

**Kính:**  
**A window into the life of a second generation Vietnamese American**

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**Dedication:**

For my family, for all the struggles they went through and all the sacrifices they made so that my siblings, cousins, and I could have the lives we have today. Cám on.

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## **Traditions**

*Một giọt máu dày hơn ao nước lã*  
*Blood is thicker than water*

## Christmas

Since I was old enough to remember, Christmas has been my favorite day of the year. I enjoy Christmas not because of the nicely wrapped gifts or the break away from school, but because Christmas is the only day out of the year my entire family is ever together. Every December 25<sup>th</sup>, I can always count on my grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and parents spending time together eating phở by the fireplace. Watching the smiles on my families faces brought a happiness to me I haven't been able to find anywhere else.

My family immigrated to Atlanta from Vietnam in 1990 as political refugees with only \$200 between my mom, grandparents, and two uncles. My grandparents started life in America working low-paying jobs, my grandpa as a used-TV repairman and my grandma working on an assembly line. Their days began at 6 am and ended at 6 pm. For five years this was their life until they saved up enough money to open Rose Nails, a nail salon in Riverdale, a small town outside of Atlanta. They cared for their shop as if it were a child, putting in long hours, 7-days a week, and watching it grow. Today, my family owns three successful nail salons across Atlanta. My aunts, uncles, and grandparents still care about the shops as if they were their own children working 364.25 days out of the year making it possible for me, my little brother, and cousins to enjoy a life they were not able to have.

On Christmas, when their customers are home with their families and there is no money to be made, my family closes their shops early on Christmas Eve and finally has time to celebrate. Every year we either meet at my grandma or uncle's house on Christmas Eve for a traditional Vietnamese dinner with phở (Vietnamese's national dish: a noodle and beef soup), bánh xèo (crepe with vegetables and shrimp), rau muống xào tỏi (stir-fried water spinach with garlic), and gỏi cuốn (fresh spring rolls). I learned to appreciate home-cooked meals more as I have grown older.

At midnight, the kids open their presents as the adults look on, smiling, laughing, and taking pictures. I remember when I was one of those kids with my cousins, now we join our parents watching our little siblings enjoy each other's company the way we did a decade earlier.

While the kids enjoy new toys, clothes, and money, the adults also get something they want: time to relax. The women of my family would stay in the living room where the karaoke machine is, taking turns singing and catching up on the previous year. The men do their bonding in the kitchen, but instead of sharing microphones and karaoke books, they passed around a deck of playing cards and stacks of poker chips.

On Christmas day the sounds of new toy trucks, the repeats of *Vàng Trăng Khóc* (*The Moon Cries*, a popular Vietnamese song), and cards being dealt lasts long after the sunrise. Around noon, lunch is served and then the fun resumes. Around 5 in the afternoon (almost

24 hours after we had started) my grandma would pack the leftover phở and bánh xèo for everyone to take home.

While everyone is saying their final goodbyes and giving their last hugs, I begin counting down the 364.25 days before we would be like this again.

## Wedding

My duties as a groomsman began at 6 am as I put on my tuxedo. I had flown home merely hours before for the wedding of two of my friends, Giang and Nhi. I was exhausted from the lack of sleep and probably should have been back on campus studying for exams, but it was such a honor to be a groomsman that I conjured the energy to enjoy the day.

Giang and Nhi were born in Vietnam, but spent their adult lives in America. While they wanted a simple western wedding, their parents wanted to have a traditional Vietnamese one. Since Giang's family lived in Vietnam and were only in the States for the wedding weekend, Giang and Nhi decided to have both a traditional Vietnamese wedding and Western one. I have been to multiple wedding receptions but never part of the whole ceremony.

Our morning started with the betrothal ceremony, known in Vietnamese culture as Lễ Đám Hôn. After we were all dressed, Giang, his family, and six groomsman met at Giang's house in Atlanta to travel a few miles south to Morrow where Nhi and her family lived. We carried with us five round lacquered boxes that served as gifts. The number of boxes was an odd number to represent luck. Our boxes contained areca nuts, tea, cake, fruit, wine, and fake gold coins. Each round box was covered with red cloth with Chinese inscriptions. While four of the groomsman carried the boxes, two of us carried a box containing a whole roasted pig to the bride's house. While the Lễ Đám Hôn usually happens weeks or even months before the actual wedding, both families decided to merge the process with the wedding so that Giang's parents could be a part of the ceremony. I had only seen this part of the Vietnamese wedding on videotapes from Vietnam seeing it in person, especially in America, was a different experience than I expected.

