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# THE ENTIRE THINGS THEY'LL TALK ABOUT BEFORE WE GET TO UNCLE TANG [NOW THOMAS]'S LUNAR NEW YEAR'S EVE PARTY N°6

Vinh-Paul Ha

Driving to Uncle Tang [now Thomas]'s apartment Granmámá and Mámá'll always talk about how Uncle Tang [now Thomas] was born with the funny vibes: funny vibes not like *Oh man, that was funny!* but funny vibes like *How did you get my number?* kind of funny vibes. Granmámá'll say she's always had her suspicions of Uncle Tang [now Thomas]'s funny vibes, had her suspicions of him from as far back as back then when "Granba put the seed in me and and and..." and *oh*, here she goes again, so "Uh huh," I'll say, because Granmámá's been telling this story over and over and over and over over over again every year since Uncle Tang [now Thomas]'s been holding his Lunar New Year's Eve Party in his two-bedroom *TOWERING INFERNO APARTMENTS* apartment named after that hit movie from back in the day called *The Towering Inferno*. And "Uh huh," I'll say again while sitting in the frontseat with Granmámá in the backseat and Mámá'll be in the driverseat driving the Special Family Package Edition™ Datsun with the left half of her face all glowing from the sun that'll be setting setting setting and still setting setting setting until finally set by around Five:Thirtyfive to Fiftyfive PM because those were the times the sun had set between in the past when we'll reach the faded green 985-SE freeway sign

|  | MINUTES    |
|--|------------|
| FOURTH STREET/ENTREPRENEUR DISRICT           | SIX        |
| MEDICAL PLAZA DISRICT                        | TEN        |
| NINETEENTH AVENUE/APARTMENT HOUSING DISTRICT | SEVENTEEN  |
| THE NGOC THAI CENTER FOR TROUBLED ASIAN MEN  | THIRTYFIVE |

meaning I'll have seventeen minutes to remind Granmámá that I've already heard her story.

Every year the same thing while driving down the same freeway to the same Lunar New Year's Eve Party to the same Uncle Tang [now Thomas] that invites all the same longtime people he knows, like that acquaintance he'd met from a mutual friend and only saw at gatherings that that mutual friend had held until eventually that mutual friend faded away and the acquaintance and Uncle Tang [now Thomas] became good friends. Such good friends that every year I'll hear them reminiscing about Mutual Friend that neither of them talk to, that Uncle Tang [now Thomas] still invites every year to his Lunar New Year's Eve Party anyway, with the hopes that Mutual Friend'll surprise him and Acquaintance [now Good Friend] and they all'll celebrate their reunion by having a drink together and talking about the old times while laughing.... Except at Lunar New Year's Eve Party N° 1 2 3 4 5 and soon to be N°6 Acquaintance [now Good Friend]'ll walk up to Uncle Tang [now Thomas] and say "Looks like another year where Hu-Win"—or something—I think—I'm never sure because it's some Mother'sland name that I don't know how to pronounce but it "Looks like another year where Hu-Win New-Win won't be showing up again...." And then Acquaintance [now Good Friend]'ll hand Uncle Tang [now Thomas] a plastic cup filled with champagne and they'll raise their Plastic JumboDeluXsize Cups™ plastic cups of girly colored champagne and they'll toast "To Hu-Win New-Win wherever you are" and then they'll both guzzle down their respective Plastic JumboDeluXsize Cups™ plastic cups of Girly Color Champagne™ and laugh while putting their arms around each other manstylesidehugging—stumbling over their words—pretending to sing karaoke—dancing to a bad impression of the classic twist—acting like stereotypes with their faces all bright red because it'll be obvious to everyone by this point in the still young night that they've already had a lot to drink.

|  | MINUTES    |
|--|------------|
| FOURTH STREET/ENTREPRENEUR DISRICT           | SIX        |
| MEDICAL PLAZA DISRICT                        | TEN        |
| NINETEENTH AVENUE/APARTMENT HOUSING DISTRICT | SEVENTEEN  |
| THE NGOC THAI CENTER FOR TROUBLED ASIAN MEN  | THIRTYFIVE |

