

Writing Portfolio

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Social/ Cultural Storytelling



Between Pages and Countries

During the 18th Annual Savannah Book Festival, Iranian-born novelist Marjan Kamali revisited her love for reading, feminism, and Persian roots to understand what it truly means to be “American”

Marjan Kamali, 54, knew two truths by the time she was ten: first, that she was lucky to see the sunlight in Iran with her family after 1980; second, that classic novels had inspired her. “That was when I found home,” Kamali said. “I found a sense of belonging in books and reading.”

The idea of home had always felt foreign, much like John F. Kennedy Airport did when she first landed in 1982. Born to Iranian parents in Turkey in 1970, Kamali has lived in seven countries across five continents, following her father’s diplomatic postings. In 1980, her family returned to Tehran. “At the ripe age of nine, I witnessed the overthrow of the last Iranian shah, the false promise of democracy, and the Iran-Iraq conflict. It was more than eye-opening.”

It was eye-opening in an unorthodox and accidental way. Kamali grew up reading English literature when Iran promoted a

Western-forward education system. As the bombs of Saddam Hussein rained down, her family hid in their basement. “My mom kept toys, papers, and books,” she said. “Lots and lots of books.” Despite her love for reading, her older sister still worried that Kamali might forget English. “She demanded that I write book reports so she could grade them. I thought, ‘Why would I do that?’” Kamali would later thank her sister in silence at night. She didn’t know writing book reports in a basement was her first writing lesson. She also shared her love for reading with a girl next door. “I would show her my book collection in the bunker: Jane Austen, Charlotte Bronte,” she said. She was the only friend that Kamali had. “And I left for the US without saying goodbye.” On the plane, Kamali made two promises to herself: to write for her sister and to live for her friend.

Those two long years have shaped Kamali’s literary vision — and she needed to share her stories with the world. In 1989, she moved from Forest Hills, Queens, to attend UC Berkeley. Soon after college, she lost trust in herself as a writer. “I didn’t think I would make any money as a writer,” she said. “So I went to business school.” Back in New York, at Columbia University, the writer and her two years in Iran began to fade. She committed to a more pragmatic life.

Although her first job was as an administrative assistant in a lab,

Kamali was able to hold on to her love for writing. At her job, besides helping the Dean manage his spreadsheets, she got to curate stories for a startup magazine. “My Dean said that I was an amazing writer,” she said. “He told me to never give up writing.” But when she asked him if she could double major in business and writing, the answer was no.



Photo courtesy of Shahine on Unsplash

And yet that didn't stop her. "So I applied to NYU," Kamali said. "Waitlisted at first. But finally got in." She was living a double life. In the morning, she drew graphs and analyzed numbers. In the afternoon, she imagined and composed sentences. "My college friends asked me if I was crazy. I said that's just two sides of surviving." The crazier thing was that she got pregnant twice during her college years. "After I graduated, we moved to Australia for my husband's work. I was a stay-at-home mom for seven years. There was nothing to do." But write.

Her debut novel, and Massachusetts Book Award Finalist, *Together Tea* (2013) explored the relationship between an Iranian-American mother and daughter. Mina, the daughter, detested the idea of marriage, while her mother, Darya, ranked every boy her daughter talked to with spreadsheets. After all the failed matchmaking attempts, the family moved to Iran, where Mina fell for a boy who ranked lowest on her mother's spreadsheet. Kamali took inspiration from her days at Columbia Business School. "It was a painful job at 'math camp,'" she said. "And I hated spreadsheets. But one day at home, I marveled at how much they could do. Here comes my first novel."

Her second novel, *The Stationery Shop* (2019), became an international bestseller. Set in 1953 Iran, the book followed Roya, an

idealistic teenage girl who fell in love with Bahman, a principled young man she met at a local bookshop. Even when interrupted by the political unrest, Roya's longing lingered as she pursued education in California and settled in New England. The novel raised questions of cultural identity and personal sacrifice. And as always, somewhere in the narrative stood a mother figure.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Kamali stepped out of the shower on Tuesday to the chime of her phone. It was an Instagram message from her childhood best friend in Iran. Kamali learned that the woman had been working for a human rights organization. With trembling hands, she turned on the TV. She saw women with exposed hair and faces pouring onto the streets of Tehran, holding banners that read: "Women. Life. Freedom." "I don't even know what to say," she said. "They are tired. They have been tired."

In that moment, the female figure in her fiction became even more substantial. She turned off the TV, kissed her husband goodnight, and went to her office. That night, she began working on her latest novel, *Lion Women of Tehran* (2024).

Kamali's process was simple. "I watch books, music, films from the era," she said. "But I also ask my mom a lot of questions. It was an excuse to talk to her." She scanned through the audience as a woman asked how she wrote such rich male characters, even when

her novels center on women. “Thank you to all the gentlemen for coming to my talk. I just find women more interesting.”

“Historical fiction is about telling the truth,” Kamali said. “And it’s not about who won on what date. It’s about how history makes people feel.” Her truth was that she was lucky enough to write novels about being a mother and talk about them without fear in front of five hundred women who cared about the safety of other women around the world. That to her was American. “Most Iranian women,” she said, “never know safety.”



Carried in Silk

Photo courtesy of BB Ngo on Unsplash

The first time I wore áo dài was when my nanny put it on me for a family photoshoot. I was six. My family drove two motorbikes — my dad and brother were on one, my mother, nanny, and I were on the other. The midday sun poured lava on us. I told my nanny that the brocade smelled like saliva. She said, “This is expensive. This is silk.” The photographer told me to pose as a noble and my brother as my fisherman. After that, my parents joined in. While we were laughing and smiling at each other’s awkward poses, my nanny sat on the bench in the corner of the studio, folding our jeans.

Her name was Chí, but I called her Vú, which in Vietnamese means a woman’s breast in a childlike and loving way. After the war, nannies often breastfed babies when the mother could not provide enough milk. Vú was ten years older than my mom and came from the Mekong region. We knew her from Aunt Kathy’s husband, a Cantonese man with a gambling addiction and a lot of money. When Vú heard about Aunt Kathy’s plane ticket to the United States, she panicked. Two days later, she offered to help my mom during her first pregnancy for a little less.

Like most Vietnamese, Vú had at least one áo dài. Hers was dark purple, almost pitch black, with a lotus lined with pearls on the lower part of the tunic and a crew neck for comfort. The first time I saw her in an áo dài was at my brother's eighth birthday party at a seafood restaurant downtown, where the bigger the size of the family, the higher the status. Vú paired her áo dài with ruby sandals with faux rhinestones on the straps — the one my brother and I bought for her on our trip to Malaysia (our aunt gave us 100 ringgits to spend at the night market before our flight. We used 70 for her sandals. On the bus to the airport, she cried because no one bought gifts for her mother, not even her kids. I felt guilty and bought my grandmother a keychain at the airport). Big and happy families, like ours, filled the restaurant's lobbies. The other dads showed off their muscles with skin-tight pants, polos — Korean style, and big watches. The women wore floral dresses or skirts with Mary Jane flats. At our table, Vú talked about the same story that she told at every family dinner: the one time I peed myself in kindergarten, the day my mother gave birth to my brother, and the pink bathtub that she bought for me. When she opened the crab, she put some meat in my bowl, looked around, and suddenly went to the restroom. Vú returned with a napkin and placed it on her knees. She pulled her chair closer to the table, letting the tablecloth fall over her robe. Vú

didn't talk until we were home. That was our family's last night out with her in Ho Chi Minh City. A year later, when we were about to leave for our cousin's birthday, I asked if she was coming.

“My back hurts too much,” she said.

“Why?” I said, dragging my voice. “Drink more milk.”

I left her a cup of milk on the kitchen island and jumped into the car.

It took me only five years to realize that Vú was the only one wearing áo dài in the restaurant that night.

Vú grew up in Trà Vinh but loved Ho Chi Minh City more than her hometown. While my Ho Chi Minh City was ten-year-old kids who only had one arm selling lottery tickets, Q-tips, and peanuts to businessmen, hers was still Saigon, where she could ride her bike without a ruck puncturing the tires. Her only critique was that Saigon had become more expensive, but it was only to start a conversation rather than an argument. Every chance she had, she would invite her kids to the city. Her first daughter, Diễm An, came to work for us when my brother was born. After three years, Diễm An got married at Vú's home in Trà Vinh. She invited us without a card.

When our family arrived, the thick haze from the grilled pork

welcomed us. We found Vú in the kitchen, squatting in her purple áo dài and cracking the coconuts for the juice. She gave each of us a glass.

“Sit at the gift table while I help Vú clean the kitchen,” my mom said.

Sweat dripped from my armpit to the split of my áo dài. I finished my coconut juice in half an hour and searched for Vú when nature called.

“I want to poopoo,” I said, pulling her tunic.

“I’m busy as hell,” Vú said as she wiped the sweat on her forehead. “Come on.”

She walked me to a boat in the backyard, untied it from a coconut tree, and rowed down the canal. We arrived at what looked like a platform built over a pond, with metal sheets raised to waist level. Vú took off my áo dài, stood behind me, and laughed as I squatted.

Two years later, when Diễm An opened a café, her younger daughter, Thuỳ An, came to help her. Every Tet, she took my brother and me to Vú’s house, where the government had installed a toilet and tiles. My life switched from sleeping on a mattress in an air-conditioned room to a pallet under a mosquito net and a thatched roof. My brother slept with Thuỳ An. I slept with Vú. And when she woke up

at four to light the kitchen fire with coconut husks, I would follow her. At six, she took me to the market, where the stench of fish and chicken blood plagued the air, on her bike.

“You sit here and finish your breakfast while I grab some fish,” she said. “Want something to drink?”