When we arrived at the bride's house, Nhi's brother-in-law set off a twenty-five foot string of red firecrackers waking up the whole block and announcing our arrival as well as the start of the Lễ Cưới, the wedding ceremony. Once the last firecracker had popped, the groomsman handed our baskets to the six bridesmaids who were all dressed in various colored áo dài, the national dress of Vietnam, a tight-fitting silk tunic worn over white silk pants. While the groomsman transferred the gifts to the bridesmaids, Giang entered Nhi's house to complete the second part of the Lễ Cưới, asking Nhi's parents for permission to marry their daughter. The process took ten long minutes while we anxiously waited outside. This stage was completed when Giang and Nhi walked out together to welcome all the guests inside their home, which was now decorated from floor to ceiling like a room out of a Kung-Fu movie with red curtains, lanterns, and banners with Chinese inscriptions.

Once everyone found a place to stand in the living room, the bridesmaids laid the boxes of gifts on a table draped with a red covering next to an altar where the two families stood. Nhi's father welcomed us as the two families performed a ritual to honor their ancestors before an altar. For the next hour, both families exchanged wishes and Giang and Nhi performed their vows in Vietnamese as part of lễ tơ hồng. I wish my Vietnamese had been

better so I could appreciate the vows more instead of just smiling and nodding my head. Watching the ceremony, I was aware of how ignorant I am of my Vietnamese customs. Since a wedding is so rare, I don't get to experience it. I wondered what else I have been missing.

With the conclusion of Lễ Cưới, we left Nhi's house and drove to her church, a small Vietnamese Baptist church, about six miles away on a country road. It was the same church where I met Nhi six years earlier. The wedding ceremony was presided over by one of the pastors of the church and attended by 18 people. Afterwards everyone joined one another for lunch at the church. As everyone else left, the bride and groom and their maids and groomsmen stayed to take pictures before heading north to a Cantonese restaurant known for hosting many Vietnamese weddings where 126 guests joined Giang and Nhi on their special day. The dinner was a seven-course meal featuring shark fin soup, roasted pig, quail, duck, sea bass, crab, and lobster. Usually the reception is my favorite part of the wedding, but after such an exhausting day, I just wanted to sit quietly and eat my meal.

The reception lasted five hours with introductions of the families; speeches by the best man, fathers, and finally the bride and groom; and singing and dance performances. The last of the guests left at midnight. Within a period of 18 hours, we had completed two weddings. I was so glad I decided to come home to be part of this ceremony.

A few hours later, I caught the first flight back to campus wondering whether my wedding would be traditional or modern. Giang and Nhi came to America at 18, so they knew much of the Vietnamese customs. I was born here and only spent one summer in Vietnam when I was six. If I did do a traditional wedding, it would mainly be for my parents I suppose, and the vows, unless I have time to rehearse, will be in English. I suppose it is a good thing I don't have to decide now.

## In Memory of My Aunt Quyen

When my aunt died last year, my family chose to have a traditional Vietnamese funeral and 100-day mourning period. In America, when a family member dies, most Vietnamese American families will choose to hold a modern funeral period similar to those of Western culture: place the body into a coffin, hold a wake, and then bury the casket. My family wanted to honor my aunt the same way she had honored her ancestors in Vietnam.

When my aunt passed away, it was a Thursday and a monk was called in from her temple to place a thin piece of cotton sheet over her face as he rang a bell and recited a chant for her. It was the beginning of the 100 days of mourning for my family. I received a call from Jessica, my aunt's oldest daughter, earlier that morning. It was the first death in my family and I didn't know how to handle it. While my family was together, I was 1006 miles away at school. My family did not allow me to come home for the weekend to say goodbye to my aunt. They and I both knew that if I went home, I wouldn't want to come back to school. Jessica had just taken the semester off with only a few weeks to go, and my family did not want me to do the same. I went to the music room that day and just played the piano for hours on ends. I didn't know how to deal with the pain I was feeling.

My aunt's wake took place on Saturday, and on Sunday, her body was cremated and her ashes placed in an urn now at her temple. I only heard about it from Jessica who also took pictures for me.