Still seventeen minutes to go on the 985-SE when Granmamá'll pretend that she didn't hear me and'll motion me to lean my FrontseatRelaxer Combo™ SFPE™ Datsun's front seat back some more so I'll be able to hear her better. But I won't want to hear her better. I'll hate having to hear her better because after having to hear her better it'll take forever for me to reposition my FrontseatRelaxer Combo™ seat back into a position that I like. So I'll pretend I didn't hear her and do

something else like look for quarters in the sidepocket, or look in the glovebox for a stick of Agatha Lê's *Homemade Tasting! Cantaloupe Pie Gum™* but Granmamá'll be all like "Hurry up!" and *Lame*, I'll think, and "Really Lame," I'll say while looking down into the leg space at my shoes that are dragging dragging dragging up and back and front and down and side to side of the FRCSFPE™ Datsun's UV faded black rubber mats, fully knowing I'll be hearing it all over again: Mámá saying, "Stop doing that, Sweetheart, you'll ruin the rubber," and me wondering *Is she talking about my shoes or the Datsun's?* and me thinking about what I wish I could've been doing instead and "Hurry up," Granmamá'll say again, "before we get to your uncle's house," Granmamá'll keep talking. "Didn't Mámá teach you it's rude to ignore people in cars?"

"Sure did, Mámá," Mámá'll say. "Don't know why you'd even ask."

"Oh, of course you did, Dear," Granmamá'll say, "I wasn't questioning you, Dear."

"Not saying you were," Mámá'll say, turning on the heater. "Wasn't implying anything like that."

And "Oh, crap," I'll say. "Oh, crap."

"What, Honey?" Mámá'll fake like she didn't hear me. "I couldn't hear you over the sound of the heater."

And every year it'll be the sound of the FRCSFPE™ Datsun's heater.

"I said 'Oh, crap,'" I'll say.

"Manners, Darling," Mámá'll say while turning the heater up to one level under full blast, making the inside of the FRCSFPE™ Datsun din with the rumbling of a broken heater's clatter.

But just as the heater is starting to find its regular clatter I'll hear, "The day your Granba died from that burst appendix, your uncle wouldn't stop kicking," coming from Granmamá's mouth. Granmamá clattering on about how she thought "Tang [now Thomas] was going to kick right on through and out of me, like in that Sig Weaver movie. You know, the one where one of her shipmates—or is it called spacemates?—the one where this guy—what's his name, *what's his name?*—I can't remember his name, but the one where that guy has an alien *phewwwwwwwww* right out of his belly," Granmamá'll say, over the clatter that'll be blowing out

almost tepid heat from the only two working vents: the two middle vents of the FRCSFPE™ Datsun's heater. I'll then see Granmámá in the passenger sidemirror covering her mouth with both of her dry hands, I'll see her eyes go wide and round with faked terror, I'll see Granmámá rolling her wide and round faked-terrered eyes down and up and around the interior of the FRCSFPE™ Datsun, rolling her wide and round faked-terrered eyes all about the Authentic FabricLined Interior™ of the FRCSFPE™ Datsun in every kind of sideways direction until, like perfect timing, the clattering of the AFLIFRCSFPE™ Datsun's heater stops clattering and starts humming, like somehow Granmámá's Every Kind of Sideways Direction™ staring has made it happen, and "Holy Mother'smother's Spirit, Dears, I thought that Tang [now Thomas] was going to zing right on out of me just like one of those ugly aliens, too," Granmámá'll then say, making a loud blowing noise with her mouth while her hands and fingers'll come exploding out, wiggling out in Every Kind of Sideways Direction™ towards my face to pinch my cheeks and twist my ears and tousle my hair. And *Oh, really?* I'll think, and *Oh, really?* I'll say, and "Stop, Granmámá. I'm a man now."

And Granmámá'll quickly pull all the way back, back into her backseat. "You're no man," she'll say. "Just because you're old enough to get pubic bugs doesn't mean you're a man," she'll say. "And of course not. Of course he didn't *Alien* out," Granmámá'll say. "But still it was very painful, all that kicking."

"Facts of life, Mámá," Mámá'll say.

"Oh, please, not the facts of life," I'll say.

"Facts of what now?" Granmámá'll say.

"Life," Mámá'll say.

And the heating's clattering'll start up again.