“I want to come,” I said.

“But you don’t like the smell of fish.”

I turned away.

“Come,” she said.

As we trudged through the vendors, buying mustard greens, papaya, and sugar cane juice, mud crept onto my sandals and into my toenails.

“You want new sandals?” Vú said.

“No,” I said.

“You were tiptoeing.”

On our way home, we stopped at a shoe vendor.

“Which one?” Vú said.

“I want blue,” I said.

“They’re too small.”

I looked at Vú’s pink flip flops turning into the color of clay and felt like crying.

“Let’s get the brown one,” Vú said to the vendor.

She bent down, took my muddy sandals from my feet, and slipped them into a plastic bag. I put on my new sandals.

In the afternoon, Vú would show me how to lure catfish with a duck. Then I would make her tag along with me when I flew a kite in the rice field next to her house. At night, I would sell Pepsi and Red Bull while dealing cards. I spent seven days a year soaking in the smell of fish, shooing away mosquitoes, and dodging cow's poop on the road. Then, five days. Then three. Then Vú's son ran away to sea from a gambling debt, and I stopped visiting.

Our family moved to a new house when I was twelve. It was three times bigger than our rented one. The second and third floor was lined entirely with Hinoki wood. One afternoon, when I came home from school, I heard my dad complaining to Vú about the dirty floor.

“You gotta mop along the grains of the woods,” my dad said. “It's still full of dust.”

“My back hurts,” Vú said. “There's some papaya in the kitchen. You eat and I'll mop the floor.”

The same conversations went on for a year, but there was never an argument. Only the jokes and stories at family dinners became shorter and sparser. My dad and Vú came up with a cleaning

schedule. On days when I didn't have homework, I would help her mop the floor so she could finish her job on time. I thought working less would put less strain on her back. One afternoon, after my piano lesson, my dad took Vú to the hospital.

Her bed lay next to a window with a view of my elementary school. Her skin reeked of eucalyptus oil.

“When can you come home?” I asked when I snuck onto her bed.

“The doctor said tomorrow night,” she said. “But I can walk now. The medication works.”

I stood by the rail and watched the IV.

“Vú, eat this,” my brother said as he handed her the congee that we bought on our way to the hospital.

“You don't have to do that,” Vú said. “Have you had dinner?”

“No,” I said.

She wrapped her palm on my thigh.

“I'm going home to Trà Vinh,” Vú said. “Diễm An is pregnant again. Ngọc is going to kindergarten.”

That night, I excused myself from dinner and did my homework. Before bed, I went to see if Vú's áo dài was still in her closet.

We came to visit Vú when her second daughter got married. We found Vú in the same áo dài, carrying ice in the same kitchen.

“Two done,” my mom said. “Two more to go.”

“Ooh. I don’t know what they’ll do,” Vú said. “But I’m beat.”

“Lucky me, I only have two,” my mom said. “When will these bums get married?”

“Tell your mom, ‘Whatever will be, will be,’” Vú said to me.

“You look good,” my mom said. “A few years younger.”

“Look at my belly fat,” Vú said. “Where’s your áo dài?”

“It’s too hot,” I said.

Sweat darkened the seam under Vú’s armpit.

“I run around all day and I still wear mine,” Vú said.

I frowned.

“Help Vú carry the ice,” my mom said.

That was the last time we saw Vú on her feet.

I never knew the disease that Vú had was called osteoporosis until we visited her when I was 19. I’ve only heard of it in commercials and had to read about it on my phone. Vú had been lying on the same bamboo mat for the past five years. She only got up to help her daughter pick the dead leaves off the mustard greens to sell at the morning market. Her shin was protruding from her sagging skin.

“Let me see,” Vú said as her hands slid on my cheeks. My mom told her that I’d had work done to my face. “What have you got

“A laser peel,” I said. “You don’t have to sit up.”

“You’re already so pretty,” she said. “Why would you need anything done?”

I sipped my water.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t cook anything,” Vú said. “My back hurts so much I can’t walk.”

Vú had had three cages in her spine to replace the shrunken bones. But she still moaned every time she shifted her weight.

“I still keep your bedsheets and bathtub,” she said as she pointed to the ceiling.

The bedsheets I had when I was five were distorted Tom & Jerry figures on a striped background. Vú used it to soak up the water that leaked from the roof. In the backyard, next to the coconut husks, clothes filled the pink bathtub she bathed me in when I was two. There was a line where soapy water had worn the bathtub lighter.

Her first daughter, Diễm An, came from the back door, carrying a basket of mustard greens. Gray hair poked through her pajamas. She had turned forty last month.

“Oh. You’re so handsome,” Diễm An said as she traced her wet hands on my hair and kissed it. “How’s your job?”

“He makes a thousand a month,” my mom said. “About 25 million.”

Diễm An placed her mustard greens on the table.

“That’s what I made in five years,” she said, wiping her tears.

She took my mom by her arms and dragged her to the door.

“Don’t let Vú get too emotional. The doctor said her heart is getting weaker, too.” she whispered.

My mom sipped her green tea. Her eyes were red. My dad excused himself to check out the papaya farm.

Vú slept in the kitchen because it was easy for her to grab water. I wandered into her bedroom, now her grandkids’, and opened the closet. The purple áo dài hung on a distorted hanger. The dust had collected on the pearls. But it still smelled like saliva. On the bottom of the closet, the ruby sandals sparkled. Lying next to them were the brown sandals that she bought me.

Last summer, my mother and I made a one-hour drive to an áo dài shop 7 miles away from our home (my mom was afraid of driving among motorbikes in Ho Chi Minh City; we could’ve taken the bike, but I didn’t want to be in the sun). I saw a kid with one arm selling lottery tickets on the streets — something unmistakably and tragically Saigon. Then I thought of Trà Vinh: the fish, the rice field, the cows. It was like looking at a dreamlike painting: pleasurable, nostalgic, solemn, and dignified. Somehow, the thought of me

living there again made me want to vomit.

“Do you like this shade of blue?” my mom said. “It makes your skin brighter.”

I wanted a traditional áo dài — the one made out of three or four layers of silk that twirled in the wind when I walk, with no shoulder seam, and loose around the waist. I arrived, tried it on, and paid. There was no pressure. For the first time, I craved the silk that hugged my chest. I craved the button that poked my armpit. I craved the parting that showed my waist. My privilege was getting to choose áo dài among polos, jeans, and suits. For most Vietnamese, like Vú, áo dài was never an option. It was the only extravagance they knew.

Bug in a Bottle

There was a linden tree in the yard of the orphanage. In its shade was a green bench the color of jade. Sitting there was holy. And so Tam and Cherry sat next to each other, admiring the sunset. Pom was sweeping the leaves in front of them.

Two months ago, Pom and Tam sat backwards on that same bench. They were watching a praying mantis crawling on the linden's root.

“It looks so,” Pom said, “gross.”

“Catch it,” Tam said.

“Ew.”

Tam bent down over the bench and put his thumb in front of the mantis. When it crawled from his thumb to his wrist, he pinched its body with his other hand. Pom marveled at his best friend.

Tam hovered the mantis in Pom's eyes.

Pom jumped. “Get it away from me,” he said.

Tam laughed.

“I'll keep it as a pet,” Tam said.

“But I found it first,” Pom said.

“But you’re not brave enough to catch it.”

“That’s not fair.”

“Fine. Let’s share it.”

Pom ran across the yard and into the house. He returned with an empty water bottle and a pair of scissors. He cut a few small holes in the bottle and put some dirt inside. He gave the bottle to Tam, who opened the cap and let the mantis crawl inside.

“We should name it,” Tam said, watching Pom pick up a linden leaf. “They don’t eat leaf, dummy.”

“For habitat,” Pom said.

He placed the leaf inside the bottle.

“What about Gink?” Pom said.

“That’s lame,” Tam said. “Kitty?”

“But it’s not a cat.”

“That’s the point. Because I want a cat, and we can’t have a cat.”

“But Gink sounds cute.”

“Fine, then. Hi Gink.”

Pom got lost looking at Tam, who was playing with Gink. And because of that, Pom smiled. He was happy that the world around Tam had become unimportant in the moment. He was happy that Tam had forgotten that there was a guy who had been growing up with him for fourteen years, sitting next to him. He was even happier

that Tam listened to him.

Pom remembered Gink on his windowsill and swept harder. The sound of leaves rustling under his broom interrupted the conversation between Tam and Cherry.

“Pom,” Tam said. “I think you should come join us.”

Pom looked up from the ground to his best friend and Cherry, said nothing, and continued sweeping.

“Pom. Come on,” Tam said, turning to Cherry. “He’s quiet but he’s super clean and super thoughtful. He can help your parents with housework. See, he’s sweeping the yard right now.”

“I’m only on duty, Tam,” Pom said.

“But I think it would be very cool if we became three siblings,” Cherry said. “Have you guys been to the mall? We can all go to the mall together and play bowling.”

“Yes. Wait. They have bowling in the mall?” Tam said.

Pom swept the leaves into the dustpan and walked a little farther away from Tam and Cherry. He heard a shout from outside the gate.

“My parents are here,” Cherry said. “But maybe I’ll come next Wednesday after school.”

Pom stopped sweeping to look at Cherry hugging her mom outside the gate. When she jumped into the car, Pom realized that his hand

“Come on, Pom,” Tam yelled from the bench and walked to where Pom was standing.

“I truly think this is our only chance,” Tam said. “I’ve always wanted a family.”

Pom looked up. “Aren’t we kind of like a family already?”

“I mean family family. Like parents and siblings.”

“But Su Mun is like our dad. And Su Han is our mom. If you think about it.”

“I don’t know.”

