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author of *The Girls Are All So Nice Here*



A NOVEL

VERA WONG'S
UNSOLICITED
ADVICE *for*
MURDERERS

JESSE Q. SUTANTO

National Bestselling Author of *Dial A for Aunties*

PRAISE FOR
FOUR AUNTIES AND A WEDDING

“Meddy Chan and her indomitable aunts are back in the hilarious *Four Aunties and a Wedding* by Jesse Q. Sutanto.”

—PopSugar

“Sutanto deftly blends preposterous humor (British slang, mafia posers) with enduring devotion to prove ‘there is no right or wrong way to ‘being Asian.’ ”

—Booklist

“Charming, chaotic, and sometimes ridiculous, this tale will appeal to anyone who both adores and is embarrassed by their family, which is just about everyone.”

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“Sutanto pushes you to the edge of your seat with this suspenseful rom-com that infuses humor and heritage.”

—USA Today

“There’s a kind of magic to Sutanto’s writing. . . . She tackles complicated issues of culture and family ties while also creating convoluted plotlines that’ll make you squeal with laughter.”

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—Woman’s World

DIAL A FOR AUNTIES

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“I *loved* it. Whip-smart, original, and so funny. I found it impossible to put down and lost count of the number of times I laughed out loud.”

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“It’s a high-wire act of comic timing, misunderstandings, romantic foibles, and possibly foiled heists. . . . The glue is Meddeline; endearing, capable, and in full thrall to her elders, who are all absolute hoots to keep company with.”

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“Part thriller, part rom-com, Jesse Q. Sutanto’s *Dial A for Aunties* will give you the good laugh we could all use these days.”

—*Marie Claire*

TITLES BY JESSE Q. SUTANTO

DIAL A FOR AUNTIES
FOUR AUNTIES AND A WEDDING
VERA WONG'S UNSOLICITED ADVICE FOR MURDERERS

YOUNG ADULT AND MIDDLE GRADE

WELL, THAT WAS UNEXPECTED
THE OBSESSION
THE NEW GIRL
THEO TAN AND THE FOX SPIRIT

*VERA WONG'S
UNSOLICITED
ADVICE *for*
MURDERERS*

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BERKLEY
NEW YORK

BERKLEY

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Sutanto, Jesse Q., author.

Title: Vera Wong's unsolicited advice for murderers / Jesse Q. Sutanto.

Description: New York: Berkley, [2023]

Identifiers: LCCN 2022046634 (print) | LCCN 2022046635 (ebook) | ISBN 9780593549223 (trade paperback) | ISBN 9780593546178 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780593546185 (ebook)

Classification: LCC PR9500.9.S88 V47 2023 (print) | LCC PR9500.9.S88 (ebook) | DDC 823/.92—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2022046634>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2022046635>

Berkley hardcover edition / March 2023

Berkley trade paperback edition / March 2023

Cover design and art by Vikki Chu

Book design by Daniel Brount, adapted for ebook by Kelly Brennan

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pid_prh_6.0_142841689_c0_r0

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To Mama, the OG Vera

ONE



VERA

Vera Wong Zhuzhu, age sixty, is a pig, but she really should have been born a rooster. We are, of course, referring to Chinese horoscopes. Vera Wong is a human woman, thank you very much, but roosters have nothing on her. Every morning, at exactly four thirty, Vera's eyelids snap open like roller shades shooting up. Then the upper half of her body levitates from the mattress—no lazy rolling out of bed for Vera, though admittedly sitting up in bed now comes with about half a dozen clicks and clacks of her joints. She swings her fuzzy-socked feet out with gusto and immediately finds the slippers she placed next to her bed with military precision the night before. She takes a quick moment to send a text to her son, reminding him that he's sleeping his life away and should have been up and at it before her. He is, after all, a young man with a whole world to conquer. Late mornings, Vera believes, are only for toddlers and Europeans.

After a quick wash, Vera dons her morning gear—a polo shirt with a Ralph Lauren logo so big that it covers her entire left breast (well, okay, thanks to the ravages of time and gravity, it covers the top half of her breast) and sweatpants. Arm sleeves are yanked on and adjusted so that there isn't an exposed sliver of skin between her shirt sleeves and the removable ones. Many years ago, when Vera was a brazen young woman, she never checked her arm sleeves and often walked around with a tanned strip of skin around her upper arms. Those were obviously the wild days, when she lived life on the edge and took unnecessary risks.

