

## Next Generation Translator

My daughter kicked her feet in frustration. “I hate this.” She sat at the dining room table doing her Mandarin Chinese homework. “Why do I have to learn it?”

My head throbbed. Not even five minutes into the lesson, and she was already complaining. I leaned forward with my patient mommy facial expression, eyes widened, and big smile. “This is your grandma’s native language, Kali.”

“It’s hard.”

“It takes time. You’ll get it. See...” I pointed to a Chinese character she wrote. “The stroke orders are perfect.”

“So?” Kali rolled her eyes. “I still don’t see the point of this.”

“It’s beautiful and your grandma’s native language.”

“You already said that.”

I blew through my teeth and approached the answer to her question from a different angle. “Learning the language will allow you to live and work anywhere in the world when you get older. Wouldn’t it be fun to live in Taiwan and see your cousins often? You can even speak to them in—”

“They speak English.”

“What about Auntie Zhen and Uncle G-Yong? They don’t.” I fumbled around for more reasons and pointed to the art piece hanging on the wall. “Remember that painting you used to ask me about? Just think, you’ll be able to read the characters of the poem all by yourself. Wouldn’t that be great?”

Kali turned to scratching the scrapings off the end of her pencil eraser in a dismissive move that left me longing for the days at the dining room table when my mom joked about

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haggling her most prized possession from a sleazy street vendor. Laughter would fill the room as we—dad, sister, and I—couldn't get enough of her endless bargaining voices.

“Can I go to the bathroom?”

I turned to my daughter. Now, it was all about complaining, bathroom breaks, and heartaches. When she left the table, I headed into the kitchen and checked for the doneness of the steamed rice in the rice cooker. After adding more water, I went back to the dining room table. Kali was there, drawing a mermaid on the top corner of her Chinese homework.

*This is going to be a long afternoon.*

The grueling thirty-minute-at-most worksheet usually took Kali two hours to complete. Sometimes longer with the nonstop doodling. At the end of the session, her paper would resemble a kid's activity placemat at Denny's. Colorful animals, odd shapes, and random lines leading to nowhere except to interfere with the stroke order of her assignment.

I closed my eyes, picturing myself on a beach in the Bahamas, the sun warming my skin. The trip lasted all but two seconds when a pencil slammed on the table. I opened my eyes to see Kali twirling in the office chair, her wavy, brown hair spinning around and around.

“Kali. Focus. Focus Kali.”

She stopped rotating and pointed to her baby brother snoring in the playpen. “Why doesn't he have to learn Chinese?”

“He's two.” I swallowed hard and then redirected her attention back to the paper. “You're almost done. You can do it.”

Kali returned to her homework, scribbling the Chinese characters on the paper.

My voice deepened, “Write it better.”

She gave me the side eye, then erased it vigorously to where the paper ripped.

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I leaned back in my chair, rubbing my temples.

*You're nine. You don't understand. You will. This is for your future.*

My self-assuring pep talk, using her age as an excuse, boosted my confidence. However, that feeling didn't last as pencils rolled around the table and dropped to the floor, taking my heart with it.

“Ugh, where's my pencil?”

Irritation revved inside me and traveled throughout my body, from my toenails to the top of my crown. I gritted through my teeth, “You're learning the language to keep in touch with our family in Taiwan. Because when I die, the connection dies.” The outburst took me back to growing up with my mom as our family translator.

She spoke to me in her native language until I entered kindergarten. After the school year ended, she stopped, worried my English would turn out fractured like some of the other military wives' children with their heavy accents. My dad, on the other hand, believed we'd never go back to Taiwan, so learning was pointless.

“I hate this.” Kali ranted. “I don't want to learn it. It's too hard. Why can't I go to a different school where we only learn English?”

Her barrage of complaints propelled me from the dinner table and to the kitchen, where I hovered over a plate of wontons I had prepared earlier from my mom's recipe book. I snagged one of the fried pork delights and crunched down on the number one requested family favorite, picturing myself standing next to her all those years ago. Elbow to elbow. Throwing down in the kitchen. With her notebook cracked open, I'd asked what characters represented which ingredients. I'd write them down in my own notebook, while helping her mix, fill, and fold the dumplings.