Pom continued walking as he heard Tam’s footsteps fading away. He wanted to say that he could be Tam’s brother, at least. Though he felt at ease that he didn’t.

The sky had turned a soft navy blue by the time Pom finished sweeping the yard. He walked to the kitchen, propped the broom and dustpan against a wall, and dipped his feet in the water bucket. It took him longer than usual to wash them. When Pom entered the kitchen, the steam that smelled like boiled carrots evaporated from a pot. The dying light crept through the window’s crack. There was a bowl of silkworms on the wooden table. It was at this table that Tam told Su Mun about Gink. The monk smiled for five seconds with his lips but not his eyes or cheeks. A month ago, Su Mun asked Pom

after he came home from school, “So, who takes care of Gink?”

“We share,” Pom said with a lollipop in his mouth. “I feed him from Monday to noon on Thursday. Tam feeds him from Thursday night to the end of Sunday.”

Pom lifted the cover of each pot he saw in the kitchen.

“Su Mun, where are the worms?” he said.

“Today is Friday,” Su Mun said.

“Tam will be home late. He is playing soccer. So I’ll take care of Gink for one more day.”

Pom poured himself a glass of water.

“He asked me,” Pom said.

“The worms are in the yellow plastic bag on the table.”

Pom grabbed a bowl and scooped the worms.

“Thank you. But Su Mun, why do you always ask me about Gink but never Tam?”

“Pom, it’s because I see you more than him.”

“You’re right, Su Mun.”

Pom laughed and threw his lollipop in the trash can.

“Don’t get too attached,” Su Mun said and slurped his tea.

Pom stopped in the doorway.

“To Gink,” Su Mun said. “Animals have souls. They’re mortal, too. Right?”

Pom shrugged and walked away.

Lately, Pom noticed that Gink had been lying down more than usual. And it hadn't been shedding skin. Gink, like Tam, ate a lot. But it hadn't been eating for five days. Whenever Tam was out with his friends, Pom sat by the window and watched Gink's gauging green eyes as he munched on the worms. He thought the act was macabre and adorable. He missed that, like how he missed glancing at Tam's stout fingers when he gripped the spoon during breakfast. Pom tried to let Gink roam around the linden's roots every two days. The first time he tried picking Gink up, it wiggled its limbs. Pom swallowed his spit and held his breath until Gink crawled inside the bottle.

When Pom got used to holding Gink, he wanted to tell Tam that he was no longer afraid of insects. But Tam was always with his friends or Cherry, talking about soccer. The only time Pom got to be alone with Tam was at night after Pom had brushed his teeth. They slept on the same mat. Pom, being a little smaller, brushed his teeth first so he could crawl into the corner before Tam, leaving a bigger space for his friend. Every night, Pom listened to Tam rambling on about the janitor at school, his grades, and the new marble games he invented.

“How's Gink?” Tam asked on a Monday night.

“It’s good,” Pom said.

The cicadas roared.

“You know, Gink,” Pom said. “I think it might be —”

“Uh huh.”

Tam was already snoring. Pom turned away. His eyes were open.



Photo courtesy of Jet Stouten on Unsplash

Cherry came to the orphanage next Friday as she promised. When her parents were talking to Su Mun at the shrine, Pom, who was on sweeping duty, washed the dishes. It was supposed to be Tam’s turn

today, but Tam asked Pom to swap. And so when Pom stacked the dishes and went to the yard, Tam was not there. Pom looked in his bedroom, the bathroom, and behind the shrine, but he couldn't find Tam. So he went to the yard again and sat on the bench in the shade of the linden. The wind stirred the leaves above.

When Pom closed his eyes, he heard footsteps.

“How are you?” Su Mun said, straightening his robe and sitting down next to Pom.

“I'm good.”

“Good is good. How's Gink?”

“Gink's good.”

They sat in silence.

“Do you know how long a mantis can live?” Pom said.

“A few years.”

“Below ten? But Gink may be very old already. It lies down a lot. Do you know how to tell how old it is? What if it's dying?”

“I don't.”

“Sorry,” Pom said and sighed. “Can you touch an animal?”

Su Mun laughed.

“Of course I can,” Su Mun said.

“Wait, so if animals have souls, they can fall in love, too? Right?”

“Pom,” Su Mun said. “It's getting late. Let's have dinner.”

“I’m,” Pom said, slouching and staring at the ground, “not hungry.”

Su Mun patted Pom’s back and stood.

“Is Tam coming home for dinner?” Pom said.

The more bites Pom took, the more he felt like vomiting. He poked his chopsticks into his rice bowl and stirred, hoping the rice would get mushier so it would be easier to swallow. But Su Mun kept putting food into Pom’s bowl. Pom frowned at the monk. Su Mun finished his dinner and put his bowl in the sink.

“I’ll get the dishes,” Pom said from the table.

There was only Pom in the kitchen with a bag of silkworms and plates full of food. Pom wanted to throw his food away. Su Mun would never find out. But Pom remembered Su Mun talking about the people and animals who died of starvation. So he sat, waiting.

Now he was like Gink, he thought, or maybe Gink was just bored with eating silkworms every day. Pom ran to his room and brought the mantis to the kitchen. He used the other end of his chopsticks to drop one grain of rice into the bottle. Gink moved closer to the grain of rice, sniffed it, but didn’t eat it. Then Pom gave it two and three more. He gave it a slice of cabbage and a piece of carrot. Still, Gink didn’t want it.

“Pom,” Tam said, taking off his sandals.

Pom straightened his back.

Tam threw his backpack on the floor and sat across from Pom, where Su Mun had sat earlier.

“Tam,” Pom said. “Where have you been?”

“Cherry’s parents took me to this cool place.”

“Where?” Pom said, crossing his legs on the chair.

“Are you eating that?” Tam said as he pointed to Pom’s food.

“No. I’m full.”

Pom picked up the bowl from the table and gave it to Tam with two hands.

“I’m so hungry. You need to eat more, Pom. You’re so skinny.”

Tam squeezed Pom’s arm.

“Oh. There are bumping cars,” Tam said with a mouthful of rice. “And this thing that you can jump on, and it bounces, so you jump higher.”

“A trampoline?”

“Yeah, yeah. And there’s a big big turkey leg.”

“Did you eat all of it?”

“I share it with Cherry. But she didn’t eat a lot. She was just like you. I think you guys will get along. I wanted to save some for you, but I couldn’t find any plastic bags.”

Pom smiled. "I'm jealous."

"Where were you? I was looking for you everywhere. I thought you were at school."

Pom coughed.

"It's okay," Tam said. "Next time. But I mean it. Cherry's family could be our new home."

Tam saw Gink.

"What's Gink doing here? How is it?" Tam said.

"It hasn't been eating a lot."

"Oh no."

Tam picked up the bottle and studied Gink.

"I think it might be dying," Pom said.

"Don't say that, Pom."

"No. I feed it. It doesn't eat. It just lies on the ground all day."

"Maybe it just needs attention."

"You haven't been taking care of him," Pom said, stacking the dirty dishes and carrying them to the sink. "A lot."

"I was just very busy."

"With soccer?"

"Yeah."

"And hanging out with Cherry. I have to help Su Mun with chores and still take care of Gink."

“Why are you mad at me?”

“I’m not mad, Tam. I don’t know. Maybe Gink was supposed to be ours, not just mine.”

“Give me Gink for the next two weeks then. I’ll take care of it.”

The running water hissed. Tam’s chopsticks clattered. Pom felt the heat from the stove and turned it off.

He turned. His voice was still quiet. “That’s not what I mean,” Pom said.

“Then what do you mean?”

“You say you wanted a pet, Tam. And we have Gink. You wanted parents. We have Su Mun. You wanted siblings. You have me, and Yen, Pim, Mai. Everyone here is your sibling. Is this not like a family?”

Tam carried his dirty bowl to the sink and left the kitchen. When there was only the sound of running water, Pom turned off the faucet and walked to the table. He took a deep breath before grabbing the bottle and throwing it on the floor. The plastic cracked. Pom stomped on it. He didn’t look at Gink, but at a vein on his foot. Sweat and soap soaked through his t-shirt. Then he walked back to the sink and turned the faucet all the way. He rubbed his eyes with water.

Tam wasn't next to Pom when he woke up the next morning. When Pom sat up straight, he noticed a bottle on the windowsill. The plastic sparkled as the sun lit up the bottle's bottom half. Inside the bottle was a new mantis. Pom picked it up. Next to the bottle was a note that read: "I'm sorry. I didn't know that you would love an insect that much. I hope we're still together." Outside, the heart-shaped linden leaves rustled as the wind blew. Pom stood barefoot next to the window, listening for footsteps.

Carmen Sandiego Game Review

A Family-Friendly Game that Delivers Stories and Knowledge

The Carmen Sandiego franchise has long been adored by parents for its educational value. But unlike the previous version that focused solely on geography and puzzles, the 2025 reboot of Carmen Sandiego excites both kids and parents with its immersive storytelling while maintaining its educational roots.

Carmen Sandiego is a fresh adaptation from Netflix's animated series Carmen Sandiego. Much like the series, we play as Carmen Sandiego as she defects from her previous crime syndicate and joins The Agency to Classify and Monitor Evildoers (ACME) as a secret detective. Unlike the older editions where we played as Player (the hacker that traces Carmen Sandiego through a computer), this game allows us to travel to cities as we track down criminals. We no longer look at the world through a computer screen; we are living and learning from it. This is what the child in us wishes to do.