Sleeves on, Vera nods at her reflection and marches to the kitchen, where she gulps down a pint of room-temperature water—cold water, Vera believes, would freeze the fats in your arteries and give you heart disease. At the door, Vera dons her orthopedic sneakers and her tortoiseshell sunglasses, and finally, the last and perhaps most vital article of clothing—a visor so enormous that there is no way that a single ray of freckle-causing, wrinkle-making sunlight could snake its way onto her face. Then, without a backward glance, Vera strides out into the world.

And all of this happens without the aid of alarm clocks. Vera should really have been a rooster, but she isn't; she is a pig, and perhaps that is where all the trouble began.

• • •

According to the Chinese horoscope, pigs are diligent and compassionate and are the ones to call upon when sincere advice is needed. Unfortunately, very few people call Vera for sincere advice, or even insincere advice. The one person who should be calling her at all times for advice—her son, Tilbert—never does. Vera doesn't quite understand why. When her parents were alive, she often went to them for advice, even when she didn't need to, because unlike her son, Vera was a filial child and knew that asking her parents for advice made them feel needed. Well, no matter. Vera is a diligent mother and goes out of her way to give Tilly all the advice he could ever need anyway. Her previous texts are as follows:

Sent today at 4:31 a.m.:

Tilly, are you awake? It is 4:31 AM, very late. When I was your age, I wake up at 4AM every morning to cook breakfast for Ah Gong and Ah Ma. Qi lai! Seize the day! Carpe diem!
Kind regards, Mama.

Sent yesterday at 7:45 p.m.:

Tilly, I notice that this girl @NotChloeBennet has liked TWO of your videos on the TikTok! I think this means she likes you. I look at her profile and she pout a lot, but I think she will make good wife. She went with her mother for manicure last week, this means she is a filial daughter. Perhaps you should slip and slide into her DM. Kind regards, Mama.

Vera had been particularly pleased about using the phrase “slip and slide into her DM.” Vera insists on keeping up to date with every trend. She doesn’t believe in getting left behind by the younger generations. Every time she comes across a nonsensical-sounding phrase, she looks it up on the Google and jots down its meaning in her little notebook.

Sent yesterday at 5:01 p.m.:

Tilly, it is 5PM, I hope you have eaten your dinner. Your Uncle Lin eat dinner at 7PM every night and he didn’t even live past thirty. You better eat dinner now. Kind regards, Mama.

This one actually garnered a reply.

TILLY: Uncle Lin died because he was hit by a bus. And I’ve told you to stop calling me Tilly. I go by Bert.

VERA: Don’t talk back to your elders. I raise you better than that. And what is wrong with Tilly? It’s a good name, your Baba and I think long and hard about your name, you should treasure it.

This was followed by more silence from Tilly. But no matter. There is no time for her wayward son right now, because Vera is about to start her morning walk, and morning walks are a serious business. First, there is the stretching. Many people her age complain of stiff joints and unbending limbs, but Vera goes into a low squat without much difficulty and bends at

the waist until the tips of her fingers touch her sneakers. When he was a teen, Tilly had been extremely embarrassed about Vera's stretching routine. He'd begged her to do it in the privacy of their home instead of on the sidewalk, but one needs fresh air to properly stretch, and anyway, Tilly should be proud that his mother is setting such a good example for their neighbors.

With her muscles sufficiently warmed up, Vera gets into walking position—chin up, chest out, and elbows perpendicular to her body. Then she begins to walk, her fists swinging in front of her chest with the enthusiasm of a North Korean soldier at a national parade. Vera's morning walk can only be described as vigorous. She is a general on the warpath, eating up the miles with ruthless efficiency. Anyone foolish enough to get in her way is met with a cutting glare (which is invisible behind the sunglasses and the visor), but Vera relishes having to swerve around passersby, as it is a chance for her to put her agility and quick reflexes to the test.

For her last birthday, Tilly gave her a Samsung watch that could measure her steps, but Vera sees no need for it, because she knows exactly how many steps her daily route takes: 3,112 steps, starting on Trenton and Pacific, where her house is, down along Washington, where all the mom-and-pop grocery stores and souvenir shops are preparing to open for the day. Some of the shop owners wave at Vera and call out greetings, but they all know she can't stop for a chat, not when she's on her morning walk. Still, Vera has impeccable manners, so she calls out niceties in Mandarin like, "Wah, the melons look good, Mr. Hong!" or "The weather is finally warming up, Sister Zhao!" as she zips past.

