

ONE FOOT IN, ONE FOOT OUT

VSA Culture Show 2017

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ACT I

SCENE THREE. UNBOXING THE ISSUES.

EXT. AMERICA ELEMENTARY SCHOOL ENTRANCE - MORNING

MAI HO, a short, Vietnamese woman in her thirties, clad in a T-shirt and jeans, walks her first child, THUY TIEN, to school. Five-year-old THUY TIEN HO is wearing pigtails, an oversized T-shirt, faded jeans, and a pink Barbie backpack. The two stop by the school sign DOWNSTAGE RIGHT.

MAI

Con oi, minh toi roi. Con di vo di.
(Honey, we've arrived. Go on
inside.)

THUY TIEN

(wavering)
You're not coming with me?

MAI

Khong duoc. Me phai di lam. (I
can't. I have to go to work.)

THUY TIEN

Can't I go to work with you, me?

MAI

Con oi, ba me di lam cuc kho lam.
Neu con khong muon giong ba me thi
con phai co gang hoc hanh. (Honey,
work is very hard for us. If you
don't want to be like us, you have
to focus on school.)

THUY TIEN

Okay, me! I'll do well in school
and one day buy a big house for you
and ba!

MAI

(shakes head)
Me khong can con lam gi cho me. Me
co dua con ngoan la me vui lam roi.
(I don't need you to do anything
for me. I'm happy just to have such
a good daughter.)
(kisses THUY TIEN on the
forehead)

THUY TIEN
(hugs MAI for a few
seconds before finally
letting go)

MAI
Con co dem theo hop com trua khong?
(Did you bring your lunchbox?)

THUY TIEN
Yes, me. It's in my backpack!
(sets backpack down and
takes out a plastic
grocery bag filled with
Tupperware to prove it's
there)

MAI
Con phai an cho het nhe de co suc
khoe de cham chi hoc hanh. (Make
sure to eat it all so that you'll
have the energy to learn.)

THUY TIEN
(giggling)
Of course I'll eat it all, me! Your
food is yummy!

MAI
Vay thi me an tam. Bay gio me di ve
de chuan bi di lam. Con ngoan nghe
loi thay co nhe. (Then I'm
relieved. Now I'm going to go home
to get ready for work. You be good
and listen to your teachers, okay?)

THUY TIEN
Don't worry, me! I'll be good! Have
fun at work!
(hugs MAI one last time
before skipping away and
exiting UPSTAGE LEFT)

MAI
(waves goodbye until THUY
TIEN is out of sight then
exits STAGE RIGHT)

FADE TO BLACK.

INT. SCHOOL CAFETERIA - LUNCHTIME

A school bell rings in the background. THUY TIEN clutches her lunch bag tightly as she enters the cafeteria from STAGE LEFT. She recognizes JESSICA and TIFFANY, a couple of White girls from her class sitting at a table CENTER STAGE, and she looks at them nervously. Slowly, she approaches the table. The girls stop their conversation immediately and peer curiously at THUY TIEN.

THUY TIEN
Hi... Can I sit here?

JESSICA
(glances at TIFFANY)
Um... Sure. I'm Jessica, but you
can call me Jess.

TIFFANY
(glances back at JESSICA)
I'm Tiffany, but I go by Tiff.

THUY TIEN
Nice to meet you. My name is Thuy
Tien.

TIFFANY
Huh? What did you say?

THUY TIEN
Thuy Tien.

JESSICA
(slowly)
Twee Thing?

THUY TIEN
No, it's Thuy Tien.

TIFFANY
How do you spell it?

THUY TIEN
Spell?

JESSICA
Like with the alphabet.
(smugly)
My mom taught me the alphabet when
I was three.

THUY TIEN
Oh... I don't know what that is.

JESSICA
Oh, it's reaaaally easy! You just
sing the song!
A-B-C-D-E-F-G-H-I-J-K-elemenopee-

TIFFANY
(abruptly)
Okay, Jess. We all know you're the
alphabet queen. But what about her
name?

JESSICA
Sorry, I get carried away
sometimes. Hmm... Your name's too
hard to say. Let's just call you
Tweety, like that yellow bird from
that old cartoon.

THUY TIEN looks down at her lap.

THUY TIEN
But that's not my name...

TIFFANY
Think of it as a nickname! Like how
I go by Tiff and she goes by Jess!

THUY TIEN
Okay... I guess that's fine.

JESSICA
Okay, let's eat! I'm starving!

JESSICA and TIFFANY simultaneously pull out Lunchables from
their matching, brown paper bags.

TIFFANY
Jess! Oh, my God! Your mom let you
get the Nachos Lunchables? She only
lets me get the Cracker Stackers.

JESSICA
Yeah, it's actually really good! My
mom says she wants me to be more
cultured. Whatever that means.

THUY TIEN starts to pull out her container filled with rice,
fish, and cha bong. As soon as she opens the container, the
girls immediately cover their noses, making unpleasant faces
at the container that Thuy Tien is holding.

JESSICA
(repulsed)
(MORE)

JESSICA (CONT'D)

Ewww! What is that?

TIFFANY

Oh, my God... I think I'm going to throw up.

