctor. But I didn't pick the right subjects in high school to become a doctor. Instead, I did drama and all the humanities subjects and joined school charity groups to fill in my time. I was in a band. I had the lead roles in my school productions. My mum got frustrated:

'When I gif you piano lessons supposed to be hobby, not a job. Stop this stupidness. If you school leader how you go to concentrate on studies?'

When I received my university entrance score, I was happy. I finished top of my drama class and I had had a fulfilling school experience. But when I told my mum my results, the first thing she said was, 'What did your friend get?'

I told her.

'How come you didn't get higher than her?'

In her eyes I was a disappointment – I had made her lose face. My mum has made me lose face, too. When I had a lead role in a school production, I invited my family to come and watch. I was so excited that my mum would see me shine, that she would see

the love and energy of my performance. During interval, I saw her car driving away. I can still see it today. I was shattered. When she came to pick me up that afternoon, I didn't talk to her. I let her hurt sink deeper into my soul.

Maybe I should have told her how I felt, because it happened again. During one of my university performances, I looked out into the crowd during the interval and saw an Asian woman walking out. For the past two years I have been a working actor in Melbourne, and not once has she come to see me perform. I don't invite her any more.

*Step Two: Work Four Jobs – But What Career?*

I have four jobs. Three of them support the fourth: my acting career.

I used to work at Coles in Springvale and I saw all the ethnic groups come through. I saw the waves of refugees pass through my register: the Greeks and Italians with their pasta and cheeses; the Vietnamese and Cambodians with their rice and carefully selected fruit; the Afghans and Sudanese with their new-found freedom. And they all had something in common when they came through my register. When I finished the transaction, I would turn to them with a smile:

'Okay, that's \$10.45. Do you have any Fly-Buys?'

Pause.

'Huh?'

I would look them in the eyes and say very slowly, my hand imitating a Fly-Buys card, 'Fly ... Buys ...'

Another pause, and a lost look in their eyes.

'Ah, it's okay, I'd say with a shrug.

Some customers devised a beautiful plan to get out of this game.

'Oh, I left it at home,' they'd laugh. 'Okay, see you later.'

They also loved to get rid of their change. No matter how much they had or how long the queue was.

'How much?'

'That comes to \$14.85.'

'Okay, I got change.'

Groan.

'Two dollar, two dollar, five dollar, five dollar fifty-sen, twenty-sen, tin-sen, f-sen. See you later.'

One day, I was serving a customer who bought nappies. I put her transaction through and said, 'Have a nice day!'

She looked at me and said, 'Bag, bag, bag,' pointing at the nappies.

I showed her that the nappy bag had a handle, so she didn't need a bag.

'Gif me bag!' she demanded. 'You Chinese all the same.'

I felt like I had been slapped in the face. With my best angry-on-the-inside customer-service voice I said, 'I am not Chinese, I am Vietnamese.'

She finished off with, 'You Asians are all the same.' She grabbed her nappies and went on her merry way, leaving me angry and frustrated.

In the entertainment industry, being Asian was daunting at first. I had a Bert Newton face with Bart Simpson skin; I had Chinese eyes and huge black hair. At least I could never be stereotyped as a bimbo.

*Step Three: Become a Viet-school Drop-out*

I am Australian. I am a second-generation Australian Vietnamese. My mum would stress that I am Vietnamese-Australian. All my life I've had this mixed idea of who I am and what my role is.

When I was in Year 7 my mother forced me to go to Vietnamese school for the first time. After coming back from a three-month family trip to Vietnam, she realised she had better send her eldest daughter to Vietnamese school.

So there I was, a Year 7 student in a Grade One Vietnamese class, my little peers staring up at me. I cried so much before every Sunday-morning class that family friends asked if I was being bullied by my tiny classmates! Being a dutiful Vietnamese girl, I went to Viet school for another three years, until I finally quit, telling my mother I needed to focus on my school-work.

My lack of interest in learning her language created a lasting communication barrier between me and my mother.

*Step Four: The Boyfriend*

I was ugly when I was in high school; I'm not scared to admit it. I was an Asian bookworm, with big owl-eyed glasses and a brown school uniform two sizes too large. I hung out with my Asian crew of girls and did Vietnamese daughter chores: after school, I looked after my two little sisters and attempted to teach them piano to save my mum money. But this all changed the summer after I finished high school. I discovered the internet. There, in a chatroom full of Asian teenagers, I met my boyfriend.

Big no-no. Number one rule in the *Asian Mother's Handbook*: no boyfriend until after university. This rule encompasses all the other rules in the book. If you don't have a boyfriend, you will still be dependent on your family and stay at home. You will concentrate on your studies. And your virginity will be intact.

By having a boyfriend, I created a lot of fear for my mother. It didn't help that my boyfriend was Chinese. Soon after finding out, my mum decided she hated Chinese people.

'They are too tight with money, always family first. Why can't you go out with an Italian boy, you like pizza?'

Once I overheard her gossiping to her friends:

'She can date anyone other than a Chinese. I don't care if he's Iraqi or Indian, but not Chinese.'

So, how about a nice Vietnamese boy?'

'No Vietnamese. He will cheat on you and gamble all your money.'

*Step Five: Get Kicked Out of the Cuckoo Nest*

When my mother kicked me out of home at the ripe old age of eighteen, I found a freedom that I had never known before. My mother forced wings on me and pushed me out of the nest, and I know she regrets it. At first I was scared. I was the first and only Asian girl in my group of friends to be kicked out of home. I became known as the girl with no home, the girl who had brought shame to her family.

What was my shameful act? I had a boyfriend before I finished university ... and she found him in my wardrobe. My mum is Vietnamese, and no way was her daughter not a virgin. That afternoon, I got home from uni and saw all my belongings in the back-

yard. Everything. I was stunned. She had threatened to kick me out before but never acted on it. I collected my essential belongings and moved in with my first ever boyfriend. We slept on a foam mattress on the floor. My friends were supportive, but they couldn't understand: we were all conditioned to depend on our Asian parents, and now I couldn't.

To my mother, I was the slut daughter. I am still with my boyfriend after five years and I'm still a slut in her eyes. I guess I will be for the rest of my life.

So, there you have it: five simple ways to disappoint your Vietnamese mother.

*The Courage of Soldiers*

Pauline Nguyen

Like his peers, my father wanted desperately to raise four high achievers, believing that the sacrifices he and my mother had made were far too great for us not to be. We aimed high because we had no choice. We were made acutely aware that he and my mother had fled Vietnam not for their own future but for ours - to ensure that we could lead a prosperous life and have a better education. 'You are like cars with no direction,' my father would say, 'and I am your steering wheel, leading you in the right direction.'

My father feared that his children would lose the old culture. At home, we spoke Vietnamese to our parents and English to each other. We practised all the formal traditions and lived the pious Vietnamese way. We upheld filial obedience and dutifully worshipped our long-lost ancestors.

My father had hoped that the two very different cultures could blend into one well-adjusted whole. In theory, this sounded better than when it was put into practice. We worked at the restaurant seven days a week before and after school, stopping only to finish our homework and complete household chores. Outside activities included maths school, Vietnamese school, cooking