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“M” for Mother, “P” for Process

Growing up, I didn't think the letter “M” existed. It's funny because it's such a common letter: Mother, man, muffin, math, more, etc., all started with the letter “M” and they were definitely all words I would say regularly, but it didn't register in my head that those words began with the letter I preached didn't exist. My mother taught me basic English growing up. I was nearing the age of starting school and my lack of English proficiency was starting to worry her, so my childhood was spent with learning software she would buy from Sam's Club and colorful books from the public library that were often about some funky animal taking a bath. My mother saw these as gifts that she wished she had growing up, and so often she would exclaim to me that if only she had these growing up in China, she would've been fluent in English too, and she wouldn't have struggled so badly on her English exams in school. My elementary classrooms were all lined with a colorful strip of the alphabet along the ceiling, and my classmates would point it out to me when I told them that it wasn't a letter, but I would simply shake my head and place their hands onto my lap. “Trust me,” I would say, “My mom told me so and she's a doctor. She knows these things.” After a particularly loud argument one day in class that caused me to get sent to the principal's, I went home embarrassed and angered. I told her what had happened and she laughed so hard that tears sprained out her eyes and she flicked my forehead. “You can't believe everything I say, Serena. I am trying to learn just like you.” She was correct, after all, English wasn't her first language either, but to my kindergarten self, I saw this as betrayal. I didn't understand that she didn't know the English alphabet, that she missed the letter “M” while writing flashcards for me. To kindergarten me, this was the first instance where I couldn't help but wish my mother was fluent in English.

My mother was a doctor but in China. She gave that up after moving to America and chose to be a stay at home mom so that my dad could continue on his journey in medicine without having to worry

about the kids alone at home. They believed that it was only right that my mother, as a woman, would stay home to look after the house. It's one of her biggest regrets in life, and a big reason why she pushes me so hard to succeed in school. "Without education, you are nothing. Don't just depend on men, you need to be independent, and the only way you can get there is with education," she would lecture, but I would wave it off, more engrossed in whatever was preoccupying my attention at the time. But as I grow older, I'm starting to understand why she thinks so.

Of all the learning that can be done in the world, my mother believes language is the most powerful. I didn't agree for a long time. Language is easy, it's something that's second nature to me at this point. But to my mother, who can't speak fluent English, it's the biggest thing preventing her from living comfortably in this world. I think kids of immigrant parents always need to grow up faster. You grow up translating what the doctor says, translating what the restaurant menu says, what the medical forms say. At the age of 8, I was translating legal jargon to my mother. At the age of 10, I was listing off all the symptoms of leukemia in Chinese to my mother. It's funny because I can fluently list off all sorts of diseases in Chinese, yet I still don't know how to say the word "brown." My mother's dream for me was to speak fluent English, to excel in America, to have an American name, to be an American girl. I, however, would rather spend time playing Wizard101. But my mother is a determined individual, so every morning, she would sit next to me in front of the computer monitor, with the learning software up, and I would repeat after her. "Ah" she would pronounce for "A" and I would wholeheartedly yell it back, "AHHH!" She pronounced a lot of the English letters like how she would pronounce the Chinese pinyin equivalent, so naturally, my version of English was very off because of this. "L" and "R" were the hardest letters for both of us. There was no Chinese equivalent sound so we both had fun trying to mimic what the internet would say, only to hear how far off in pronunciation we were. As my English progressed, my mom always had me say "umbrella" to her so she could learn as well. I used to sit next to her in the kitchen, kneading the little square of dough my mom let me play with as she made dumplings, chanting "umbrella, umbrella, umbrella" as she repeats after me.

Even now my mom still struggles with pronouncing “umbrella” but, like everything in life, it’s a work in progress.

In second grade, in art class, a kid told me that he didn’t want to be my friend because I was Asian. The girl sitting next to him snickered before gasping and whispering loudly “That’s racist!” I was confused. I didn’t really understand what he was saying and I didn’t understand what it meant. I knew I was hurt by it, but I didn’t know why. “What’s racism?” I asked and the girl looked at me with wide eyes, her mouth agape, and she giggled. “It’s when people don’t like you because of your race.” But I still didn’t understand. What’s race? Like running? I wasn’t stupid though. From the way the boy next to me sat with his head down, eyes averted and the two kids across from me giggling obscenely, I decided to stay quiet and finish my drawing. I went home to my mom that night and asked her what racism is, but she didn’t know either. So she pulled out her little electronic dictionary, and she sounded the word out with me as we tried to figure out how exactly to spell it. After this, I was acutely aware of how different I looked from the other kids in my class, and I grew conscious of the looks from strangers as my mother spoke to me in Mandarin. I would have my mother talk in hushed whispers, and in my head, I couldn’t help but wish she spoke fluent English.

It seems to be an universal experience for children of immigrants to get a “culture shock” of sorts when they see their parents in their native country. Everytime we visit China, I couldn’t help but feel shocked at seeing my parents so at ease and in their element. You spend so many years translating everything, and suddenly, it’s not you who is translating what the KFC menu says, but your mother, as she explains what’s in the dinner combo. In China, I no longer filled out the paperwork for the hospital visit, I no longer guided my parents through the airport, I no longer spoke to the front desk of the hotel to check in. And to a young and insecure teenager, this caused so much bitterness about what life could have been. How life would have been so easy if only my mother were fluent. Or so I thought.

I have only been alive for eighteen years, but sometimes I ponder if I truly *have* been alive for eighteen years. I spent such a big portion of it denouncing my heritage and playing dress up to appeal to my white peers that looking back, I almost feel as if that wasn’t a part of my life, because in the real

sense, that wasn't me. And to this day, I can't help but wonder how my relationship with my mother would have been if I didn't see translating for her as a burden, but as a way I could help one of the most important persons in my life. I like to joke about how old I am now, but it's moments like this when I realize just how little life experience I have. I want everything to be settled with no loose ends, but one of the biggest things I've learned in life is how everything is a process.

My mother is still learning how to pronounce "umbrella" in a fluent, American accent, and we laugh until there are tears in our eyes as we repeat the word so much our tongues twist and our ears ring as the word doesn't even sound comprehensible anymore. I am still learning how to accept my culture. Because there are times where I am so confident in who I am as a person, and in just seconds, in just one lingering glance or one snarky remark, I just as quickly duck my head and lower my voice in hopes that if I just stay silent, I will blend into the crowd. Like everything in life, this is still a process, but everyday I encounter, the easier it gets. One thing I have realized, however, one loose end that I have tied in my life, is the importance of my mother to me.

I no longer see my mother's lack in fluency as betrayal. I no longer wish for her to be fluent day in and day out. I used to translate things for my mother out of need. She needed me to translate or else we wouldn't be able to accomplish anything. But now, I translate out of want, because I have grown. I am no longer the insecure 8-year-old who feared standing out. I can realize the sacrifices she has made for me to have a better life. And I have realized that my mother is learning, just like I am.