I missed a lot while I was at school. Every Thursday and Saturday for 49 days, my family gathered at my aunt's temple in downtown Atlanta, Chua Quang-Minh, a small Buddhist temple my family has been a member of since they came to the United States. The temple is composed of two buildings, one where the monks live and eat, and the main temple, where a giant statue of Buddha resides in the large main room with mats for visitors to pray. For seven weeks on Thursdays and Saturdays, my family recited prayers and chants for six hours before having dinner with the monks. The philosophy behind my family's actions is that if my aunt had done good during her time on earth, she would have family and friends who love her and would support her during the 49-day process during which it is said that Buddha will judge her life and determine where her spirit will go (with the ultimate goal of reaching Nirvana).

It is believed that the actions of friends and family of the deceased influence Buddha's decision. Jessica, my aunt's oldest daughter, and Tram My, my aunt's youngest sister, volunteered at various local soup kitchens under my aunt's name. My uncle gave up meat and each morning, as he had done for over 21 years, prepared my aunt's favorite coffee and placed in on the shrine erected for my aunt in their home. My uncle made a shrine for my aunt from a wooden table and placed in the center a large colored headshot of my aunt taken a few years ago, before she was diagnosed with breast cancer. The rest of the table was covered by her favorite foods, magazines, books, and prized belongings like her wedding ring. The coffee my uncle prepared is not part of the ritual but my aunt loved drinking it while she was alive. The first part of the mourning ends on the 49<sup>th</sup> day. For my

family, the 49<sup>th</sup> day was Christmas; I was home for winter break and had a chance to join my family. We gathered one last time at my aunt's temple to pray and chant; I was glad I had at least one chance to say goodbye to my aunt, who cared for me as if I were her own son.

It was the first Christmas we had spent without my aunt, but her memory will continue to live on with me with every Christmas our family celebrates and every day when I think about her.

The mourning period officially concludes on the 100<sup>th</sup> day. Coincidentally, the 100<sup>th</sup> day for my aunt was Valentine's Day; a fitting day for a woman who loved her family more than anything else.

## **Culture**

*Có chí làm quan, có gan làm giàu*  
*Fortune favors the brave*

## Wouldn't you rather learn to cook?

I have two cousins who are my age, Jessica and Teresa. Our families live close together and like many Vietnamese families, my parents cared for my cousins the same way they cared for me, and my uncles and aunts cared for me the same way they cared for my cousins. We were one family.

When we lived in the same house, Jessica and I would do everything together. When we were three, we watched as our grandpa screwed on a new wall socket. We were fascinated with the screwdriver he was using. When Jessica asked my grandpa to show her how to use the screwdriver, my grandma, who was in the room, replied, "wouldn't you rather learn to cook?" Without waiting for Jessica's response, my grandma took Jessica downstairs to the kitchen, while my grandpa taught me how to use his screwdriver.

As we grew up, our family's double standards affected our dating lives. My family never prevented me from having a girlfriend. When I brought one of my girlfriends home, my grandma and uncles merely reminded me to "use a condom." My girlfriend and I could stay out as late as we wanted and if we wanted to spend the night together at my house, that was allowed as well. For my cousins, such acts and even having a boyfriend would have meant shame on our family and disownment. My cousins had to sneak out to see their boyfriends and return before my aunts and uncles came home from work at night. Even when they went out to see their girl friends, one of my aunts or uncles chaperoned.

When it came time to apply for college, my family didn't really care where I ended up going. As with my girlfriends, they trusted my decisions.

When my cousins applied for college a year later, my family supported my cousins getting a higher education. My cousins were encouraged (if not forced) to go to college, but they had to obey two conditions, I did not:

- 1) They could only apply to schools less than 2 hours driving distance from the house
- 2) They had to agree to come home every weekend

My cousins agreed to those terms before being able to apply for college. I wonder how my life would have been if my mom had gotten her wish and I had been born a girl.

## How to Find the Right Wife

My grandma gave me advice on how to tell if the girl I was dating would make a great wife. She prided herself on her method. She taught my two uncles who used it on my two aunts, who passed successfully, and in the process gained my grandmother's blessing to join our family.