"You know, I think a part of your uncle died that day with Gandba because because because"—and the heating's clatter'll get more steady, more loud—"really, Dear, can you just turn off that cold air you're pretending is heat already? All that clattering. I can't hear a thing I'm saying." But Mámá won't turn the down the heating clatter. "Because who was going to teach Tang [now Thomas] how to be a man now?" Granmámá'll continue on anyway, making the sign of the Holiest Spirit before saying Granba's name.

|  |            |
|--|------------|
|  | MINUTES    |
| FOURTH STREET/ENTREPRENEUR DISRICT           | FIVE       |
| MEDICAL PLAZA DISRICT                        | NINE       |
| NINETEENTH AVENUE/APARTMENT HOUSING DISTRICT | SIXTEEN    |
| THE NGOC THAI CENTER FOR TROUBLED ASIAN MEN  | THIRTYFOUR |

And then Mámá'll say, "And back then, when your uncle was still in high school—"

"Turn down the heater, Dear, I can't hear you from back here," Granmámá'll say again.

"Like his sophomore year, I think"—Mámá'll say, in a voice one octave lower, maintaining the speed of the heating's clatter—"when his funny vibes were still maturing. As in he wasn't full-blown funny yet, but still funny enough."

"What's your Mámá talking about?" Granmámá'll ask me.

"About the facts of life," I'll say.

Mámá'll lie: "I'm talking about the time you picked up the Ten-Channel Cordless and—"

"Yes, that cordless. I haggled that down from \$Ten.00 to \$Seven.00 from Mister Lê's yard sale you know," Granmámá'll say to me.

And "Uh huh," I'll say.

"Because Mister Lê had apparently just won big money through some big sweepstakes company that this famous Pailie—the one with really white hair that does that talent show on TV called Star somethingsomething...something... whatever—came right up to Mister Lê's doorstep and presented him with an oversized check made of FlexiPlex Glass™ and said, 'Congratulations, you've just won the—'"

"The Publisher's Clearinghouse Sweepstakes!" Mámá'll say.

"That's right. Yes. 'Congratulations, you've just won the Publisher's Clearinghouse Sweepstakes,'" Granmámá'll say. "Thanks for ruining my climax for Dear, Dear."

“It’s okay,” I’ll say. “I know,” I’ll say. “I already knew.”

“And Mister Lê said on TV when Linda Lê from Channel:EightyOne LiveNews™ came from the local news to ask him what he was going to do with his winnings. And he said—Dear, you won’t believe what he said.”

“Get the heck out of this Northie infested dump,” I’ll say.

“Right,” my Mámá’ll say. “So right. And your Granmámá and uncle and I all laughed because our family—”

“Aren’t Northies. Aren’t from the North. And if there was anything Mister Lê hated more than being poor were those kung pao-, gimbap-, and sushi-eating Northies,” I’ll say. “Yeah, I know. I know. I’ve heard this story before you know.”

“Yeah? Well then why don’t you tell it to us Mister Smarty Pants?” Mámá’ll say.

I’ll say: “Then your Granmámá said Mister Lê always said funny stuff like that because Mister Lê was born with the *Oh man, that was funny!* kind of funny vibes. ‘That man was a born comedian,’ your Granmámá says while licking her lips and staring off like she just had a vision of eating a slice of Agatha Lê’s *Homemade Tasting!Cantaloupe Pie™*.”

“Nobody likes a know-it-all,” Mámá’ll say. And the heating clatter’ll get louder but Mámá’ll insist on talking over the clatter: “But before the camera could cutaway from the smile on Mister Lê’s face, Mister Lê announced he’d be holding a yard sale to sell off all his oppressions—whatever that meant—‘So come on by. All of you. Even you Northie leeches!’” And Mámá’ll look over at me from the Exclusive Driverside MemoryFoamseats™ of the AFLIFRCSFPE™ Datsun and ask me “Did you remember that part? I bet you didn’t remember that part.”

I’ll say: “And at that yard sale Granmámá said she’d picked up other good finds, but the Ten-Channel Cordless was definitely the best find. Practically brand new.”

“Don’t be so eager, Sweetie. It’s not attractive for a young man,” Mámá’ll say.

“Facts of life,” Granmámá’ll say. “Facts of life.”

“Did you just say the facts of—”

"No, Dear," Granmamá'll say, "just reminiscing back here."

"About the *Facts of—*"

"No, Dear, just simply reminiscing back here."