THUY TIEN

It's rice and fish with some cha bong.

JESSICA

Ugh, gross. Isn't fish supposed to be like white or pink?

TIFFANY

Yeah, at my house, we only eat pink fish. I think it's called salmon.

JESSICA

Yeah, what kind of fish is that? Oh, my God... Are you eating baby fishies?

THUY TIEN

No, I think this is just a different kind of fish.

TIFFANY

Baby fish killer!

THUY TIEN

I didn't kill them!

JESSICA

And what is that hairy stuff in the corner?

TIFFANY

Yeah, that looks like what my cat Mr. Potato coughs up in the morning.

JESSICA

Aww... Your cat is really cute!

TIFFANY

I know, right?

THUY TIEN

It's cha bong. I don't know what it is exactly, but it's really good! You want to try some?

JESSICA
No, thanks. How can you eat
something without knowing what it
is?

TIFFANY
My mom only feeds me REAL food.

TIFFANY holds up respective components of her stacker for
emphasis.

TIFFANY
Like REAL ham and REAL cheese and
REAL crackers.

JESSICA
Yeah, I feel kind of sorry for you,
Tweety. Our moms would never feed
us anything that gross.

THUY TIEN stares at her lunch teary-eyed.

JESSICA
Well, since you're our friend now,
you can have some of my nachos.

JESSICA pushes her Nachos Lunchables box towards THUY TIEN.

TIFFANY
And you can have one of my Oreos!

TIFFANY hands THUY TIEN an Oreo.

THUY TIEN
(quietly)
Thank you.

The bell then rings, signaling the end of lunch period.
JESSICA, TIFFANY, and extras immediately get up to throw
away their trash and start to rush out of the cafeteria
towards STAGE RIGHT. Before the two girls exit, they turn
back to THUY TIEN, who is still sitting at the table.

JESSICA
Hurry up, Tweety! It's time for
recess! We'll wait for you at the
tire swing!

JESSICA and TIFFANY exit STAGE RIGHT. THUY TIEN slowly walks
up to the trash can with her food. With a pained expression
on her face, she dumps the food her mom had prepared for
her. She clutches her stomach briefly before turning to face
the exit STAGE RIGHT.

FADE TO BLACK.

INT. THE HO HOUSE KITCHEN - AFTERNOON

The kitchen of the Ho house features a nondescript dining table and chairs/benches STAGE CENTER as well as a backdrop of kitchen counters and appliances UPSTAGE for the sake of our budget.

The dining table that most likely won't be an actual dining table is adorned with a tacky, floral tablecloth printed at the Engineering Design Center because tablecloths are hella expensive too. A ceramic tea set and a bamboo plant sit uncomfortably at the table as if they are aware of their purpose of conveying to the audience that this is an Asian residence.

THUY TIEN is sitting at the table eating Calbee Shrimp Chips when MAI walks in from STAGE RIGHT.

MAI

Tai sao con cu an vat hoai vay? Me da noi me nau com sap xong roi, nhung neu con tiep tuc an vat thi lam sao con co bung de an com? (Why do you keep snacking? I said I'm almost done cooking, but if you keep eating like that, how are you going to have room for dinner?)

THUY TIEN

No, I can't wait that long. I'm really, really hungry.

MAI

Doi con khi! Moi ngay sau khi tan hoc may cu keu doi, nen toi hom qua tao nau them de cho may co du do an hom nay. (Hungry, my ass! Every day after school you complain about being hungry, so last night I cooked more so you would have enough to eat today.)

THUY TIEN

I know you packed more food today... I did eat it all, but I'm still hungry.

MAI grabs THUY TIEN's arm and "pinches down" on her bones

MAI

Thiet khong? Vay thi sao may cang ngay cang om? (Really? Then why are you getting skinnier every day?)

THUY TIEN silently her eats chips while trying not to cry.

MAI

Bo may bi diec ha? Tra loi me! (Are you deaf? Answer me!)

THUY TIEN

(mumbling)

...I didn't eat all of it.

MAI

Tao khong hieu. May an khong no, nhung may lai an khong het? (I don't understand. You weren't full, yet you didn't finish your food?)

THUY TIEN

(weeps while continuing to eat chips)

MAI

THUY TIEN!

THUY TIEN

(standing up)

Well, maybe if you cooked me NORMAL food that everyone else eats, then I would actually eat it!

MAI

(taken aback)

...May noi gi? (...What did you say?)

THUY TIEN

Me, your food is gross! Everyone looks at my food and thinks I'm eating bugs or something. They think I'm a freak! Do you know how it feels to be the only one in the whole school not eating American food?

MAI

Minh la nguoi Viet! Ho an gi mac mo gi den minh? (We're Vietnamese. Why should what they eat matter to us?)

(MORE)

MAI (CONT'D)

THUY TIEN
(less forceful halfway
through, as if she
realizes too late it is
the wrong thing to say)
Then I wish we weren't Vietnamese!

THUY TIEN sits down and averts her eyes from her mother's.
MAI is silent as well, staring at the ground trying to
process this information.

MAI
(quietly)
...Vi vay may nhin doi ha?
(...Because of that you've been
starving yourself?)

