

Mama,

There are many things I want to tell you, but I can't seem to find the right words, in English or Chinese, when I talk to you. They grow in the walls of my throat like vines and become ugly upon the witness of light.

I'm not perfect, Mama. I don't know how to tell you this. When I was young, you used to say to me that some people are born geniuses, and others are not. I used to think that I was born a genius because it seemed that you and Dad hoped I would be one. I hoped, for a very long time, that I would become a genius. Then you could talk about me to the other Chinese mothers at the dinner table, and you wouldn't have to hide me like a thief.

The daughters of your friends bring home armfuls of trophies. They are tactful and polite and can be happy whenever they want to be. They are sorry for me because I am struggling to get where they have been. I am afraid of their mothers, who pry my arms for muscles and interrogate me about my grades and try to ask who I think is dumb in my class. I know that you often fear you failed as a mother, because I am not away at chess tournaments in Brazil every weekend, because I am unhappy sometimes. Because your old ways do not work for me.

I know you are afraid for me although you never say so. We hide behind the silence, peering at the other in fearful anticipation. We never say what we mean. I'd rather we fight.

When you are sorry, you do not say that you are sorry. You give fruit slice apologies, porcelain-besieged citrus cuts whose juice seeps sticky and slow into the creases of my palms like tears.

The day I told you that I loved writing perhaps more than I loved myself, you sat in the car for a very long time. Your knuckles were white on the steering wheel. English is not a *useful* subject the way Computer Science or mathematics is, and I was ashamed. I could not make you understand that I had caught a glimpse of God in literature. I didn't know how to tell you that I want to do something in the world beyond the threshold of a letter grade. As don't describe happiness to me, though we both wished it would. You wouldn't say anything, so I said it again. And then again. My hands were birds waiting to fly from me. The world used to be cruel to you for your dreams and now it might be cruel to me, too.

We do not say *I love you* to each other. *I'm proud of you*, you'd say when you see my report cards or if I win a round in Debate. There would be a pause then, and neither of us would know what to say. The movies I watched did not teach me what to do in scenes like these; inside the neon screens of the theater, love comes easily, rushing into one's lungs like lake water.

I found out in San Diego that you love me. San Diego was rainy when we visited, all clouds and highways. You wouldn't leave this barbeque stand until they finished roasting my food. *They might give you the charred ones if I'm not looking. Charred meat causes cancer, you know,* you kept saying. You stood there for half an hour.

It started raining again when you hurried back to the bench you stationed me on. It was the sort of rain you couldn't feel on your skin but could see fall through the air like threads. When you walked, your belly jostled slightly over the wristbands of your jeans. The chunks of chicken meat you gave me were warm and a tinge too sweet; tasted a little like elastic bands and soggy wood. I thought I would never be happy again because suddenly I realized you loved me so much I didn't know what to do about it.

There are many things I want, though none of them are simple. I want to show you my life without the pauses. I want to be honest and young and ambitious. I want you to know that I am imperfect. I want to tell you I love you.

Mama, let's not be silent anymore.

Your daughter,

Yuan

Required Information:

Date of submission: 1/17/2023

Name: Yuan Cheng

School: Marlborough School