Perhaps, Carmen Sandiego is a clichéd story: a badass female detective, a hacker, a secret crime organization. Yet it works for its educational purposes. Besides Carmen Sandiego’s stylish and mischievous side, we also see her curiosity as she investigates suspicious activities at famous monuments. “Wow...Thirty-four meters high, and over 230 metric tons of bronze. They don’t call this the ‘Big Buddha’ for nothing.” Carmen Sandiego says as she searches for criminal activity in Hong Kong. Her true “La Femme Rogue” manner makes facts easy to learn as it is for us to fall in love with what she does.

Education and storytelling are not an uncommon combination in the Carmen Sandiego franchise — Where in the World is Carmen Sandiego?, Carmen Sandiego Math Detective, Carmen Sandiego ThinkQuick Challenge. What takes the 2025 version to the next level is the visuals. The game does not feed us just facts, but amazing landscapes of the Wonders of The World. Carmen Sandiego’s capers, as the franchise calls it, are only the vessel through which players explore the culture of the place — Carmen Sandiego picks a thief’s pocket on the buzzing street of Khan el-Khalili, she scans for handprint in the jazzy French Quarter, she hang-glides through ravishing Gardens by the Bay. Carmen Sandiego, in a way, is our unconventional tour guide. We sit on the bus, listening to her story of cracking down on crimes and staring at the magnificent views

outside the windows. Nothing says education and entertainment more than traveling. Who wouldn't love a warm family vacation?

The music is simple and immersive, enhancing the traveling experience. When Carmen Sandiego travels to La Rambla, Barcelona, we hear flamenco. When she goes to Asakusa, Tokyo, we hear koto. The voice acting is sparse and guiding, rather than distracting. For the most part, the control is smooth. With that said, when we get to control Carmen Sandiego in third-person, the direction becomes a bit unclear for mobile users. Although learning how to control her does not take long, a touchscreen joypad would enhance the experience. Sometimes, learning can be challenging. But that's what makes it exciting.

The latest reboot of Carmen Sandiego goes beyond its predecessor in making the information digestible while telling the agent's story of capturing criminals. It's not a complex story but practical enough if you're looking for a narrative and knowledge, but don't want to grab an Encyclopedia.

Science & Technology Journalism



AUREUS SOLAR PANELS: A SOLUTION TO FOOD WASTE IN COMMUNITIES



AuREUS Solar Panels, invented by Carvey Mehren Maigue, convert UV radiation into electricity using food waste. Maigue, [during a Dyson interview](#), expressed his desire to make clean technology accessible in the Philippines. "I would like to help people access clean technology in the Philippines," he said.

Agricultural Waste and Its Consequences for Farmers

According to a 2021 report by the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) United Kingdom (U.K.) and Tesco, global food waste totals 1.2 billion tonnes annually, representing 15.3% of produced food, equivalent to \$370 million in value. Research by the No Hungry Children Organization suggests this could feed 37 million people for a month. On farms, between 22,000 and 37,000 tonnes of produce go to waste annually, enough to provide 150,000 to 250,000 people with five daily portions of fruits and vegetables for a year. Factors contributing to food waste include environmental challenges, changing food standards, product mishandling and shifts in retail demands, most of which are beyond farmers' control.

AuREUS Solar Panel Function

The same technology derived from the phenomena that govern the beautiful Northern and Southern lights powers AuREUS, a system using luminescent particles similar to those found in fruits and vegetables. These particles, when struck by high-energy particles like gamma or UV rays, absorb and emit visible light. AuREUS features two products: the Borealis Solar Window and the Astralis Solar Wall. Both incorporate a layer of organic luminescent extracted from food waste suspended in a resin substrate.

Photovoltaic (PV) cells, crucial to solar panels, line the edges of these devices. When UV radiation hits, the luminescent particles emit light toward the PV cells, converting it into electricity. This electricity can then be redirected to storage, batteries or immediate use. Unlike traditional solar panels, AuREUS panels can be installed vertically and capture UV radiation even on cloudy days due to their ability to harness UV light without direct sunlight. In 2019, AuREUS was implemented in building settings and its innovative design earned Carvey Ehren Maigue the first-ever James Dyson Sustainability Award in 2020.

A Potential Solution

AuREUS technology, leveraging crops from agricultural communities, enables farmers to upcycle waste from farming and retailing processes. This innovation helps farmers mitigate significant losses and manage risks more effectively. Moreover, AuREUS solar panels harness UV radiation, a clean and unlimited energy source, which can reduce daily living costs for farmers. Additionally, these panels help decrease food waste, contributing to climate change mitigation.

Currently under research and testing for broader applications such as mass production and public transportation, AuREUS Solar Panels have shown promise in early studies. Out of 78 crops tested, nine exhibited high potential, with red, orange, yellow and green hues serving as potential dyes containing the necessary luminescent particles. Ongoing research aims to optimize material extraction from crops, aspiring to

reach 100% efficiency compared to the current 80%, which could revolutionize crop utilization in agricultural communities.

Looking Ahead

The development of AuREUS Solar Panels represents a breakthrough in [sustainable energy](#) and waste reduction. By turning agricultural byproducts into functional technology, the panels offer a creative approach to addressing both energy needs and food waste. As research progresses, this innovation could open new possibilities for renewable power generation and resource use, enhancing both environmental sustainability and economic benefits for agricultural communities.

– *Jimmy Nguyen*

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Photo: [Flickr](#)

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SNV'S WASH PROGRAM: IMPROVING WATER ACCESS



According to the U.N., fortunately, from 2015 to 2022, the population using [safely managed drinking](#), sanitation and hygiene services water [increased from 69% to 73%](#). However, in 2022, 2.2 billion and 3.5 billion people lacked safely managed drinking and sanitation water, respectively. Worldwide, 140 countries report that 42% of their household do not receive safe water treatment. This has made little progress toward the goal of providing safe water for half of the population in 2030.

SNV's WASH Program Brief

[SNV Netherlands Development Organization](#) is a global developmental partner that works with government and private sectors in more than 20 African and Asian countries to improve basic living conditions in three criteria: water, agri-food and energy. In 2023, SNV has improved the lives of 6.4 million people through system upgrading, income increment, outcome management and widespread inclusion of basic services.

SNV's inspiration comes from pursuing SDGs objectives. In response to the water question, SNV has improved the water security for 1.6 million in 18 countries, with 562,000 people gaining access to water for the first time, according to the 2023 SNV Annual Report. SNV frames its work around three determining topics: systems transformation, changing weather patterns and social equity.

Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) is SNV's main water developmental program. SNV's WASH Program defines successful water security as safe water usage, lower water pollution, protection from water hazards and safe water resources, according to the 2023 annual report. To achieve its objective, [SNV works with all levels](#) of government facilities and civil societies to provide impactful systemic changes in water infrastructure. At the household level, SNV provides open-access educational programs and publications, promoting thoughtful and safe water management.

SNV's WASH Program in Mozambique

From 2017 to 2019, SNV's WASH Program [provided sanitation for 68,000 people in Mozambique](#). In those two years, 14 percentage points more households gained access to an improved toilet. In terms of WASH's educational effort, 40,000 people have practiced washing their hands after defecation.

However, due to Cyclone Kenneth's impact, the program sees a 21% decrease in hygienic toilet maintenance. The percentage of the population without access to handwashing facilities went from 62% to 75%. This led to a 14% increase in out-of-usage toilets and, eventually, a 5% increase in open defecation, according to the 2020 brief.

The Most Recent WASH Project

[Transforming Access to WASH and Nutrition Services II \(T-WASH II\)](#) is a project launched by SNV and funded by the U.K. government aid organizations. The project has a budget of £55,821,502 nationwide to date. T-WASH II aims to improve national, provincial and municipal stakeholders' knowledge and relationships. The project brings positive change from community involvement and women-in-decision-making positions. The lasting outcome is its learning opportunities for stakeholders and local communities.

Looking Ahead

Despite increasing weather challenges, SNV's WASH Program sees positive change. SNV will continue to adapt its WASH system to align with the changing demands of the local communities and the challenges that changing weather patterns may bring. SNV's WASH Program is in full force with the necessary funding to do its part in achieving UN SDGs 6.

– *Jimmy Nguyen*

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Photo: [Flickr](#)

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BabylissPro's Mini Nano Titanium Flat Iron Review

The BabylissPro Mini Nano Titanium Flat Iron is a compact styling tool for quick yet sleek touch-ups, particularly for individuals with shorter or medium-length hair. Its 2.5-inch titanium plates heat up faster than traditional porcelain ceramic ones, making it a reliable option during rushed mornings. What sets BabylissPro's titanium plates apart from other brands, though, is their ability to evenly distribute heat and resist ultra-high temperatures that can damage fine hair, offering more control over the styling process. The Nano Titanium technology also emits negative ions, allowing the plates to glide smoothly and leave hair silky. It is a solid option for individuals looking for efficient styling without compromising natural hair texture.

It's worth noting, though, that this product is not suitable for longer or more dramatic hairstyles. At just six inches long and half an inch thick, it fits right into the palm — ideal for zipping up split ends but not large enough for close-to-the-scalp styling. And yet, despite its compact build, the design doesn't sacrifice safety. There are two dented knobs on either side of the iron for finger placement, improving grip and preventing accidental burns. Another user-

friendly detail is a large side switch instead of a button placed inside the iron — a thoughtful design not just with the users' control, time, but safety in mind.

As an on-the-go beauty guru who prefers a natural-looking hairstyle, I recommend the travel version, which includes a pouch and supports dual voltage. But with the extra features or not, the BabylissPro Nano Titanium Mini Straightening Iron itself already promises you a neat style in just five minutes.

Food Writing



“Would You Like to Hear Our Specials?”

