**International Letter-Writing Competition for Young People –** Viet Nam

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**Age:** 13 years

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*For Grandma Suong, seller of sticky rice,*

My dear Grandma Suong, for ten years, my breakfasts have been the balls of sticky rice that you sell. As my love for you grows, I have taken to calling you “wise Grandma Suong”. My letter today aims to make your kind heart known.

*My dear Grandma Suong, whose sticky rice sells like hot cakes,*

All the town knows your delicious sticky rice, it is unique in every way. Every morning, with a big wooden spoon, you serve us balls of hot sticky rice, as the steam rising from your pot encircles us with the fragrance of the paddy fields. You quickly place the balls into polystyrene boxes, closing them deftly before dropping them into small plastic bags, complete with a little plastic spoon. Hundreds of children like me skip off to school joyfully with these neatly packed breakfasts. In less than five minutes, all the packaging is in the bin and we look forward to queuing up once again, the following day, in front of your big pot of sticky rice, full of gratitude for your bundles of rice, and unaware that we are poisoning ourselves.

*My dear Grandma Suong, whose sticky rice doesn’t sell so well,*

Grandma, I learnt something good at school. Do you know why, in Viet Nam, there are so many cases of cancer, especially among young people? Do you know why boys are becoming more feminine or why girls are going through puberty so early? There are a few explanations, but one of the most important is food. Viet Nam is one of the top five countries for polystyrene and plastic use. Toxic substances like DEHP, lead and cadmium in polystyrene and recycled plastics dissolve easily in contact with hot foods containing acids, cooking oil or salts. And in this way, Grandma, polystyrene and plastic packaging are helping to spread these illnesses! I still remember the day when Mum brought me to you to talk about these problems. I was scared that you would scold us for wanting to “be an egg that’s wiser than the hen”! But no, you thought carefully and then, taking my hand in yours, told me: “I am not well educated and I know nothing of these things. But I will do my best to change.” I am grateful to you for listening to me, as I am but a child.

And then, you got rid of all those polystyrene boxes and plastic bags. You used only banana leaves to wrap up our rice balls. I appreciated your effort, but many of the pupils’ parents and even the children themselves were not happy with this less practical packaging. Before your very eyes, you lost customers, yet you carried on using your banana leaves.

*My Grandma Suong, whose customers are coming back in droves,*

One week later, you are using plastic bags again. I am sad to think that profit has made you stray away from a good path. But no, as you explain to me: “Bad habits are formed easily, but remain difficult to change. Everything takes time”. To begin with, you carry on replacing the polystyrene boxes with pieces of banana leaves. You place the wrapped-up rice balls in plastic bags with – as a bonus – a short message that you have written and photocopied.

*“Dear child,*

*I am a seller of sticky rice with little education, but I know that polystyrene boxes and plastic bags are harmful to health, especially when they come into contact with hot rice. Over time, they could cause infertility or cancer and pollute the environment. Help me to protect you and save the world. Tomorrow, bring your ceramic or biodegradable plastic boxes to buy your sticky rice and I will give you a discount!*

*Yours,*

*Grandma Suong, seller of sticky rice*

I was touched to read your message. Anyone used to using polystyrene boxes or plastic bags will be touched by your message. And the customers will come back, your reputation will grow. Everyone will want to buy your sticky rice so as to receive your letter.

Everyone will agree with you and admire your actions. Of course, some may remain sceptical: “What is the point?” Well, there are many: first, you have done your work properly, secondly, you have wisely passed on a message to help people protect themselves against toxic substances in polystyrene boxes and plastic bags. And most of all, you have helped us to avoid becoming “criminals” by destroying the environment for our future generations. For me, you are a superhero, while remaining a simple seller of sticky rice.

I admire you and wish you good health so that you may continue selling us your unique sticky rice!

*Your special customer*