And Mámá'll look at me with her eyebrows all slanted and her lips all protruding and her nostrils all flaring—i.e., her thinking/angry/"yeah right, I know what I heard" face—like she's about to say something. But she won't. Instead she'll pretend she didn't hear Granmamá, and she'll go on to say, "And a few days later after getting that practically brand new Ten-Channel Cordless, Granmamá picked it up to make a call but heard that someone was already on the a phone. She heard a girl's voice that she knew wasn't me," Mámá'll say. "Because if you remember, Mámá was taking a business class at AUGUST LÊ'S BETTER THAN A+ LEARNING SERVICES—"

"I studied there, too," Granmamá'll say. "Way way back when, when August Lê was still handsome. And not in the Entrepreneur District. That's why my English is so perfect."

"Yeah, uh-huh, that's nice, Mámá," Mámá'll say, "But it's not about you right now. Because if you remember, I was taking a business class at AUGUST LÊ'S BETTER THAN A+ LEARNING SERVICES and\_\_\_\_."

And silence. Except for the sounds coming from the heater's heating clatter.

"SERVICES and \_\_\_\_\_," Mámá'll say once more and wait. And \_\_\_\_\_," Mámá'll say again because Granmamá and I'll still not say anything. "SERVICES and \_\_\_\_\_," Mámá'll say for a third time because apparently every year around this time she has nothing else better to do. And again Granmamá and I'll still not say anything because both of us'll still have something else better to do. "SERVICES and \_\_\_\_\_," Mámá'll say for the fourth time because apparently at this point it's no longer about the "Services and \_\_\_\_\_."

And "Ughhhh," I'll ugh, but my ugh'll not be ugh enough to stop her.

"SERVICES. *And*. SERVICES and \_\_\_\_\_."

"Oh for Holy Sprit's sake," Granmama'll finally say to me. "put that clattering



woman’s needs to an end already, Dear. Put the dog out of her misery, Dear.”

“Oh for Sprints’ sake,” I’ll say again this year.

“SERVICES and \_\_\_\_.”

“...SERVICES and had been taking that business class at AUGUST LÊ’S BETTER THAN A+ LEARNING SERVICES ever since having had that vision way back some nights ago of becoming the best lioness statues emporium owner in the nation. And now am,” I’ll finally say.

And “Awww.... Well, I don’t if I’m the *best*,” Mámá’ll say. “Oh, but thanks, Love. That really makes me feel good inside.”

|  | MINUTES   |
|--|-----------|
| FOURTH STREET/ENTREPRENEUR DISRICT           | THREE     |
| MEDICAL PLAZA DISRICT                        | SEVEN     |
| NINETEENTH AVENUE/APARTMENT HOUSING DISTRICT | FOURTEEN  |
| THE NGOC THAI CENTER FOR TROUBLED ASIAN MEN  | THIRTYTWO |

“Then Granmámá heard the young girl’s voice say, ‘I’ll call 9-1-1 on you if you try calling me again. Comprende, Tang [now Thomas]?’” Mámá’ll say. “But your Granmámá...well, she didn’t know what comprende meant, but she sure knew what 9-1-1 meant. Don’t you Mámá?” Mámá’ll say over the clatter. “9-1-1?”

“After hearing 9-1-1 and Tang [now Thomas]’s voice I said, ‘Oh. Oh, dear...’” Granmámá’ll then pantomime herself covering the then practically brand new Ten-Channel Cordless with Built-In Answering Tape™ with her fingers, all dramatic-like like an episode of *Santa Barbara*. “I don’t know if your uncle Tang [now Thomas] had heard me or not, but the phone clicked off abruptly, and I knew since that day that your uncle Tang [now Thomas] was cursed with the funny vibes.”

“And then who’ll carry on the Lê name?” I’ll hear Mámá or Granmámá say as we pass a 985-SE billboard advertisement for Da? Da? Da? DA-EW?

**ĐIEU LÊ’S® HOME FOR THE ADDICTED**

**Commit yourself now if you’re addicted!**

and upon seeing the billboard Mama'll make the sign of the Holy Spirit and mumble something in Mother'sland tongue that sounds like a bunch of gluck ulck uluck glucking mixing with the heater's clattering, almost but not quite drowning out Granmamá's voice that'll be saying, "Your Granba would've died in vain, then. So I did the only thing reasonable...."

"Sent him back to Mother'sland," Mámá'll say, done glucking to herself now that we've passed the billboard. "And after Tang [now Thomas] graduated from high school she—"

"I'm capable of telling the story, Dear," Granmámá'll say.

