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Dear Mom and Dad,

You might remember this, but some Monday a couple weeks back, Mom took me to get my hair cut. The hairdresser was Chinese, and he and Mom struck up a conversation in Mandarin as we waited for him to finish with the client before me. After, he took me to the back to shampoo my hair, and as he was toweling off my scalp, he said something about my hair.

I asked him to repeat himself. He did, but I couldn't parse out enough meaning with enough surety, so at that point I was forced to admit, "My Chinese isn't very good."

"Oh," he said, then translated for me. "Your hair is so long."

A simple sentence. I did recognize that, after he'd said it in English, a wisp of that sort of idea—that approximate shade of meaning—had crossed my mind, just not opaque enough for me to trust myself in the guess. It happens sometimes.

The hairdresser led me back to the chair, started cutting my hair, returned to chatting with Mom, while I sat there in silence, sort of eavesdropping, as much as one can eavesdrop on a conversation in a language that can so easily sound completely foreign to them. I realized I never asked the hairdresser's name. I also realized that it felt absurd, being in that chair and not

making a single sound as the chatter floated above my head, seeing the other clients in the salon making casual conversation through the hair draped over my face. My fingers itched for my phone. I didn't say anything.

And it made me think, *Man, the universe has really been handing me a shit ton of reminders of everything I signed up to miss by not learning Chinese.* I remembered a conversation I'd had with my therapist about how uncomfortable I feel when I talk to my grandparents, your parents, when you're on video call with them and ask me to say hi. There's a shame in it, I remember saying, and a weird, yucky feeling, not being able to communicate with my own relatives. Like not being able to do something you should. And it's so *awkward*. I say hi, they say hi back, and then I have nothing else to say, and if they ask questions then you, my parents, have to translate, and I never know where to look or how to feel and I'm always just waiting for the interaction to end.

The thing is, I understand that there wasn't really a right time for me to learn the language. All of my friends in Chinese school were miserable, giving up their Saturdays every week to study in a dreary, stuffy classroom, and I hadn't felt any need to learn, back then. The language of school in America is English, and that's what was filling my head at the time. So you didn't force me to go to Chinese school, and I'm grateful. But it makes it no less painful, knowing that I had, however unwittingly, cut myself off from so much. Every moment I'm in a Chinese supermarket or business, or when my Chinese American peers at school use Mandarin around me, it aches just a bit.

I'm in the dark, all the time, about the culture of your home. I'm in the dark about your conversations sometimes. I've never felt entirely like I'm in the right place, hearing you talk in Chinese with someone else while I watch in uncomfortable silence.

And you'd think, having traded Saturdays of studying Chinese for reading books in English, that I'd used the time to fit into another world. But I'm not quite all-American either. My first boyfriend was white, and he and I were always conscious of the racial barrier between us.

And with my non-Asian friends, there are always experiences I have that they don't understand, aspects of my life that are puzzling to them the same way their lives are sometimes puzzling to me. Sometimes the realization that I grew up in a Chinese household is all the more startling when I find a different home to contrast it against; little moments when I realize, *Ah, our lives are different*. I can't quite put my finger on it, but there's something that my Chinese friends just *get* that my other ones don't.

But unlike my Chinese friends, I was not a good Chinese daughter; I did not learn the language or absorb the culture. In fact, I don't feel like a daughter at all, and that's another thing I don't know how to tell you. My issues with gender are hard enough to explain to myself, sometimes, but there are days when I'm not a girl, and not a boy, and when I refer to myself in the third person I say *them*, but to you I have always been your daughter and I haven't yet found the courage to refute that, since my few attempted explanations weren't met with any comprehension at all.

It's always the in-between, with me. I live in a liminal space, a world of between, a child of travel. I am the product of leaving home, it seems, and as a result I don't know where home is except in the gap in the middle.

Liminal space, by the way, as a descriptor of the weird world I live in, is a phrase I picked up from a writer I follow on Twitter. They're Japanese-American and biracial, and like me, they are a not-daughter struggling with their mother tongue. Every time they post writing about the tension between them and that language, that culture, that country that isn't quite theirs, it hits me somewhere personal. I haven't read their latest big work—a story about two Asian American boys—despite having tried several times to start; maybe it's because I know a lot of their feelings about Japan and growing up Asian American went into it, and I'm scared of how it will make me feel.

That writer is in college now, and taking Japanese classes. They document their journey of language learning on their Twitter. Recently they went back to Japan and tweeted about it. It's

not good all the time, nothing is, but it's a path on which they are moving forward. It gives me hope.

It's the same kind of hope I got from hearing R. F. Kuang, a favorite author of mine, admit to losing her grasp on Chinese and regaining it in classes. It's that same kind of feeling I got from a graphic novel about a Vietnamese American boy and his mother who finds a way to communicate with him through the telling of fairy tales. It's the feeling I got from Joy's reconciliation with her mother in *Everything Everywhere All At Once*. It's a good feeling. It's nice.

Perhaps you could say that I don't quite feel like I belong in either of the two worlds I know, and you'd probably be right. But there's stories that come from the space between that make me feel like there's a place there for me, in the gap, in the empty hallway. And every time I write a story or a poem or a stray bit of prose about the tension of it, the discomfort, it doesn't feel much better, but it does make more sense. I do feel like it's worth it.

So I'll keep writing about it, and I'll keep reading. In the meantime, please keep translating for me. Please tell me more about Chinese culture, and about all the old stories you grew up with. If you have time, sit and talk with me about something. Anything. I know we've had our share of troubles, but despite everything, I love you, and I'm grateful.

Your child,

Andrea