Illustrator Fabiola Nuñez opened up about post-college challenges

It was midnight, and the floor was covered in bits of lettuce, pools of passion fruit juice, and napkins. “Would you like to hear our specials? We have Baja Fish Taco,” Fabiola Nuñez said. A few lights from the neighboring restaurants were already out. Nuñez had been asking the same question to no less than forty customers. When the clock struck two, she ran the torn mop across the floor until she could see her reflection. Nuñez grabbed a few scattered dollars and quarters from the bucket on the counter. She tossed them into her backpack, pulled on her blue baseball cap, and left Ranche Alegre. She walked from W Congress St to Habersham. When she locked the door to her bedroom, she pulled out her notebook, drew the tacos with limbs, and chuckled at them.

That night, besides reciting the Baja Fish Taco special, twenty-eight-year-old Nuñez still remembered something else — her special talent for drawing. “Christian, Guillermo, Maria Carlotta — like

Charlotte, but in Spanish — and Victor. I love my cousins. I have been drawing for them since eight,” she said. It was Fabi’s love language. Every time her cousins visited her house in Venezuela, she would draw them scenes from The Powerpuff Girls and make sure they took her drawings home. “I am grateful that I grew up in a huge and loving family in Caracas,” she said. “But like every family, it was far from perfect.”

Like every other kid, Nuñez enjoyed watching television. Sometimes when she turned on the TV, the eight-year-old girl, who still thought she was born from her mom’s armpit, would see smoke and guns on the news channel. She quickly switched the channel and grabbed her colored pencils instead. “Ohana means family,” she heard from the TV, and felt warmer. After drawing the scene where Lilo, Stitch, Nani, and David surfed together, she couldn’t wait until her parents came home so she could show them her work. That night at the family dinner, she cried. Her parents had yelled at her for drawing a scene of a girl and a guy wearing swimsuits next to each other. “I was a little bit sheltered,” she said. “My parents would reprimand me if I were to do something that wasn’t ideal, like expressing love or opinions about my own body. It felt wrong. But I didn’t know why.”

And so drawing became an escape for Nuñez. Four years later, her

parents took her to the bookstore for a birthday gift. She was strolling through the children's aisle when a book with a cover of a dark-skin girl and a white rabbit caught her attention. She picked it off the shelf and brought it to the cashier. "Niña Bonita. Te gusta?" the cashier said. Nuñez raised her heel and grabbed the book from the cashier's hand. The book, written by Ana Maria Machado, was about the white rabbit who wanted to be friends with the girl because he thought she was beautiful. On their way to school, while her parents were drinking coffee, she would talk about it in detail. To her parents, it was just paper. To her, it was power. The rabbit and the girl's friendship opened Nuñez to a world of possibilities. "I grew up not knowing if things were taboo, and so I became ignorant and afraid," she said. "I don't think it's good for children to grow up like that. I want to draw educational books like Niña Bonita because that's what I lack. It will be great if I can encourage children to learn through my drawings." But a purpose alone was not enough. She needed something more.

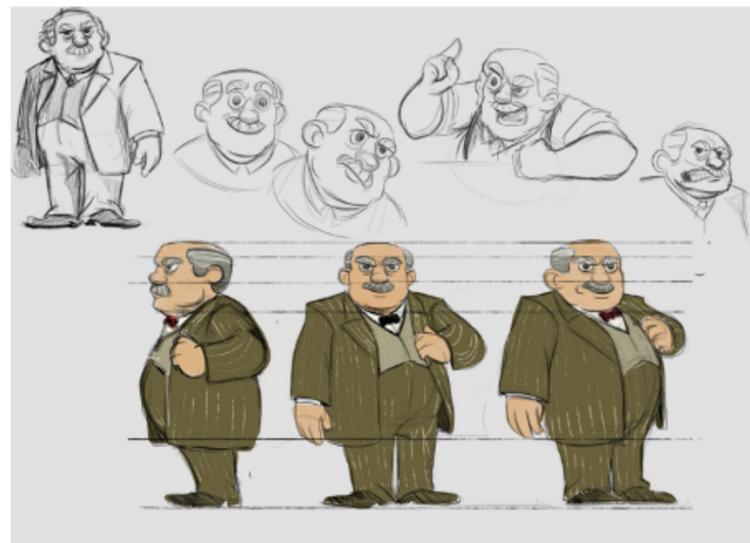
At eighteen, Nuñez finally understood why she heard loud noises at night. When President Maduro was elected, she saw her neighbors pour into the streets carrying pots and pans. She spent that summer mostly indoors. In August, she read on her phone about the drone attack in Avenida Bolivar and decided that pursuing an Art degree in

another country was the only option to turn her passion into a career. A month later, she kissed her parents on the cheeks and said goodbye to Christian, Guillermo, Viktor, and Maria Carlotta at the Simon Bolivar International Airport. On the plane, she wrote down ways to make new friends. A friend, who completed their degree in Fashion, introduced Nuñez to the Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD). “It was one of the best experiences, actually, in my life, just meeting a lot of professors and talented people with the same interests,” Nuñez said as she recalled her college days. “It was very nurturing to my soul. It was a little bit overwhelming and amazing at the same time.”

Back in Venezuela, her youngest cousin, Christian, called Nuñez every month because he also wanted to go into illustration. “I told his mom to send him to drawing classes,” she said. She told Christian, “Draw whatever you want. Don’t think too much. Just do it.” Sometimes, even her older cousin Victor called her for advice when things went wrong in his first year at college. She listened. And yet, family was not a distraction but motivation. Christian’s story inspired Nuñez’s senior film. The idea was simple: a quiet but passionate guy going into an interview full of hiccups with an angry boss. Christian’s timid yet brave attitude in his conversations with his mom reminded her of a job interview. It was Nuñez’s message to

Christian that determination is the key to success. “It’s the work that I’m most proud of,” she said.

Nuñez didn’t just draw for her cousins. She created for herself, too. She drew inspiration from Hayao Miyazaki’s work, especially his earlier movie *Kiki’s Delivery Service*. “That’s what I watch when I feel stressed,” she said. Even when her characters are heavily stylized, they feel human because of their quirky attitudes. The backgrounds, though minor to the characters, were done with precision and care. “The drawing style of the props and environments has to be cohesive with the characters,” she said. “Because it suggests a mood.” Even when the visuals were intricate, the message was straightforward: “Do not give up.” And so drawing became a conversation.



Fabiola Nuñez’s artwork

Nuñez graduated from SCAD in 2020. Immediately after, she felt a distance between herself and her goal. “As a student, everybody was positive,” she said. “They love everything, even my career advisor would tell me like ‘I can see your work on Nickelodeon. You just need to apply.’ After I graduated, I didn’t feel the same support. It was kind of like, you’re left defenseless. It was a positive experience as a student, not as much as an alumnus.” When she thought about her cousins and the challenges they would face without her, she provided faster service in the hope of more generous tips. Even small things like doing a roll-up by the window took her closer to her dream.

“Growing up is not easy,” Nuñez said. She tasted it herself. The rejections hurt her, yes. But it had also taught her to work just a little harder. Her story went beyond a little girl and a dream. It was about confronting her reality with talent and passion, about how childhood passion became a way to help others. Perhaps, the opportunity was yet to come. But her story itself was already a testament to her determination.

Despite the challenges, Nuñez was still able to find gigs here and there. “I worked on a few projects, but it’s not like a stable job, where I was in the studio, working as a full-time artist,” she said. Her face lit up as she talked about her work in Neon, a third-person

point-of-view game with a futuristic flair, for which she was the concept artist. “The game was about tribes, and I had to do a lot of research about the tribes from different cultures,” she said. “So I’m creating something new, but it’s not disrespectful, you know.” Even on a temporary project, she approached it with precision and care.

“My dream was to work at Nickelodeon or Paramount. It makes me sad just knowing that it probably won’t happen,” Nuñez said. A lady called. She needed more dressing for her salad. The kitchen called — her order was ready. Her manager called, “Can you take another table?” Someone broke a dish. Her hair smelled like sautéed shrimp and vinegar. *Still*, she thought, *what if I drew an animation in a restaurant setting?* With her cousins in mind, Nuñez picked up the dirty rag, dashed to the next table, and smiled, “Would you like to hear our specials?”



Smoke-Free Village: A Discussion with Energy Leader Bastiaan Teune

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BY THE BORGES PROJECT ON NOVEMBER 24, 2024

TECH AND SOLUTIONS

SAVANNAH, Georgia — The Lower Mekong River Basin, which consists of [Thailand](#), [Lao PDR](#), [Cambodia](#) and [Vietnam](#), has limited access to clean cooking. In low-income communities, firewood remains the dominant heat source. Because of the region's culture, most cooks are women. This clash between poverty and culture disproportionately affects women, leading to long-term health risks for the mother and the child.

The Harm of Biomass Fuels

A study from the Radiological Society of North America's (RSNA) annual meeting shows that [3 billion people](#) [rely on biomass fuel](#), including wood, thatches, and dried bush, as a heat source. This is approximately 35% of the world's population, and it accounts for 4 million deaths from household air pollution yearly.

According to [Isabelle Romieu and Astrid Schillmann](#), biomass smoke contains respiratory irritants such as phenols and acetaldehyde and carcinogenic compounds such as benzene and formaldehyde.

A 2013 USAID report indicates that [96% of Cambodian households in rural areas](#) use wood as the main fuel source. More than 2 million are exposed to indoor air pollution. 47% of the households' cooks are women, and 46% of their assistants are female children.

An explanation for the prominent use of biomass is cost. Wood costs less than 23\$, free in some households, per year. Additionally, 81% of the households have women responsible for collecting fuel, according to the same report.

Smoke-Free Village

SNV, a global developmental organization, operated the Smoke-Free-Village approach to [decrease biomass usage and lessen the severity](#) of the fuel's health risks. To investigate the situation, The Borgen Project spoke with Bastiaan Teune, The Energy Sector Leader of Cambodia from SNV.