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My mom never tired of being our Chinese-to-English translator, even when watching her favorite soap opera, *The Seven Brothers*, an adventurous martial arts saga of kings, queens, and common folks. She spent hours explaining the character names, relationships, motives, and storylines. Whenever we visited the Chinese markets or restaurants, she ordered for us. In Taiwan, she was our tour guide, introducing me and my sister to aunties, uncles, cousins, and friends from her childhood.

My mom passed away when I was twenty-nine years old. In her sleep. Sudden. My world flipped sideways as I contemplated ways to get the message to her family in Taiwan. I visited the Buddhist Temple she attended regularly, gripping her handwritten notebook containing contact information for relatives and friends. The monks pried the pages from my trembling hands and called each number until they came across my mom's oldest sister, Akame.

A shrill cry escaped from the woman I had seen a handful of times but understood to be my mom's closest sibling growing up. The monks talked fast to calm her down, but the howls she released carried across the Pacific Ocean, from Taipei to San Diego, and exploded in a barrage of high and low tones that I couldn't make out, except for my name. She called it a dozen times while I wailed, "mama...mama..."

As promised, I gave my mom a Buddhist funeral. Monks in golden robes chanted words that reminded me of her. Deep down, I believed that whatever they recited, sent her on a heavenly journey to the place where my dad resided. Together, they would finally be, and no longer would she suffer from a soul mate ripped away too young, cutting her heart in half.

Akame and the rest of my relatives kept in contact the only way we knew how, through Facebook with happy and sad face emojis.

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One day, about a year later, that changed. I received a longer message. The temple translated.

Akame passed.

My heart fell, and memories of my mom resurfaced. A yearning to learn the language surged because, like strings on a musical instrument, it was only a matter of time before that last one snapped. My heritage—lost and floating away—would become as if the world my mom and I shared never existed.

I enrolled at a community college and struggled through years of learning Chinese. I imagined my mom cheering me on because I believed she would have finally understood how not teaching her native language affected my well-being after her death. I kept our same traditions, Asian market Saturdays and Buddhist Temple Sundays. I stumbled through her recipe book, whipping up broccoli beef and shrimp fried rice. When the learning process kicked me down, I'd show up at community functions like the Chinese New Year's and Mid-Autumn Festival. With my kinky hair and misuse of tones, I'd tell myself, I'm not turning back.

“Mommy, I need help.”

My daughter's voice drew me from my memories. I hurried to the dining room table as she stumbled through pronouncing a sentence. “I don't get what it means.”

I took a deep breath, bringing myself to the purpose of this entire ordeal, and how I had had enough. I almost said forget it, put it away for another day because I was tired. Tired of trying. Tired of convincing. That is, until her meek voice asked, “Tell me the direct translation again. I think it's saying, you like drink what?”

“You're correct,” I said, giving her a gentle squeeze on the shoulder.

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She giggled and asked me to repeat the direct translation. Her attention now focused on word combinations like ‘cell phone’ which ended up being ‘hand machine’ and ‘computer’ which became ‘electric brain.’ I forgot how much she loved learning new words and phrases this way, the same way I learned. She couldn’t get enough, and for several moments, I took pride in the dialect rolling off my tongue, wishing my mom could see me now, following in her footsteps as the new family translator.

The first time I utilized this skill was when I visited my Taiwan relatives for the first time since my mom passed. The sixteen-hour plane ride proved nerve-wracking, until the moment my sister and I exited customs. A long line of family members yelled our names and waved signs that read “Welcome Home” in Chinese characters. I turned to my sister, translating every foreign writing and word tone to come across my eyes and ears.

“Finished,” Kali said. She threw down her pencil and ran off.

I stared at her finished homework, aching for my mom, wishing she could have met her granddaughter, and wishing she were here by my side, encouraging me to continue to learn our heritage language.