"What's that? Can't hear you back there over the heat," Mámá'll say.

"I said, 'I'm capable of telling the story, Dear,'" Granmámá'll say louder.

"What?" Mámá'll say.

"Oh, nevermind. Where was I?" Granmámá'll say. "What else was I supposed to do? Keep a funny son single? What about having grandchildren? What about the grandchildren? Oh, wait"—Granmámá'll then lean forward and give one of my shoulders a really lazy massage. Then stop—"I don't mean you, Dear. You're fine. You came from your—well, at least your mom doesn't have the funny—hmmm...." Granmámá'll pretend to whisper at this point, "Well, at least she's functional," she'll say, giving me a wink while massaging one of my shoulders again all lazily until I tell her I've had enough.

And Mámá, upon hearing Granmámá, will turn the heating clatter down one level. "Thanks. I think you're 'functional,' too," Mámá'll say, putting air quotes around the word functional. Using whichever hand she won't be steering with when she says it.

"Can't hear you, Dear," Granmámá'll say, "Your heaters to loud, Dear."

And "Facts of life," Mámá'll say, turning the heater back up to its usual clattering self. "Your uncle didn't speak much of Mother'sland's tongue like your Granmámá and me," Mámá'll take over. "So he had to learn it once he got there. Couldn't go to college there if he couldn't speak the tongue, you know. I mean, what would be the

point if he couldn't—"

"So I had him stay with my sister," Granmámá'll say. "Because my sister still lives in Mother'sland."

"It's because she didn't make it to the planes on time when Mother'sland fell to the Comrades," Mámá'll say. "When the U.S. was still evacuating the people from the devastation caused by the Great Fall to the Comrades, you see."

"My sister never was good at planning ahead," Granmámá'll say. "Sometimes I wonder if she was born funny, too."

"Can't really plan ahead for something like that, Mámá," Mámá'll say, shaking her head, rolling her eyes in big circles at me like I care.

"I don't care," I'll say this year.

"And Tang [now Thomas] picked up the tongue so fast when he got there," Mámá'll say. "He learned the tongue in one, two, three—"

"Eight months, Dear."

"Wow!" Mámá'll say. "Just eight months?"

"Yes, Dear. It was amazing. Amazing."

"Certainly amazing," Mámá'll say under her breath. "Certainly amazing!"

And I'll look in the passenger sidemirror and I'll see the countenance of Granmámá's face and it'll be one of the "not amused" varieties.

"And my sister had this friend. And her friend had a daughter that was around Tang [now Thomas]'s age. Sweet girl. But a bit funny, too," Granmámá'll say.

"She couldn't stop blurting out dirty things randomly, Love," Mámá'll say. "It was all very inappropriate things, too. Things like—"

"Oh don't, Dear. Just Don't."

"He's a young man, now, Granmámá," Mámá'll say. "I think he's old enough to hear

the stuff that that girl said."

"Just don't, Dear."

"What would happen was she would say not so polite things about what happens when two people show each other their down theres," Mámá'll whisper. "Not polite things at all."

"And I said 'No Way,' to my sister," Granmámá'll say. "Even Tang [now Thomas] can do better." Granmámá'll then go quiet like she just had a vision of Holy Spirit and I'll see her again in the passenger sidemirror: crossing her arms over her chest and staring out onto the other lanes, to the tailgating Datsuns on the 985-SE freeway from our EDMFAFLIFRCSFPE™ Datsun's backseat Childproof FlexiPlex Glass™ Window™, all those other Datsuns on their way to their own Lunar New Year's Eve parties.

|  | MINUTES    |
|--|------------|
| MEDICAL PLAZA DISRICT                        | FOUR       |
| NINETEENTH AVENUE/APARTMENT HOUSING DISTRICT | ELEVEN     |
| THE NGOC THAI CENTER FOR TROUBLED ASIAN MEN  | TWENTYNINE |

"But who was I kidding," Granmámá'll say, breathing the same sigh she breathes out every year. "My sister was right. Didn't matter what form the funny came in because as long as you were funny you were cursed. And cursed is cursed. So I asked my sister if she was at least a pretty woman. 'But she has the funny vibes,' my sister said. 'Does it really matter?' And my sister was right again. It didn't really matter. Because funny was funny. Funny with funny. Funny loving funny," Granmámá'll say. "I mean, what if we couldn't find another girl with funny vibes to marry him? What then? I certainly didn't like that idea." Granmámá'll then make the sign of the Holiest Spirit again, but this time without saying Granba's name. "I say, always better to live with someone than die with no one like your Mámá. Isn't that right, Dear? Always making bad choices in life?"