THUY TIEN
(still looking away from
MAI)
...Yes, but my friends give me a
little bit of their food.

MAI
Bao lau roi? (How long has it
been?)

THUY TIEN
...Two months.

MAI
(pacing around)
Oi, troi, troi, troi... Bao nhieu
cong trinh cua minh uong phi vo
cung. Cai con nay kho oi la kho!
ANH OI! (Dear God... All my hard
work gone to waste. This girl is so
naive! PHUC!)

PHUC HO walks in from STAGE RIGHT.

PHUC
You called? What's all the
commotion?

MAI
(pointing at THUY TIEN)
Anh lai giai quyet dung cho em di.
Em met moi lam roi.

MAI storms off STAGE RIGHT. PHUC watches her leave then turns to look at THUY TIEN and takes the seat next to hers.

PHUC
(calmly)
Now what did you do to make your
mom so angry?

THUY TIEN
...I haven't been eating my lunch.
But it's because all the kids at
school make fun of me! I just want
to be normal.

PHUC
What do your friends eat?

THUY TIEN
Lunchables.

PHUC
Are those the boxes of food that
you can get from the grocery store?

THUY TIEN
Yeah.

PHUC
(smiling)
I think they're just jealous.

THUY TIEN
What would they be jealous of? They
think my food is yucky.

PHUC
That your food is made with love.
Your mom stays up really late to
pack your lunch, you know.

THUY TIEN
(glum)
...I bet she hates me now.

PHUC
Your mom doesn't hate you.

PHUC wraps an arm around THUY TIEN's shoulders.

PHUC
She just doesn't understand you.
She hasn't lived in America as long
as I have. She grew up in Saigon,
(MORE)

PHUC (CONT'D)
where everyone was just like her.

THUY TIEN
That must have been nice.

PHUC
I understand you want to feel
normal, but being different isn't
bad. It makes you special.

THUY TIEN frowns and shifts in her seat.

PHUC
What? You don't believe me?

THUY TIEN shakes her head vigorously. PHUC laughs.

PHUC
Well, anyway, you shouldn't be
starving yourself. If you really
want to fit in, I can ask your mom
to make you sandwiches instead?

THUY TIEN nods her head vigorously. PHUC laughs again and
kisses her on the forehead.

PHUC
I guess I should tell her to do the
same for Kevin as well once he's
old enough to go to school.

THUY TIEN
Thanks, dad. You're the best.

PHUC leans in closely, eyeing STAGE RIGHT.

PHUC
Shhh... Don't let your mom hear
that! She'll get even angrier!

THUY TIEN laughs and hugs PHUC around his belly.

FADE TO BLACK.

ACT II

SCENE ONE. BURSTING BUBBLES

INT. TEXTILE FACTORY - DAY

The curtain opens, revealing MAI's workplace, a textile factory. The factory features a long assembly table, three uncomfortably-looking, metal chairs, three sewing machines, and an assortment of fabrics sprawled over the table like a reluctant orgy.

A bluish-white light is cast on the table, where Mai and her two Vietnamese co-workers, ROSE (formerly Hong) and LILY (formerly Hue), are already sitting and hard at work.

Their supervisor, KEN, enters from STAGE RIGHT with a serious look on his face.

KEN

Mai, what's wrong? You normally work so fast. You're one of my best employees!

MAI

S-s-sorry, sir...my husband die. My son sick. My daughter just start high school. I try my best.

KEN

My, my, my. Your name is very fitting, Mai. It's always about you, isn't it?

Mai starts to tear up.

KEN

(sighing)

Look, when I found out about your husband, I gave you a few weeks off. Now what do you want me to do? What do you want?

MAI

N-n-nothing, sir. I work faster, okay?

KEN

That's what I like to hear! Keep it up, Mai. You do good work.

(turning to Rose and Lily)

(MORE)

You two are doing a great job, too!

MAI
Thank you, sir.

Ken exits STAGE LEFT, looking pleased with himself.

LILY
Mai, I'm so sorry.

MAI
(sobs)

ROSE
Don't worry, Mai. Ken not mad, he
just worry. He love you, honey.

LILY
You funny, Rose.

ROSE
You think I joke? The white men,
they love Asian. We work hard. Not
like the black and Mexican.

LILY
Ih, you right. You see the news
last night?

ROSE
No, last night, I watch K-Drama.
What happen?

LILY
Black man kidnap girl at school. No
one find her.

MAI
(alert)
What?

ROSE
Troi dat oi!

LILY
I know. I see it on news all the
time. So scary.

ROSE
That why I happy, I have two boy,
no girl. Healthy.

LILY

Mai, your daughter. How she get home?

MAI

She take bus now...

LILY

Oi troi oi. So dangerous! And she in high school now? Tsk, tsk, tsk.

ROSE

My son in high school now too. So they same age. Is your daughter pretty? Maybe we can be in-law!

LILY

Rose, you talk too much.

MAI

I don't want her to take bus, but I have to work. What do I do?

ROSE

My son big boy. He can protect her.

LILY

Maybe if your daughter go with friend. Go alone big trouble.

MAI

(sighs)

FADE TO BLACK.