

Dear Mom,

My name is Emmy Li. My Chinese name is 李明清. I am fifteen years old and in tenth grade. I am the valedictorian in the number one school in Florida. My goal is to get into Harvard or MIT, and in the future I hope to become a professor or an engineer at the very least, just like you. From a young age, I have known that I loved to play piano and violin, and I have a shining row of awards and polished trophies that sit on the living room mantel, displayed for any guest that enters our home. My friends are just like me, top students who don't ever say no to parents or teachers, don't smoke, don't eat unhealthy food, and don't date during high school.

Unfortunately, I am not that child. I'm sorry that I can't live up to your expectations of what a Chinese-American child should be like. I go to an average high school, and am at best an average student. I don't have the courage to tell you that I'm hopeless at music; my hobbies are actually reading and playing video games. I will never dare to tell you that I hope to be an author. I will never get to say that my favorite color is white, or that my favorite food is ice cream, or that my greatest fear is growing up to be someone who disappoints you. But those little bits of me I keep to myself, because they have no place in our conversation.

But despite all of that, I would like to plead my case.

Despite what you and I may want to believe, I am only fifteen. I am in the middle of piecing together a puzzle that is my teenage years, and I have been struggling. In the last few years, I have been caught in the tug-of-war of figuring out who I am and who you want me to be. Whenever I build up the courage to ask for help or express

my ideas, your curt response of “What would a kid like you know about it?” shuts me up fast.

I wish I could say that I have felt the joys of being respected and considerately treated. I wish I could say that I have been treated as an equal. I wish that you could take the time to listen to me, just once.

I have felt blessed to be Chinese-American. I have spoken Chinese since I was young, a language truly and completely foreign to many Americans. I have been immersed in Chinese culture and history, celebrating Lunar New Year, eating dumplings, and sharing traditional folktales. I have family that are selflessly willing to fully support me in my studies and show nothing but the sincerest concern for my well being.

However, sometimes being Chinese-American has made me burn with the most painful shame. We have been called the “model minority,” and you have proudly carried that title with you. We all dream big, we all want to be the best, but my dream is not the same as yours. My dilemma is about how others perceive me, about how you perceive me, and about how I perceive myself.

We are a model minority, but I am not the model that people want to see.

I know I am far from perfect. I know that I do not work as hard as I could. I know that when you were my age, you were doing much better than me under more pressure than I have ever felt in my life. I know you are working harder than you should to compensate for my shortcomings. And for that, I deeply apologize. I hope you can forgive me for all of the misgivings that I have caused. I hope you can forgive

me for the sleepless nights that you have endured because of me. I hope you know that I appreciate everything that you do for me, the responsibilities you have set aside for me, and the time and effort that you have spent on me.

I want to do well in school. But I also want to have long calls on the phone with my friends.

I want to work hard in my extracurricular. But I also want to have time to play video games and watch TV shows.

I want to get into a good college. But I also want to look back on my high school years as a time when I could enjoy being a child for a little while longer.

I know that, in reality, these two wants contradict each other. I know that I do not have enough time in the world to indulge myself in everything I want to do. But I also want to remind you that as a fifteen-year-old, I do not want to be counting down the minutes of my youth. You say there is “only one and a half more years” for me to shape myself into the perfect college applicant, but I say there is “only one and a half more years” for me to know the life of a teenager.

I know that you have lived my experiences and made my mistakes, and I know that your cautions are only because you care. But I also want to remind you that the gentle words of a supervisor cut deeper than the harshest abuse of a bystander. When you have told me that I am not good enough, when you have told me that I don't work hard enough, when you have told me that the future you see in me disappoints you, I have felt shame and guilt for who I am. Those phrases have carved their own little place in my brain.

My self-esteem has been low not because of the many times that Dad has slammed uncapped markers onto the table and yelled at me because of a math concept that I couldn't understand, but because of the fear I have of doing something that doesn't meet your expectations. I am afraid of your judgment. I am afraid that if I am not good at something when I first start, I will have failed you. I am afraid that if I don't push myself to the limit, academically or otherwise, you will see me as lesser. You have come from an environment that places the ultimate stress on mere children and have not only survived, but claimed victory. How can I ever compare with that?

This is not to say that we do not have the same goal. I know you want me to improve just as much as I want me to improve. I know that you know that getting into my dream university would allow me to live with the least amount of regrets weighing down my shoulders as I sleep just as much as I know that. I know you know that my good grades are just as much for me as they are for you. But, as regrettable as it is, I do not have the years of wisdom that you have. I will make the same mistakes again, and again, and again. I will take the time to apologize for my actions in advance, and I hope that you will show me some empathy and care.

Despite all of my shortcomings, I hope you can still consider my strengths. I hope that my humor can bring some joy to you, even through the opaque barrier that is language and culture. I hope that my dedication to studies can provide at least some benefit to what you expect of me, and what I expect of myself. I hope that my fresh outlook on life, my very "American-ized" view on the world, can show you something that you have not seen before. And through all of our arguments and

disagreeing viewpoints, I hope you can tell that you will always be the one that I look to for advice, affirmations, and criticisms.

Your faithful daughter,

Emmy

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