My grandma's method was very simple, yet so effective. In fact, with my grandma's logic, I am surprised she hasn't convinced me to bypass the whole dating process and just use her method. Her method took only one date...to the grocery store. It went like this:

- 1) "Tell her that you want to prepare a special dinner for your mom."

If my date did not care or protested what I was doing for my mom, she would not make a good daughter-in-law.

- 2) "When you are at the food section: pick a meat (usually fish), fruit, and vegetable and tell her you don't know how to choose good ones."

My grandma wanted to test my potential wife's ability to shop for quality food, determine how much time and care she put into her chores, and how she reacted to the prices.

- 3) "Then ask her if you should add anything else."

I would be able to see how she spends my money and if she knew what was worth buying.

- 4) "When you are home. Ask her to help you cook."

She should be able to cook or willing to experiment and learn.

- 5) "Next the two of you have dinner with your mom."

To me, I would see how well my date interacted with my mom and vice-versa. To my grandma, I wonder if this was a mechanism to limit my date choices to Vietnamese girls as my mom only speaks Vietnamese.

- 6) "Put the plates into the sink. See if she volunteers to clean them. If not, start cleaning and see if she joins you."

I like this part actually. I never plan to make my wife wash the dishes by herself. If I love someone so much, I plan to spend every minute of the day with her, washing dishes included.

Next time I am home, I am going to ask my cousins what my grandma told them about finding a husband. If there is a test for males, I need to know how to pass.



## My Birthday

For my seventh birthday, my dad invited a band to play, ordered enough food to feed sixty guests, and bought enough drinks to last for months. The problem was that the band played only Vietnamese music, the guests were all my dad's coworkers and friends, and I had to be fourteen years older to drink the drinks – though that didn't stop my dad from pouring me a glass.

My dad was outside entertaining the male guests making introductions and playing *bầu cua cá còpa*, a Vietnamese gambling game. My mom was inside our living room keeping the wives of my dad's friends occupied. Good news for my mom, there weren't many of wives as most of the men came by themselves. Besides me, there were two other kids, one girl about a year older than I and her sister who was my age.

At the end of the evening, when all the guests left, I told my dad I didn't want another birthday party.

## **Values**

*Vạn sự khởi đầu nan.  
All things are difficult before they are easy*

## **“Vy, pick up when we call you.”**

When I was 16, I had a girlfriend named Vy. We started dating three months after meeting each other at a community service event. We had much in common; we were both our school’s valedictorians, captains of our math teams, joined many of the same honor societies, and we were both Vietnamese.

Every time I wanted to take Vy on a date I would ask her parents myself. Each time I asked, her parents would view my request with extreme scrutiny.

“Where will you two be going?”  
“When will you be home?”  
“Do your parents know?”  
“Who will you be with?”

When they agreed. They would end by saying, “Vy, pick up when we call you.” Vy’s parents were true to their word; they called her twice before we even had time to buy our movie tickets. The funny thing was that her family wasn’t always as strict. In fact they had been lenient with Thuy, Vy’s older sister. As we say in the Vietnamese community, they were quite “American” with Thuy.

A few months after Thuy began dating her boyfriend, she became pregnant. Thuy hadn’t finished high school and her parents were horrified by the news. News quickly spread in our little Vietnamese community and the gossip began, how Vy’s mom and dad were terrible parents and their daughter was a slut.

Being surrounded by gossip and the feeling of bringing shame on her family, Thuy ran away from home causing more stress and gossip for her family. Two months later, she returned, married her boyfriend, and made amends with her parents, but the scars were still felt. The Vietnamese community continued to gossip. Vy’s parents were ashamed to come to work at a fruit processing factory which hired many of the Vietnamese in our community. Their friends even began distancing themselves from Vy’s parents.

Vy was my first relationship and for a while, I thought her parents simply did not like me. When Vy told me the story of Thuy and her parents, I could understand. As a result, for the time I dated Vy, I did not blame her parents for checking up on her even if during the climax of a movie. They were doing it in the interest of Vy and making up for Thuy.

## **Poverty breeds thieves**

My house has been robbed twice. My parents suspect their friends had been the burglars because both times occurred when we were away on vacation and only their friends knew we would be gone. After the second time, we installed an alarm system.

The Vietnamese have a saying, “bần cùng sinh đạo tặc.” In English this means, “poverty breeds thieves” or “lack of money is the root of all evil.”

