

Kelly Ren

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School : Thomas S. Wootton High School

BRIDGING THE CULTURAL GAPS ESSAY CONTEST - Dear Mom, Dear Dad

Dear Mama,

I almost got in a car accident last week. I didn't tell you because I didn't want to worry you, but it was on that cold Tuesday morning as I was rushing out of the house for school. I sprinted to my car, realizing I was going to be late that morning. The layer of snowflakes were frozen on the windshield and even after starting the car, the hot air didn't seem to melt the ice. As my watch continued to tick, I decided to just start driving, hoping that the icy layer would clear soon.

As I drove past our street, my heart dropped and the world went silent. A car had appeared out of nowhere, blasting their horn. I pulled over to the side of the road to sit and wait, this time for the ice to melt completely. As I sat there, I realized that I had no idea that it took so long to defrost because I was never the one waiting in the car. When I was younger, during the winter time you would always leave the house first to warm the car up for me, so that I wouldn't be cold while we were waiting. It never hit me until last week that you did that every single time for 17 years.

That day afterschool, I wanted to come home and say "Thank you Mama. Thank you for

everything. Thank you for all the little things you do for me.” But I didn’t know how to. I want to be able to say so much to you, but I know that being vulnerable doesn’t come easy within our culture.

I’ve never told you this, but I am forever grateful for the way you raised me. Teaching me to be trilingual, forcing me to go to Chinese school every Sunday, celebrating every Chinese holiday, and most of all, giving me a cross-cultural upbringing. I don’t think you ever knew this but growing up, I had a really hard time finding a balance between my own two cultures. I struggled for a long time figuring out if I was Chinese or if I was American. Too white amongst our family friends and being called the “white-washed Asian”, but also too Chinese amongst my white friends, getting called racial slurs at school. It made me feel like I didn’t have a place where I belonged and I didn’t know how to fit in.

One of my most heartbreaking memories was in Kindergarten when I brought my favorite meal to school- fish fried rice. I remember getting ready to dig in, taking in a delicious whiff of my favorite home cooked dinner. The excitement came crashing down as the kids at the table told me that my lunch stank with disgusted tones. With a red-face and head hung low, I ended up throwing the entire lunch away. There was a point in time where I would trash my lunch every day if it was Chinese food because I didn’t want to feel embarrassed. The delicious Chinese dinner I had snarfed down the night before always felt different when I was eating near kids who’d scrunch their noses and whisper. I remember so vividly the hurt look on your face when I begged you to give me lunch money so that I could eat frozen, gloppy, rubbery school mystery meat, instead of your home cooked lunches.

However, there have definitely been times where I had resented your strict parenting style. I didn’t understand why my phone used to get taken if I did poorly on a test, when Lizzie’s

mom never took away her phone. I didn't understand why I couldn't miss a Chinese school class for my best friend's birthday party. I didn't understand why you knocked down my dreams of being an actress when I was little. You would always just say “你是中國人”, you are Chinese. I used to hate that phrase, but as I've gotten older this phrase has had a new meaning in my life.

I can't imagine how hard it must have been for you to raise me. Being a single immigrant mother, figuring out what Chinese traditions to pass on, but also trying to adapt to Western culture. You've taught me that being a 中國人 is something to be proud of and something to celebrate. Watching you get red envelopes ready for Chinese New Year brings the holiday to life every year. Your generosity is something that I have always admired. Even though almost all of my friends are white, you never hesitate to share our culture with them. Our tradition of delivering red envelopes to everyone's house is something that I look forward to every February.

I see the hard work you've put in to pave the way for a bright future for me. The constant push from you to make me go above and beyond has paid off so much. I used to think you were a tiger mom, but as I grew older I realized you were far from that. As each year goes on, you have given me more and more freedom. You've taught me the motto of “Work Hard, Play Hard”. It was because of the way you trained me that now I succeed in school. But Mama, you've inspired me in ways you don't even know. Yes, your rules have built up my independence and work ethic, but you've also taught me life-long lessons that I couldn't have gotten from anyone else. Growing up as a daughter from a single mother, you've proven to me countless times the true value of never giving up. Penny by penny, you built yourself up from nothing. You've shown me the importance of kindness, and that kindness is not something you do but who you are. It's because of you that I can be Class President of Wootton and a board member of the National

Honor Society, but also want to spend my weekends volunteering for the less fortunate. It's because of your blunt criticism and pure heart that I put 110% in everything I do.

One of my fondest memories of us was when you took me to Hong Kong a few years ago, showing me where you grew up. It was the first time you ever told me about your childhood. I remember your eyes lighting up, taking me places you used to love going to as a kid. You opened up a part of yourself that I don't get to see very often, and it made me feel so special.

It's so easy for me to write all of this down because it's exactly how I feel, I just don't know how to say it in person. I want to be able to have a relationship where we can talk about our feelings and emotions, but I know that's not how you grew up. I'm curious as to how it was growing up with Grandpa and Grandma, who are even more traditional. Did you have these same feelings?

I know that you're not good at showing affection and giving me words of affirmation, but that's okay because I know that you love me. It took some time for me to realize but your actions speak so much louder than anything you could say. I want to learn everything there is to know about you- your hardships, your hopes, and your dreams. I want to live through that moment again in Hong Kong where you shared that little side with me. Mama, you are my ultimate inspiration. The beautiful woman from whom I gained my best qualities from. You never let me believe I couldn't accomplish anything I set my mind to and you've guided me through these incredible 17 years. I wish I could show you yourself through my eyes, and I know I don't say it enough but I love you. Words will never be able to fully express how thankful I am to have you.

Love,

Kelly Ren