"Nothing wrong with being a single business woman," Mámá'll say.

"Wrong, Dear. Completely wrong."

"Getting cold in here isn't it? I think I'm going to turn the heat up some more," Mámá'll say, trying to turn up the already fully-turned knob of the already full-

blasting heater.

“What about that boy that’s obsessed with you? What about Vinh-Paul [now Vinh]?” Granmámá’ll say. “He’s still calling me you know, every other day, leaving all sorts of messages on my answering tape for you, asking to speak with you. Practically fills up my tape so fast I don’t have enough room for my friends on the machine when they call.”

“Then why don’t you just answer that old cordless you still call a phone?” Mámá’ll say.

“Don’t change the subject, Dear. I don’t think so, Dear. It’s not like I’m in the mood to talk to anyone anyway. It’s just nice to know who’s called and calling. You know, I hear Vinh-Paul [now Vinh] has stock options.”

“I don’t think so,” Mámá’ll say. “He’s the same age as—is he one of your friends, Sweetie? I think he’s calling Granmámá number for you. Is he calling for you?”

“Whatever I said last year,” I’ll say this year.

“No, he’s calling for you, Dear,” Granmámá’ll say. “And age is only a number, Dear. I had to tell the same thing to Tang [now Thomas] after he called from Mother’sland complaining about the funny girl being too old.

‘Too old?’ I said.

‘Too old. Too dark. Too much. And you should see that nest on top of her head she calls hair,’ Tang [now Thomas] said. ‘It’s so black. All that black hair. Black black black black black—’ and Tang [now Thomas] would just go on and on about that hair. And ‘Holy Spirit,’ I said. ‘What’s in that Mother’sland water that’s made your funniness even worse?’” Granmámá’ll say. “So I had to do the only sensible thing and make sure he just married the girl before even *she* thought he was too funny for her. Could you imagine? *Her* thinking my Tang [now Thomas] was *too funny* for *her*? Since when did people with the funnies even think they had the right to judge someone anyway? And and and and and and—”

And the heater’ll still be making the same steady loud clatter and “What’s going on back there?” Mámá’ll say over the heating clatter. “What’s all that noise back there?”

"It's your heater, Dear," Granmámá'll say. "I'm glad you finally hear it. I've been asking you turn that thing off since we left the house."

"That's not it," Mámá'll say. "It sounds more like like like an old woman's rambling," Mámá'll say, laughing, looking at me. "Better get your head checked, Granmámá," Mámá'll say, laughing some more, winking at me like she just said something funny. "I think you're getting the symptoms."

"Symptoms? What symptoms, Dear? What are you talking about, Dear? No one likes it when you start acting funny, Dear. It's rude to your brother," Granmámá'll say.

And Mámá'll give her thinking/angry/"yeah right, I know what I heard" face again, except this time she'll say something. She'll look in the CFPGWEDMFAFLIFRCSFPE™ Datsun's rearview mirror for the first time since leaving the house. She'll look directly at Granmámá sitting in the backseat, and say, "No Granmámá

"Listen Granmámá

"You're making no sense Granmámá

"No one cares Granmámá

"Get over it Granmámá

"Granmámá

"Granmámá

"Granmámá—"

"Just just just just stop, Dear," Granmámá'll say. "You're giving me a headache with all of your funny clatter. You're making me feel so old with all your funny clatter."

"Facts of life, Granmámá," Mámá'll say. And then, then, *oh*, here it comes: all over again out of nowhere like some repressed memory that only comes out once every year during our drive to Uncle Tang [now Thomas]'s Lunar New Year's Eve Party.

"Like that TV show you didn't let me watch because you were afraid I'd turn out like that girl Jo-what's-her-face."

"I think you're getting a chill, Dear. I'm telling you, you should turn off that cold blasting heater."

"Facts of life, Granmamá," Mámá'll say.

"Why do you keep saying that, Dear? I really can't hear what you're saying, Dear."