Growing up in south Atlanta, where my neighborhood was one of the poorest and most minority-populated, I saw what the lack of money did to people and their families. The people around me were not afraid to “solve” their money problems by turning to drug-dealing, stealing, or worse, violence. Families that never seemed to have enough money fought, argued, and at an extreme, broke apart.

My family never had much money. When they came to the United States in 1990, my family of ten shared a four-bedroom home and lived as frugally as possible. Doctor’s visits were avoided if a home-cure was available, eating out, and even Chinese take-out, was a luxury, and going to the movies meant going to Blockbusters to rent a movie.

For the first half of my life, the only toys and clothes I knew were hand-me-downs and those bought from Goodwill or America’s Best Thrift. While many of the kids I grew up with were wearing the latest Nikes and carried the newest iPods, I wore used and off-brand shoes and still relied on my SanDisk MP3 player. I often wondered why I was never allowed to buy Air Jordan’s or the latest Apple product. I often felt inadequate to my peers and thought my parents were cheap, poor, and simply didn’t love me; I didn’t know it back then but, now as a twenty-one year old, I don’t think there was a better lesson my parents could have taught me than the value of living within your means and only buying things you need.

Today my family is much better off and spends more than we did before, but we still live within our means. My grandparents own one of the most successful nail salons in Atlanta, multiple rental properties, and have a retirement fund to last until they both die. Despite this, my grandma and grandpa still continue to live the same way they have always lived: buying clothes only at discounts, cooking their own food, and doing home repairs on their own. As long as you live within your means, poverty won’t be a problem and stealing won’t be a solution.

## Kính

On campus, wind, rain, or snow, people will recognize me biking right past them. In fact, given a choice between riding the bus or my bike, I will choose to show up to class sweaty, tired, and with sore legs. I love my bike and treat it like my car back home: making sure the gears are properly oiled, the tires are changed regularly, and the brakes are inspected monthly.

I bought my bike almost two years ago with money I received for my 20<sup>th</sup> birthday. For what I bought my bike for, a family of four in the United States could have fed themselves for four months. Ironic, because my family could have been that family. When I was in kindergarten, my dad was still working at his manufacturing assembly job. My dad's occupation paid only slightly above minimum wage and he had a hard time feeding our family. Some nights we ate a regular meal such as bò kho (beef stew), cá kho tộ (fish cooked in a clay pot), and bún bò Huế (rice vermicelli and beef soup). Other nights, we made do with rice and cheap chả lụa (pork roll). Needless to say, my family did not have much of a budget for non-essential items. When my classmates were learning how to ride a bike, my family couldn't afford one.

My classmates would pick on me for being the poor kid, the kid who wore the same shirt every day, and the only kid who had never been on a bike. I never told my parents how much I wanted a bike to call my own, but they secretly knew. Every afternoon, I would stare at the kids across the street riding their bikes around our neighborhood while I looked from afar unable to join them.

On December 24<sup>th</sup>, 1997, my dad took me to work with him. Since it was Christmas Eve, my dad's office held a big party and people were allowed to leave early. As my dad and I drove to our house, my dad noticed that our neighbors, a retired white couple both in their late 70's, had thrown away a used girl's bike. My dad parked the car in our lot and stared at the garbage.

I knew what my dad wanted to do. Even at five, I had the awareness of how important my reputation was. Across the street, I saw two girls who were in my class.

“I don't want it dad!”

“It is a perfect size for you.”

“Dad it's a girl's bike!”

“We can paint it over, no one will be able to tell.”

“NO DAD!”

My dad had never been afraid to ask for what he wanted; he believed the worst thing that could happen was that someone would tell him “no.” My dad opened the door to our purple 1990 Ford Aerostar Minivan and started to walk over to the house next door. I only peeked from the window of the minivan. I wanted to run inside the house, but did not want to be seen by the two girls across the street; I could only imagine what jokes they would make

at school if they saw my dad going through someone else's garbage. My face flushed red as I continued to peek out from the car window.

My dad rang the bell and the husband stepped out. He and my dad spoke for a few minutes before they both walked to the pile of garbage. My dad returned with the bike a few minutes later. The next day, I found the bike under the Christmas tree. My dad had installed training wheels and painted it blue. I prepared for my first ride with my dad right behind me.