"The Sustainable Development Goals is our framework. We follow an approach to make energy about people and give decent energy services to everybody, not only cities or the health of the well-offs," Teune explained. The Smoke-Free-Village involves policy interventions, supply chain development, demand creation and behavioral change.

Improving the communities' understanding of cooking and health is at the center of the project. SNV hosts school gatherings, door visits, village meetings and cooking demonstrations. "We work with 500 villages, and these villages are clustered in communes. This is behavioral. You have to do it together. If my neighbor is still using firewood and I have clean cooking, it does not matter because the smoke will disintegrate throughout the village," said Teune. [The project covers 500,000 people](#) living in 100,000 households in Kampot, Kampong Speu, Battambang and Siem Reap provinces.

SNV also reaches out to community leaders such as Community Councils, monks, teachers and health workers to educate and set policies when appropriate. The four key behavioral notes are keeping children away from smoke, drying wood before cooking, cooking in a well-ventilated room and investing in clean cookstoves. The goal is to trigger a demand for clean cookstoves and fuels, which motivates businesses to seek opportunities. Once a supply-demand chain is established, the Smoke-Free-Village project will strengthen institutions and secure a systemic change.

"In rural Cambodia, it comes down to costs. Some people say, 'It costs less when I collect firewood.' I always say it costs you even more if you don't break free from the bushes." said Teune. Wood costs from 0-\$0.20 per kg compared to \$0.15 kWh of electricity. However, the monthly fuel consumption is 85 kg on average, which results in a monthly cost of \$17, compared to 6\$ and 43 kWh, according to the SNV report.

The Outcome of a Smoke-Free Village

"The health concerns voiced by villagers go up from 40 to 66%. Traditional wood stove usage as a primary stove is going down from 60 to 39%. It takes just six months to change," said Teune.

As more households acquire more electric and liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) cookstoves, the amount of traditional wood stoves decreases. LPG cookstoves are the most popular, reaching 34,975 in 2024. As a result, 15,163 wood stoves are removed, according to the SNV report.

SFV was a success because of its adaptation from its colleague project, WASH, and a competent team of female committees. Besides the internal factors are Cambodia's increasing urbanization and health-inclined culture. "People live with an expandable income, and there's a culture. Cambodians are more responsive to modern lifestyle," Teune said.

Looking Ahead

"It is really about education that makes this program very exciting," Bastiaan Teune said. With a pertinent effort and sincere altruism, Smoke-Free Village has seen successful changes in Cambodia's usage of clean energy in cooking and, most importantly, better health for the women involved in the cooking process. SFV changes the norms regarding cooking in Cambodia's rural areas. Thanks to SNV's global presence, the project is looking to expand to neighboring countries such as Laos PDR and African countries. In the future, SNV will build off the Smoke-Free Village model in Cambodia and collaborate with major health partners.

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How to Make the Best Pho Broth, According to My Grandma

Aromatic. Appetizing. Authentic

Did you know that my grandma used to serve Ho Chi Minh pho when he visited Hanoi? Me neither. But she was proud of it. Pho for my grandma was more than just a bowl of noodles and meat. It was the pride of knowing that she contributed to the country she loved so much.

Pho's origin was poorly documented. However, it is most likely to have come from Nam Dinh province. Despite my grandma's roots in Northern Vietnam, her version uses beef, which is common in the South. Making pho is insanely time-consuming. And yet, it is enjoyable for her — she makes pho as an offering to our ancestors every weekend. As I crave pho while studying abroad, I called her in Ho Chi Minh City for tips on making the best pho broth.

1. Choose Fresh Ingredients

“Everything has to be fresh. Don't buy the bones from

yesterday,” my grandma says on the phone. Choosing fresh beef bone allows the broth to have the purest odor. Old meat went through a process called putrefaction. This is when Lactobacillus, a common bacterium, grows and produces acids such as lactic and acetic. Unlike the fermentation process, this growth is uncontrolled and causes an unpleasant odor and a sour taste.

2. Blanch the Bones

Blanching removes all the impurities from the bones. This technique kills the majority of the microorganisms in the bones, so they are not released into the broth. Meanwhile, cold water will preserve the bones’ color, texture, and taste, extending their shelf life. Simply dip the bones in boiling water for thirty seconds to one minute, then rinse them with cold water. “If you don’t blanch, your pho will smell like it's made with rats,” my grandma says. Ew.

3. Give Your Spice a New Life

Heating the spices causes them to release their aroma, resulting in a bolder and more flavorful broth. Char onions and ginger on a stovetop. Now, the difference between charring and burning is that burning takes the food past the caramelization process — the point of no return. Charring, on the other hand, is when

you slightly burn the outer edge, but the food still maintains its original flavor. “It’s all about control,” she says. So, keep an eye on them to not burn any of them. Roast the dry spices on a stovetop. Be careful not to overheat them since they will become bitter. A common method is to remove the spices when you can smell them standing straight. Again, fresh over powder. Trust me, your pho (and body) will thank you.

4. Slow Cook for As Long As You Can

Always cook your bones at the lowest heat setting. Slow cooking causes the beef bones to release collagen and protein gradually, making your broth as clear as possible. Plus, the longer you simmer, the longer the spices and bones will release their aroma and the more flavorful the broth. “Overnight is the best,” my grandma says. Sometimes, protein will still bubble up to the surface no matter what. If this happens, use a ladle to remove the impurities.

5. Add Some Flavor with Extra Beef

Adding beef brisket to the broth gives it a richer, more umami flavor. The small amount of fat in the beef brisket also adds a thicker texture without overwhelming the purity of the broth. Still, remember to keep an eye on the broth and remove any impurities on the surface if needed.

6. Season Your Broth with Flavor Balance in Mind

Northern Vietnamese usually season their pho lightly, while the Southern region prefers a sweeter and richer broth. Psst. Fish sauce, monosodium glutamate (MSG), and rock sugar are the key to pho seasoning. Fish sauce adds a gentle saltiness. Rock sugar adds a lingering sugary sensation — one that is less aggressive than granulated sugar. MSG enhances umami, saltiness, and sweetness. A true well-rounder. “I sometimes add soy sauce for extra depth,” my grandma says. “Uncle Ho liked that.” The saltiness and sweetness will balance out the bitterness of the spices. Later, a little bit of lime juice will be the cherry on top. After seasoning, the broth should be clear, with a slightly yellow/brown hue.

7. Add Aromatics to Your Liking

Thirty minutes before serving pho, add garlic and shallots to your broth for an extra aromatic layer. Not only do they taste good, but they are packed with antioxidants and probiotics as well.

8. Enjoy Pho to Your Liking

“Noodles, thinly sliced beef, green onions, broth, black pepper. In that exact order,” my grandma says. There are a variety of toppings that my grandma adds to her pho: culantros, basil

leaves, mint leaves, rice paddy herbs, bean sprouts, etc. I like to keep my broth clear with a little bit of lime juice, a few fresh chili slices, and no extra sauce. However, enjoy it to your liking. Eating pho should be a personal experience. That's the tradition. So, have pho-n with your bowl, just as you should with making it.

Beauty & Wellness News





How History Hammered Vietnam's Skin Ideals

And how they still shape the beauty business and cultural identity today

At a red light in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, a woman sits on her motorbike, wrapped in hoodies, masks, gloves, socks, and visors. It is 103 degrees. Above her, a Pepsi billboard shows a young model with skin like a porcelain doll. The woman on the motorbike curses as sweat seeps through her fabric. Meanwhile, the model smiles against a refreshing blue backdrop. The sun spared no skin. As the woman squeezes through the traffic downtown, she sees more signs looming from the concrete pumps and the thick cotton of her mask. Oh, how the young girls' skins cut through the dust. Next to the young girls were even brighter words: "Want bright and youthful skin like Koreans? Come to us." If the woman is lucky or knows the streets well enough, she will make it in time for her next appointment. Though being late is not a big deal. The front desk girls know that she pays fifty million VND for this appointment, which is around two thousand dollars, and a year's worth of a construction worker's

income. Among the 257 beauty clinics in Ho Chi Minh City, this one offers the best deal. The clinic needs her as much as she needs them. As of May 2025, Ho Chi Minh City still stands as the city with the most beauty businesses out of 1232 clinics in Vietnam. That's a 6.20% increase from 2023. Beauty here is not just a luxury — it's a discipline. One might wonder why such a desperate desire for pale skin exists. Even dermatologists sitting in their office behind the signs, who have had thirty years or more of experience, like Dr. Thu Hien Do, don't have the truth. Dr. Do only knows one thing: the desire for pale skin will buy her lunch.

Dr. Do realized the ridiculousness of Vietnam's beauty industry after working at the Ho Chi Minh City Hospital of Dermato-Venerology for twenty years: postpartum moms waiting for hours to erase melasma, college students scraping money for acne scar treatments, and even husbands burning their moles out of fear that the spots would make their skin darker.

In Vietnam, working for a hospital commands respect. At 53, Dr. Do still wears it with pride and sometimes even more. It was her top credential when she opened HHV clinic, named after her and her sister's initials. In 2014, Dr. Do rented a four-meter-wide house in an alley Southwest of the Tan Son Nhat International Airport runway for her lab. "When I started, I didn't know what Facebook or

YouTube was,” Dr. Do said, tugging at her lab coat to reveal her name tag. She relied on street signs. “My clients called me for eyebrow tattoos and sometimes laser hair removal. When I told them I offer skin procedures like PRP injections, too, they asked me what it was. I told them it’s platelet-rich plasma therapy —it’s injecting your own blood into your face to make your skin healthier. They got scared. Who wouldn’t be?”