"Facts. Of. Life. *Facts of Life Facts of Life Facts of Life Facts of Life.*"

"Hmmm...facts of? facts of? facts of? facts of *ohhh....* Are you still going on about that? Let it go, Dear. She wasn't normal. How would I have looked if I'd let my daughter watch a show about a girl with linear preferences? It's not like I really had a choice in the matter. Her name was Joe, for Spirits' sake. *Joe.*"

"Jo not Joe. Jo like short for Joanne Joan Joanna Joana Johanna Jo. Not Joe and not a girl with linear preferences."

"She had a mullet and rode a motorcycle, Dear. I've done my research. They hold parades for that sort of thing every year. Are those the kinds of people you wanted to be associated with growing up? To be be be be—"

"Unique! Her own woman!"

"Sure, Dear. Sure. Unique is a nice word for it. Well aren't you glad I saved you from being *Unique*, then? Saved you from—oh, wait.... Oh, dear.... Unless you *are* trying to tell me you're Unique. Dear, is your Mámá trying to tell me she's Unique? Dear, are you Unique? Dears, are either of you Unique?"

"Please don't involve me in this."

"Not what we're talking about, Granmámá," Mámá'll say. "Never at all what we're talking about."

"Why are you both getting so emotional? It isn't? Then what are we talking about? Oh, can't we all just have a regular conversation without you two getting all emotional for once? It's Lunar New Year's Eve for Spirits' sake." But Mámá won't say anything more and I won't care enough to say anything at all and Granmámá'll huff "Gluck uluck uluck gluck gluck" and I won't know what she's saying so I'll look out the window

"But who was I kidding," Granmámá'll say, breathing the same sigh she breathes out every year. "My sister was right. Didn't matter what form the funny came in because as long as you were funny you were cursed. And cursed is cursed. So I asked my sister if she was at least a pretty woman. 'But she has the funny vibes,' my sister said. 'Does it really matter?' And my sister was right again. It didn't really matter. Because funny was funny. Funny with funny. Funny loving funny," Granmámá'll say. "I mean, what if we couldn't find another girl with funny vibes to marry him? What then? I certainly didn't like that idea." Granmámá'll then make the sign of the Holiest Spirit again, but this time without saying Granba's name. "I say, always better to live with someone than die with no one like your Mámá. Isn't that right, Dear? Always making bad choices in life?"

"Nothing wrong with being a single business woman," Mámá'll say.

"Wrong, Dear. Completely wrong."

"Getting cold in here isn't it? I think I'm going to turn the heat up some more," Mámá'll say, trying to turn up the already fully-turned knob of the already full-blasting heater.

"What about that boy that's obsessed with you? What about Vinh-Paul [now Vinh]?" Granmámá'll say. "He's still calling me you know, every other day, leaving all sorts of messages on my answering tape for you, asking to speak with you. Practically fills up my tape so fast I don't have enough room for my friends on the machine when they call."

"Then why don't you just answer that old cordless you still call a phone?" Mámá'll say.

"Don't change the subject, Dear. I don't think so, Dear. It's not like I'm in the mood to talk to anyone anyway. It's just nice to know who's called and calling. You know, I hear Vinh-Paul [now Vinh] has stock options."

"I don't think so," Mámá'll say. "He's the same age as—is he one of your friends, Sweetie? I think he's calling Granmámá number for you. Is he calling for you?"

"Whatever I said last year," I'll say this year.

"No, he's calling for you, Dear," Granmámá'll say. "And age is only a number, Dear."



I had to tell the same thing to Tang [now Thomas] after he called from Mother'sland complaining about the funny girl being too old.

'Too old?' I said.

'Too old. Too dark. Too much. And you should see that nest on top of her head she calls hair,' Tang [now Thomas] said. 'It's so black. All that black hair. Black black black black black—' and Tang [now Thomas] would just go on and on about that hair. And 'Holy Spirit,' I said. 'What's in that Mother'sland water that's made your funniness even worse?'" Granmámá'll say. "So I had to do the only sensible thing and make sure he just married the girl before even *she* thought he was too funny for her. Could you imagine? *Her* thinking my Tang [now Thomas] was *too funny* for *her*? Since when did people with the funnies even think they had the right to judge someone anyway? And and and and and and—"

And the heater'll still be making the same steady loud clatter and "What's going on back there?" Mámá'll say over the heating clatter. "What's all that noise back there?"