She slows down a little in front of the café that sprouted like a particularly pustulant pimple two years ago on Washington. The owner is a rude millennial who doesn't even live in Chinatown. Vera's mouth twists in a sneer as she walks past, and as she always does every morning, she places a silent curse on the café. Even its name irks her. The Café. She can just imagine the kind of confusion it has caused to its customers. *Where would you like to go? The Café. Right, which one? The Café! WHICH ONE?* You'd think that with a name like that, the Café would have folded long ago. But no, in defiance of all logic, not only did it not go under, it

flourished, stealing customers from the older shops in the vicinity. Often, when Vera sits in her quiet tea shop, her mind wanders to the Café and it ruins her perfectly wonderful tea. Truly, the Café and its horribly unhealthy product—coffee, ugh—are a blight on San Franciscans, nay, on humanity.

When she gets down to the Dragon Gate of Chinatown on Bush Street, she turns the corner and walks along Stockton all the way to Woh Hei Yuen, where the Tai Chi Quan group is just starting their routine. Her husband, Jinlong, came here every day up until he had his stroke. He often tried to get Vera to join him, but Vera did not see the point in tai chi. Too slow to do much good, surely. It's about as effective as yoga, which is to say, not very. Each time after Jinlong finished with tai chi, Vera would check his pulse and he never once broke eighty. What is even the point? Still, she walks through Woh Hei Yuen and waves at the tai chi group and ignores the way her heart cracks a little when she sees that Jinlong isn't among the slow-moving people. Silly woman, of course Jinlong isn't here, he is safe in a silver urn in her living room, and that's that.

First thing Vera does at the end of each walk is to press her thumb against the inside of her wrist and measure her heart rate. Satisfied that it's at a respectable ninety-two beats per minute, Vera trudges inside, through her dark tea shop and up the stairs back to her living quarters. After an invigorating cold shower, Vera eats a well-balanced breakfast of congee, preserved duck eggs, and fermented tofu. Finally, she toddles back down and bustles about tidying up and preparing her shop.

As a teenager, Tilly delighted in pointing out the inaccuracies in the name Vera Wang's World-Famous Teahouse.

"First of all, nobody knows about it, so it's really not 'world-famous,' " he said with a roll of his eyes.

Vera tutted, but before she could answer, Jinlong said, "Not true, your mother was very well-known back in China for her teas. Many customer come from faraway places just to taste her tea."

"Mm-hmm," Tilly said, clearly unconvinced. He quickly moved on to his next attack. "And why is it called Vera *Wang*? You're Vera *Wong*."

"Ah," Jinlong said with an admiring glance at Vera. "That's because your mother is very smart lady, very savvy. Vera Wang is very famous

person, even white people know her name. So your mother said we might as well name it after her.”

“That’s called misrepresentation, Baba,” Tilly snapped. “You guys could get sued!” Then he added, very spitefully, Vera thought, “If anyone knew about this teahouse, that is. But I guess since nobody knows of its existence, it doesn’t matter.”

Jinlong only laughed and patted Tilly on the back. “Oh, er zi, you are so full of knowledge about the law. Maybe you go to law school, eh?”

Things were so much easier back then, when Jinlong was around to act as a buffer between Vera and Tilly. After Jinlong’s death, the relationship between mother and son had sagged slowly but inevitably into almost nothing. Tilly did indeed go to law school. Tilly is now a junior associate at a fancy law firm near the Embarcadero, with offices so high up that you can see the car lights twinkling on the Bay Bridge at night. Not that Vera would know; it’s not like Tilly ever invites her to his office, but she likes to imagine what Tilly sees when he gazes out of his office window.

Stop thinking about Tilly, Vera scolds herself as she lifts the last chair from the table and sets it on the floor. She goes to the front door and flips the sign from CLOSED to OPEN, then she walks behind the counter, perches on her stool, and awaits her customers.

Vera Wang’s World-Famous Teahouse is open for business.

TWO



VERA

Truth be told, Tilly wasn't wrong when he pointed out that calling Vera's teahouse "world-famous" was stretching the truth just a tad. It is true that back in Guangzhou, Vera ran a teahouse that enjoyed a steady stream of loyal customers as well as the occasional out-of-towner who had heard of her special concoctions. But here in San Francisco, California, she'd had to start from scratch. In its best years, Vera Wang's World-Famous Teahouse attracted more than its fair share of regulars despite its humble positioning, tucked between Lucky Laundry on one side and Winifred's Patisserie on the other. But the customer base was mostly elderly immigrants, and over the years, the steady stream turned into a trickle, then a drip, and now, the only remaining customer Vera can rely on is Alex.