“PRP is like the water of skincare.” Dr. Do said as she drew blood from a patient’s skin. “It cures everything.” A sterile needle, a plastic tube, a hiss of pain. Then she puts the blood tubes in the centrifuge and watches them spin, isolating plasma. She returns to her patients’ beds, pulls their skin taut, and buries the needle into their skin, wiping away the blood afterwards. None of the patient is allowed to leave the clinic without their photos on file.

Vietnamese skin encompasses a wide range of shades, though the majority has a golden and olive undertone. This reflects the ethnic group’s mixed origin from both mainland East and Southeast Asia. And yet, perhaps, at times, a healthy and natural skin tone is not enough for the Vietnamese beauty industry. In the early 2010s, a type of cream, generally referred to as “mixed cream”, entered the market. The packaging was almost the same as the promised result: white, smooth, and clear — nothing. It only took five years for

for patients to begin showing up at hospitals and clinics, asking questions about why there were red patches and dark spots on their faces. “What do you use?” the doctors would ask. “This cream I bought online,” the patient would answer. “Do you know what’s in it?” the doctors would continue. And silence plagued the room. In the same way, Dr. Do’s treatment sometimes benefits from ambiguity.

Dr. Do’s first patient was her distant niece, 18-year-old Trinh Ha, who suffered from deep scarring as a result of cystic acne. Trinh Ha was desperate; she flew from Hanoi to Ho Chi Minh City for treatment. When she arrived, she waited in the lobby for fifteen minutes, drinking artichoke tea with dates and goji berries. The receptionist took her to Dr. Do’s room. There, Dr. Do checked her skin quality with a skin analyzer. “I told her that I use tretinoin every day,” Trinh Ha said. “She told me to stop.” The result surprised her. “I thought my acne was caused by excessive sebum production,” Trinh Ha said. Dr. Do told her niece that her skin was producing 59% less oil than the standard, resulting in dehydration and larger pores. “She advised me to do the whole package, which includes ten serums, one cleanser, one laser resurfacing session, and four PRP sessions.” The receptionist then took Trinh Ha to a recovery room. When she entered, she noticed that everything in the

room was white —bed, drawers, sinks, chairs — except for a few stainless-steel medical carts. A nurse instructed her to lie down on a bed. Trinh Ha squealed as the nurse popped her pimples with a syringe needle. After that, the nurse slathered Trinh Ha’s face with numbing cream. “What are we doing?” Trinh Ha asked the nurse. “It’s for your PRP session,” the nurse said. “We’re doing it now?” Trinh Ha said. As she waited for the numbing cream to set, Dr. Do entered. By the time Dr. Do finished drawing her niece’s blood, Trinh Ha couldn’t feel the muscles on her face. While waiting for the centrifuge to work its magic, they had a conversation. Dr. Do loved to talk. Words rolled off her tongue like a drop of hyaluronic acid on the skin. She told her niece about her daughter’s graduation, chewing on her lunch between rests. Meanwhile, Trinh Ha lay still. “PRP is painful,” Dr. Do said. “But your skin will improve. Don’t wear sunscreen for a week after, though.”

While Dr. Do’s clinic utilizes high-tech treatments, her belief in skincare contrasts with modern science. “At HHV, no one is allowed to wear sunscreen,” she said. “Touch my face. No sunscreen at all.” What sets her apart from other clinics is her disapproval of the Vietnamese pale skin standard. “Look around. None of my staff wear sunscreen.” And yet, even that in itself was a troubling marketing vision, going against the conventions of protection and

and prevention in skincare. Retinol? Rejected. SPF? Never heard. It's all about "natural ingredients," with a touch of artificial wavelengths, of course.

Despite her disapproval of fair skin, her services contradict what she preaches against. According to Dr. David Nazarian, a board-certified physician in Los Angeles, California, PRP brightens skin by reducing melanin deposits, boosting collagen production, and exfoliating dead skin cells. Dr. Do's approach also raises eyebrows among dermatologists and skincare enthusiasts. "It makes no sense not to wear sunscreen, especially after treatments that damage the skin barrier," Peter Young, a board-certified dermatologist and the Medical Director at a San Francisco-based online healthcare company, Nurx, said. "I used to use retinol without sunscreen. I'm pale, and I would get terrible sunburn." And so, as a Vietnamese customer who just wants healthy skin, what should they do?

In fact, Dr. Do and mixed cream are only the results of Vietnam's colonial past. From Chinese domination to French control, Vietnam's dense history didn't just create the standard— it injected it into the cultural bloodstream, where it thrives beyond just beauty. Around the year 600, China invented powder foundation out of stark white zinc. Wearing it marked status. And so while the wealthy patted powder on their face, the working class toiled

outdoors, resulting in tan skin. How could the working class afford foundation? Many didn't even know foundation existed. The clash of these cultural occurrences birthed the idea that "white is wealth." This notion continued into French Indochina, Imperial Japan, and the Vietnam War. For a country with the motto "Máu đỏ da vàng" (red blood yellow skin), the widespread marketing of a different skin tone is contradictory.

What does all of this mean to a customer? "The question is," Dr. Do said. What does a customer want? Tanned, light, matte, or glowy — my clinic can deliver anything as long as there is no liability." That is the dilemma of the Vietnamese beauty industry. Customers choose. But the choices were made long ago. And dermatologists like Dr. Do are only there to deliver. And of course, the only option is pale skin. "It's what everybody wants," Dr. Do said. "It's profitable."

For Vietnam, white, pale skin isn't just a standard, it is botox—pumped deep into the skin by history. It smooths and distorts. The desire for white, pale skin motivates people to protect their skin from the sun, yet creates pressure to achieve an impossible ideal. And then, somewhere in the middle, Dr. Do sells that idea, whether she believes in it or not. Because opinion does not pay. Beauty does.

Dr. Do stares at her reflection in the window. No wrinkles. No apologies. She shifts her view to the woman covered from head to

toe stopping at the door to her clinic. Behind the dust from the construction site, a young model with white and glowing skin smiles back at her. Dr. Do drinks the last drop of her artichoke tea and greets the next customer.

The Thread from Candyland

The boundaries of candy and couture for a sparkling, sultry, and sweet summer

Roll out the red licorice carpet. The evolution of music might have cracked open a candy-shell, revealing a magical and wonderful world of fashion that will make Willy Wonka weep.

Sabrina Carpenter's massive hit "Espresso" (2024) proves that sugar has gone beyond Coca-Cola's lab and sits on the tastebud of stylists across the globe. Is it that sweet? I guess so.

While Project Runway was the first to unwrap the term "Candy Couture" in 2012, the sweet tooth of fashion has been aching since the 1960s, when color became the snack of rebellion and liberty. This saccharine sensation lingered into the 1970s and 1980s, when color blocking became the primary nutritional value of the disco subculture.

Today, "Candy Couture" spins regular color composition and silhouettes like cotton candy. The point is to count all the colors in a bag of Sour Patch Kids and put them all on yourself. It's not about

looking “good”. It’s about looking “camp.” (Right in the eye, am I right Karlie Kloss?) The trend ties visual expression into the symbol of candy in childhood fantasies, crystallized with imagination and sprinkled with wonder. It’s extra. It’s youthful. It’s frivolous.

When it comes to “Candy Couture,” channel your inner child in a candy store. The rules? Everything you can put in the shopping bag until your sugar daddy comes back. That’s what Katy Perry did with her cavity-inducing costume in “California Gurls” (2010): glittery blue/purplish bikini bottoms, an ocean blue wig, and skin-color high heels. The starburst of the styling is her bras with two cupcakes attached to the M&M-ary glands. Oh, and whipped cream gun bras, too, if you’re a fan of dairy.

Sliding on Miss Perry’s frosting, American pop-star Melanie Martinez on her 2024 Trilogy Tour dresses up as a baby with a cotton candy pink doll dress, half black half colored hair just like fruit by the foot, and tattoos. What an eye-candy. In the K-pop universe, aespa raided Claire’s and Candy Crush for their “Supernova” KBS stage comeback. Heart-shaped earrings paired with cheetah miniskirts are sure to give fashion critics serious diabetes.

Heart diseases aside, who doesn’t love some sugar and spice? Come to Candyland, where gummy bears in Balenciaga dresses you

up like Lady Lollipop. Just like the wise Skittles commercial once said, when you see the rainbow, you taste the rainbow.

THE THREAD FROM CANDYLAND

The boundaries of candy and couture for a sparkling, sultry, and sweet summer



1. Haribo Hottie

Craving for a chewy change? This luminescent crop-top will give you a tough character without sacrificing your superficial sweetness.

Vivienne Westwood
\$267

2. Holly Splendor Jolly Rancher

Nothing says jolly rancher than a shimmering sequin rainbow dress. These stripes caramelized "camp" and crystallized it right onto your body.

ASISH
\$1398



3. Milky Way and Marmalade

Fancy some cream and sugar? Darling, these boots are your cream sugar. Warning: sugar rushes might follow.

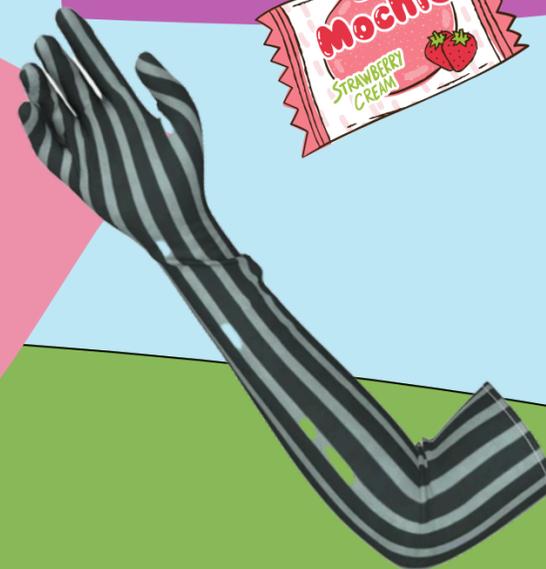
The Kawaii Factory
\$79.99



4. Pixy Stix Chix

You can bet your sweetie patootie that these gloves are the pinnacle of "Candy Couture." Unlike their bland, factory-produced counterparts, these gloves are handmade with Velour fabric. Watch out. Willy Wonka might hit you up for some fashion advice.