"It's your heater, Dear," Granmámá'll say. "I'm glad you finally hear it. I've been asking you turn that thing off since we left the house."

"That's not it," Mámá'll say. "It sounds more like like like an old woman's rambling," Mámá'll say, laughing, looking at me. "Better get your head checked, Granmámá," Mámá'll say, laughing some more, winking at me like she just said something funny. "I think you're getting the symptoms."

"Symptoms? What symptoms, Dear? What are you talking about, Dear? No one likes it when you start acting funny, Dear. It's rude to your brother," Granmámá'll say.

And Mámá'll give her thinking/angry/"yeah right, I know what I heard" face again, except this time she'll say something. She'll look in the CFPGWEDMFAFLIFRCSFPE™ Datsun's rearview mirror for the first time since leaving the house. She'll look directly at Granmámá sitting in the backseat, and say, "No Granmámá

"Listen Granmámá

"You're making no sense Granmámá

"No one cares Granmámá

"Get over it Granmámá

"Granmámá

"Granmámá

"Granmámá—"

"Just just just just stop, Dear," Granmámá'll say. "You're giving me a headache with all of your funny clatter. You're making me feel so old with all your funny clatter."

"Facts of life, Granmámá," Mámá'll say. And then, then, *oh*, here it comes: all over again out of nowhere like some repressed memory that only comes out once every year during our drive to Uncle Tang [now Thomas]'s Lunar New Year's Eve Party. "Like that TV show you didn't let me watch because you were afraid I'd turn out like that girl Jo-what's-her-face."

"I think you're getting a chill, Dear. I'm telling you, you should turn off that cold blasting heater."

"Facts of life, Granmámá," Mámá'll say.

"Why do you keep saying that, Dear? I really can't hear what you're saying, Dear."

"Facts. Of. Life. *Facts of Life Facts of Life Facts of Life Facts of Life.*"

"Hmmm...facts of? facts of? facts of? facts of *ohhh*.... Are you still going on about that? Let it go, Dear. She wasn't normal. How would I have looked if I'd let my daughter watch a show about a girl with linear preferences? It's not like I really had a choice in the matter. Her name was Joe, for Spirits' sake. *Joe.*"

"Jo not Joe. Jo like short for Joanne Joan Joanna Joana Johanna Jo. Not Joe and not a girl with linear preferences."

"She had a mullet and rode a motorcycle, Dear. I've done my research. They hold parades for that sort of thing every year. Are those the kinds of people you wanted to be associated with growing up? To be be be be—"

“Unique! Her own woman!”

“Sure, Dear. Sure. Unique is a nice word for it. Well aren’t you glad I saved you from being *Unique*, then? Saved you from—oh, wait.... Oh, dear.... Unless you are trying to tell me you’re Unique. Dear, is your Mámá trying to tell me she’s Unique? Dear, are you Unique? Dears, are either of you Unique?”

“Please don’t involve me in this.”

“Not what we’re talking about, Granmámá,” Mámá’ll say. “Never at all what we’re talking about.”

“Why are you both getting so emotional? It isn’t? Then what are we talking about? Oh, can’t we all just have a regular conversation without you two getting all emotional for once? It’s Lunar New Year’s Eve for Spirits’ sake.” But Mámá won’t say anything more and I won’t care enough to say anything at all and Granmámá’ll huff “Gluck uluck uluck gluck gluck” and I won’t know what she’s saying so I’ll look out the window

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| THE NGOC THAI CENTER FOR TROUBLED ASIAN MEN  | TWENTYNINE |

and I’ll think about that funny girl that Uncle Tang [now Thomas] was supposed to marry but never did and about whether Mister Lê still has money left over from winning the Publisher’s Clearinghouse Sweekstakes and about Uncle Tang [now Thomas] again and about Granmámá and Mámá again and “I think I’m getting a bit cold back here, “Granmámá’ll say. “Dear, do you mind turning the heater up?” But Mámá will not turn the heater up but she will turn the heater off and all of the clattering will stop.

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Vinh-Paul Ha still doesn’t know if he should go by Vinh-Paul, Vinh Paul, Vinhpaul, or Vinh. Let him know what you think at [vinhpaulvinhpaulvinhpaulvinh@gmail.com](mailto:vinhpaulvinhpaulvinhpaulvinh@gmail.com).