This morning, as on all other mornings, Vera heaves up her tome-sized ledger from a cabinet and sets it down with a soft thump on the counter. She puts on her reading glasses and peers down at her ledger, her eyebrows going up in an effort to help her read the tiny handwriting.

May 23rd—Prunella vulgaris, dried watermelon peel, goji berries

May 22nd—Luo han guo, premium bird's nest, rock sugar

May 21st—Fragrant toasted barley, chrysanthemum, candied winter melon peel

May 20th—Osmanthus buds, oolong

A small smile touches the corners of Vera's mouth as she reviews the list of teas she concocted for her best customer. He particularly enjoyed the fragrant toasted barley, and no wonder, as its smoky taste went beautifully with the vanilla scent of the chrysanthemum and the sweetness of the candied winter melon peel. What should she make today? Taking off her glasses, Vera gets up from her stool and reviews the floor-to-ceiling cabinet behind the counter.

Vera's tea cabinet is a thing of wonder. It has exactly 188 little drawers, each one filled with some high-quality ingredient shipped from the dewy hills of China. Okay, so Tilly had once pointed out in his usual disagreeable way that many of those ingredients haven't been used in years and are probably expired. Vera would be the first to admit that perhaps the Tianchi tea might be past its best years and should be thrown out along with at least twenty other ingredients that she hasn't checked on for years, but she'll get round to doing it when she does a huge spring clean of her magical drawers. It's just that with the lack of customers, she hasn't had to even think about these ingredients that nobody has asked for.

Anyway, on to the present matter. Vera taps her chin twice, thinking, then climbs up a little stepladder and opens a drawer. Jujubes, also known as dried red dates. They're subtly sweet and would go well with—oh, what is she thinking? Jujubes are so heaty. Alex has too much yang, which means he is naturally a bit too heaty, so she mustn't give him any jujubes, no matter how wonderful they taste. Vera climbs down the stepladder and turns now to her counter display, which has about two dozen of the more popular ingredients. Right, ah, yes, she'd bought a big pack of mung beans the other day from Mrs. Ong's shop. That would do well. She scoops out the little emerald-colored beans and pours them onto her traditional Chinese weighing scales, narrowing her eyes like Shaina from *Love Is Blind* season two as she works out the perfect proportion for Alex and his poor wife, Lily. Once she has the right amount weighed, she transfers it into a small mesh bag. Then she drops in two pieces of rock sugar and a knot of pandan leaves and pulls the drawstring closed. There. All Alex has to do is plop that into some water and let it boil for fifteen minutes, and he and Lily can enjoy a nice, healthy beverage that has cooling properties.

Like clockwork, the little bell on the front door jangles as Alex pushes it open. The sound always makes Vera smile. She likes Alex, the only true gentleman remaining in this era.

“Ni hao, Alex,” she calls out.

“Zao an hao,” Alex replies. He’s wearing his usual tired smile as he shuffles to his favorite seat in the teahouse, the one right by the window.

“And how are you today? The usual?” Vera says in Mandarin as she fills her potbellied kettle and puts it on the stove. Though Alex is always happy to take her special mixed herbal teas home, he never deviates from his morning tea, which is a pot of Tieguanyin. Tieguanyin, which translates to Iron Goddess of Mercy, is a type of oolong from Fujian, though it tastes nothing like oolong. It’s quite bitter when it first hits the tongue, but once swallowed, it leaves behind the most delightful sweetness in the mouth, clean and comforting. It’s one of Vera’s favorite teas, and she takes care to brew it right.

When the kettle is boiling, Vera takes out a small clay teapot and two teacups half the size of a shot glass. She sets them on a draining rack next to the sink and pours the boiling water all over them, ensuring that the cups and pot are scalding hot. Quickly, she transfers them to a tray and scoops some Tieguanyin into the little pot before filling it up with hot water. She then pours out the first brew, which is meant to scald away any harshness from the leaves, and refills the pot with more hot water before bringing the tray to Alex’s table.