Contrado
\$59.99



5. Gummy Bear Gag

Put on these earrings and strut down the runway. You know what sweet nothings these bears will whisper to you? "They all want to eat you. But you are the only one who ate."

Gnome
\$45.95



EPIC IN LAOS: HIV/AIDS PREVENTION FOR MARGINALIZED COMMUNITIES



The Meeting Targets and Maintaining Epidemic Control (EpiC) is an eight-year project (2019-2027) funded by the United States President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). EpiC's goal is to achieve control over the HIV/AIDS epidemic by enhancing technology and service access to key populations.

EpiC is led by [FHI 360](#), a global organization that rallies technology, research and relations to improve global health. FHI 360 is present in more than 60 countries. Its EpiC project has been implemented in 35 countries, from [Laos](#) to Central Asia and Africa. With a budget of \$4.2 million for 35 countries, including Laos, EpiC has seen success in controlling HIV/AIDS and improving the living conditions of those affected.

HIV/AIDS in Laos

Laos, located in the heart of Southeast Asia, borders Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam and China. The country has a population of 7.5 million. The first case of HIV in Laos was recorded in 1992, involving a female sex worker who frequently traveled to Bokeo at the northern border of Laos and Thailand. Since then, [Laos has maintained a low HIV prevalence](#), with an infection rate of 0.3%, affecting approximately 20,000 people by 2022.

The epidemic has a death toll due to the disease of less than 500. However, among the cases, 39.2% are female sex workers (FSM) and 11.5% are men who have sex with men (MSM). Approximately 11,682 cases of HIV/AIDS are on antiretroviral therapy (ART). Furthermore, 9,910 instances received a viral load test within the past 12 months.

EpiC's Initiatives

EpiC is different from past HIV/AIDS control projects because it identifies that support for high-risk individuals is its target. High-risk populations include sex workers, pregnant women who have HIV and children whose one parent has HIV. Building on existing HIV/AIDS relief programs, EpiC improves management, accurate health information and funding.

Rolling out HIV testing and pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), setting up a total market for open access to condoms and ART and decentralizing access to HIV/AIDS-related services to local and private sectors with appropriate funding health care providers to smaller regions are current EpiC's actions. EpiC also prioritizes providing services to lessen the stigma and violence surrounding HIV/AIDS in health care and law enforcement.

EpiC's Success

In 2022, EpiC achieved its goal of 95-95-95 in Laos. This means that 95% of people living with HIV/AIDS are aware of their health status. Additionally, 95% of those receive treatment and among individuals who receive treatment, 95% have suppressed viral infection and have no risk of passing the virus to others.

Moving Forward

With EpiC strategically set in place, the future is looking bright for HIV/AIDS patients and the health condition of developing countries, especially Laos. EpiC has made positive changes toward open access to HIV/AIDS control services to vulnerable communities through joint efforts and critical strategies.

- Jimmy Nguyen

Originally published at The Borgen Project

Self-care Routine for Men to Embrace Their Feminine Side

Men can be feminine, too

According to a study in the *Hormones & Behavior* journal published by Elsevier ScienceDirect, testosterone does not correlate with gender-stereotyped attributes. Being stereotypically feminine does not make a man less of a “man.” And even if so, can a man not take care of himself?

As someone who identifies as a cisgender male, I was told that I must be more aggressive and outgoing to have more luck in dating and advance in my career. But what if that’s not who I am? What if I can’t help but feel like a lotus floating on a pond under the ginger shade of the moon, dreaming... And yet I embrace that. If that’s who you are, and you don’t feel at peace with yourself, I am here to help you.

This routine consists of seven beauty products that prioritize comfort and provide subtlety to your natural look rather than full-on glam — suitable for a right-before-bed recharge without feeling

heavy. Regardless of who you are, it will make that softness inside of you blossom.



Vegan



Cruelty-free

Step 1: Infuse Your Hair with OUAI Hair Oil

You just take a shower. Now you're standing on the balcony with that special somebody behind you. The wind weaves through your hair and makes those loose strands dance on their cheek. They cannot resist but run their fingers through it.

That's what this baby will do. With the fusion of African galanga, ama, and Asian borage oils, OUAI hair oil will help fight frizz, strengthen strands, protect from heat, and give your hair a glossy finish. These ingredients also have anti-inflammatory and antioxidant properties and have been used in Ayurveda, and Hanyak (traditional Korean medicine).



Photo by OUAI

This baby also carries the iconic Rue St. Honore-inspired smell of gardenia, violet, and ylang-ylang on top of white musk, which combine to accentuate femininity.

Shop OUA I Hair Oil at [Sephora](#), [Ulta](#), [Amazon](#), and [OUAI official Photo by OUA I](#)

Step 2: Slather On Some Dove Deep Nourishment Body Lotion

There is nothing sexier than lathering your legs with lotion after a shower, and Dove knows how to play into that. This lotion is affordable and contains ceramide for skin-binding effects. This classic drug store find uses only white musk and generic floral notes to create its unique scent. And yet it is far from tacky, because gentleness comes from comfort, and there is nothing more comforting than a drug-store lotion that mom uses.

Put on a little bit of Dove to soften the body, too.



Photo by Target

Shop Dove Deep Nourishment Body Lotion at [Target](#), [Amazon](#), and [Walmart](#).

Step 3: Pamper Your Skin With I'M FROM Rice Toner

Now that your hair and body are taken care of, you wash your face, but can't help feeling dry and dull right after. [I'M FROM](#) got you covered.

I'M FROM is a Korean skincare brand with a philosophy of transparency. Their products are cruelty-free and utilize minimal but highly effective ingredients. Not only that, but they also list the local farms where they harvest those ingredients.

Made with 77.8% [goami rice extract](#), I'M FROM Rice Toner has hydrating and brightening effects. This product will reduce skin texture smooth and healthy.

The way this baby absorbs into my skin and gives it a subtle glow is heavenly. No oils, no alcohols, no silicone. Just pure skin-food.



Photo by YesStyle

Shop I'M FROM Rice Toner at [YesStyle](#), [Amazon](#), [Stylevana](#), [SokoGlam](#), [iHerb](#), and [I'M FROM official website](#).

Step 4: Pat On Some Numbuzin No.3 Softening Serum

After putting on your toner, you would want to treat a specific concern with a serum.

Numbuzin is a Korean skincare brand with a “skin first” agenda. Their product lines are sorted into numbers for specific concerns.

Number three is responsible for treating uneven skin texture, and this baby succeeds in doing so. With 42% [Bifida](#), and 21% [Galactomyces](#) (ingredients present in SKII famous Pitera line), this fermented serum promised a 30.9 % reduction in enlarged pores and bumpy skin area within two weeks.

Shop Numbuzin No. 3 Skin Softening Serum at [YesStyle](#), [Amazon](#), [Stylevana](#), [Olive Young](#), [iHerb](#), and [Numbuzin official website](#).



Photo by YesStyle

Step 5: Soften Your Lips with 3CE Blur Water Tint: Pink Guava

Now that you've got yourself a smooth hair, body, and face, let's move on to your lips.

3CE (3 Color Eyes) is a makeup brand owned by Stylenanda, a Korean beauty company founded in 2009. A master in nude colors, 3CE has given us numerous lip products from matte to gloss that are stylish yet feel lightweight.

Their Blur Water Tint has a thin consistency, which gives your lips a natural finish that no one would know that you are wearing any lip products at all. Plus, their Pink Guava color is a your-lip-but-better color that will bring out that “nakedness” of your beauty.

Shop 3CE Blur Water Tint Bake Beige at [YesStyle](#), [Stylevana](#), [Olive Young](#), [Amazon](#), and [Stylenanda official website](#).



Photo by YesStyle

Step 6: Lock in Moisture with A'pieu Honey & Milk Lip Oil

Milk and honey? That sounds delicious. This lip oil funnels honey extract for gentle exfoliation, milk protein for hydration, and vitamin E acetate for protection right onto your lips. It has a thick consistency and will give your lips a high gloss finish. It will enhance the volume of your pout and keep your lips hydrated.

Wipe away your 3CE water tint after five minutes of applying and layer this on top for a pure and seductive smile. Who wouldn't want a lick of this sweetness?

Shop A'pieu Honey & Milk Lip Oil at [YesStyle](#), [Stylevana](#), [Amazon](#), and [Missha US](#).



Photo by YesStyle

Step 7: Embrace Yourself with J-Scent Yawahada (Soft Skin) Perfume

If you make it this far, that bud of tenderness inside you is almost blooming. Just

a spritz of J-Scent Yawahada will help it blossom.

This perfume carries sandalwood (base notes), jasmine (middle note), and pear (top note) scents, which have been shown to decrease heart rate and relax muscles.

You can already feel the sensualness caressing your skin. This perfume, a creamy flavor with a hint of incense, will take you further into trances where you are allowed to indulge in the pleasure of sensory and aesthetic. Wear this perfume as a cherry on top of your gentleness. It will sure drive that special somebody crazy.

Shop J-Scent Yawahada Perfume at [Luckyscent](#), and [J-Scent Global](#).



Photo by J-Scent