Alex smiles as Vera sets the tray down and pours both of them some tea. He lifts his cup delicately, touching only the rim to avoid burning himself, and takes a sip. He inhales deeply, his eyes fluttering shut in an expression of bliss. “Mm, no one can make tea quite like you do. Lily misses this place so.”

Poor Lily, Vera thinks for the millionth time. At least a few times a day, when her thoughts go to Alex, Vera utters a small sigh and thinks, *Poor Lily*. She was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s a year ago and deteriorated quickly, to the point where she never leaves her house. Alex refuses to let anyone else take care of his beloved wife, choosing to live like a hermit. The only time he allows himself to go out is when he stops by Vera’s for ten minutes, while Lily is still sleeping. He actually sets a

timer for himself, in case he and Vera get carried away chatting. He doesn't even get his own groceries. One of his sons—the filial one—does the weekly shopping and drops it off at his front door every Sunday. It is this son who Vera chooses to bring up this morning, because Alex looks extra tired and Vera knows the mention of his son will cheer him up.

“Tell me, how is Facai doing?” Facai means “striking wealth,” a great name, which has brought Alex's son much fortune. Vera approves of it. She wishes Tilly would go by his Chinese name too.

As expected, the corners of Alex's eyes crinkle as he smiles. “Oh, wonderfully, just wonderfully. He is truly favored by the gods. He's been in such good spirits these days; he says that things are going swimmingly with his business.”

“Ah yes, of course.” Vera nods sagely as she sips her tea. “Well, there is no chance of him not succeeding with you and Lily as his parents.” She's not flattering Alex; like many Chinese elders, Vera truly believes that the bulk of anyone's success is thanks to their parents' hard work and sacrifice.

But it becomes apparent that she's said the wrong thing. Alex's smile loses its vibrance and he lowers his eyes. “I wish I could agree with that sentiment, but for my other son, Jiancheng.” Jiancheng means “strength and stability,” but from everything Vera knows about Alex's second son, he is anything but strong and stable.

“I'm sorry to hear that, but I empathize with your suffering.” Vera has spent many of these conversations complaining about Tilly, and it's over the numerous ways that their sons have disappointed them that a true bond of friendship has been forged between Vera and Alex. “I sent Mingjin a text this morning when I woke up to make sure he's awake too, and until now I have yet to receive a reply. What other mother would be so attentive to text her grown son every morning? But does he appreciate it?”

Alex scoffs and shakes his head. “These young people, they don't understand the many sacrifices we've made for them. When I was young, I would never have let my parents wake up before me. No, I was always awake before they were, polishing my father's shoes. My baba never went to work with dirty shoes, all because of me.”

“Yes, exactly!” Vera crows, her chest expanding with righteous energy. “This is precisely what I’m referring to. Every morning, I had a hot breakfast ready for my parents. Hah! This younger generation, they don’t know how good they have it.”

“Lily always spoiled them, you know.” Alex’s eyes soften. “She said they’re behaving like normal American kids, and isn’t that what we wanted?”

Vera sighs. “She has a point.”

They both gaze into their teacups wistfully.

“And how is Lily?” She hates asking this question, because there hasn’t been a positive response for close to half a year now, but she feels obliged to do so.

Alex’s shoulders slump. “She’s the same.”

Meaning she rarely has a moment of lucidity. When Lily is awake now, she spends most of her time snapping at Alex to stay away and demanding that he let her see her husband. It’s taken the life out of Alex. The only source of joy he has now is Facai and these short teatimes with Vera. Altogether too soon, though, his timer goes off, and Alex finishes the last of his tea. Vera hurries to the counter and picks up the bag she prepared for him earlier.

“Here,” she says, pressing the mesh bag into his hands. “Mung beans and pandan. Boil for fifteen minutes, maybe twenty if you want it richer in flavor.”

“You are too good to us,” Alex protests, but by now, he knows it is a losing battle and pockets the bag without too much back-and-forth. When Lily was healthier, Alex used to spend a full five minutes arguing with Vera over paying her for her teas, but time is in short supply these days.

Vera watches him walk down the block to his apartment building, a dilapidated, aging building with ten units, all of them filled with graying tenants. So much of Chinatown is like that, slowly fading away. The kernel of sadness in Vera’s heart grows, becoming heavier until it is overwhelming. Because, as much as she would love to tell Tilly that he’s wrong, Vera knows deep in her soul that her teahouse is far from world-famous. The opposite, in fact. And watching the first and last customer of the day walk away kills Vera just a little bit every day. She already knows