

The Spaces Between

The first time I can remember my father handing me a letter to translate, I am probably somewhere between the age of knowing nothing and thinking that I know everything. Let's approximate and call it ten. I am ten and my dad hands me a page with TAX RETURN written in bold font at the top. My employment history thus far had been earning 20 cents for every white hair I pulled out of my father's scalp; the concept of tax so far removed from my brain which had been predominantly preoccupied with thoughts of boys and the upcoming release of High School Musical. I do my best to make sense of the incomprehensible jargon in front of me. Words like 'employee' and 'financial' stick out.

It probably has something to do with work and money.

He laughs and says in Chinese *I know, but what about work and money?*

In my impatience, I thrust the letter back at him. I am ten and I have bigger things to worry about without the potential of tax evasion weighing on my tiny little shoulders.

By the time I reach high school, I am all too familiar with the art of translating for my parents. My palms sweat every time I have to call Optus and pretend that I am my 50-something year old mother trying to upgrade her phone plan. When the operator asks me the standard security check questions, I stumble over my answers in fear that I will be called out for my low-grade identity theft. I quietly recite the answers over and over in my head with every ring of the dial-tone.

Mary Zhang, 18th of March 1960, 4 Hocking Place Earlwood, 98675986. I didn't know it then but I'll carry this habit with me well into adulthood. I swallow my apprehension as the line clicks.

Hello?

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Ni Hao. It literally translates to 'You well', as in 'Are you well'? It is a greeting built in humility, a tender-hearted gesture that if said correctly, sounds like a warm invitation.

It is roll call for my first class at primary school and I diligently wait for my name to be called. *Jing?* Nobody answers. *Jing? Jin Yow X-U?* The kids on another table snicker at the mangled cacophony of my name. My body becomes hot. My Chinese name sounds so foreign on her tongue that I don't even recognise it until she spells out my surname. I don't answer, shame swelling heavy in my stomach. I wait until she has finished roll call before I raise my hand and tell her mine hasn't been called.

What's your name? she asks me.

Brittany. The even tone of my English name comes out clean, smooth - digestible.

At lunch those same children come up to me with their eyes pulled back *Ni Hao Ni Hao.*

The greeting which I had only ever heard pass through the lips of my kinship sounded so harsh and ugly when laced with their venom. A token of goodwill twisted to taunt, humiliate and shame. *Ni Hao Ni Hao.* Their cruelty lies in the irony.

When I think back to my childhood, searching for the source of my shame, I can't think of one specific moment that coloured it into my life. They are scattered impressions of memories that I think I've lived - like sun-faded photographs of an early childhood I don't quite remember living. I think it started in that first-grade classroom, accumulating momentum with every mispronounced word and misplaced behaviour. I will spend years accommodating and apologising for my Chinese counterparts.

It's X-U, like zoo or Jew. No, it's just my Chinese name. I don't know what it means.

I offer a simpler alternative and tuck away the parts that are too difficult to understand, bit by bit, until I, too, am digestible.

You can just call me Brittany.

So, I laugh along when people mock the jilted tongues of those who look like me but 'aren't really the same as me'. I won't question them; I feel a quiet relief that I am separate from *those people*. I may look like them but at least I don't sound like them. I teach my tongue the contusions of the Australian accent, drawing out my vowels depending on the demographic I am entertaining. I learn to hide the inherited enunciations that distinguish me from the crowd; I learn to untwist that same tongue and go home to translate words for my parents that I have yet to understand. I read out the definitions to my parents, knowing that the definitions themselves will only be just as confusing to understand.

My feeble attempt at an answer is met with more questions and when I hear my parents echo back the words in the same accent that my co-workers had mocked earlier, the all too familiar shame rises within me like bile.

What does this mean? they ask me again and my shame translates into anger because I don't know but more importantly, because they don't know.

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When I am thirteen, my mother is diagnosed with a brain tumour. It starts with forgetfulness – she no longer remembers where she put the onions even when

they are sitting right in front of her. My dad jokes that it is early onset dementia. It progresses to not being able to remember her own phone number. She strides through the first four digits and struggles to stutter out the last four. She looks to me for reassurance.

It's 5-9-8-6, right?

At the doctor's appointment that my father forces her to go to, she adamantly denies that anything is wrong. When the doctor asks for her symptoms, she says she can't think clearly because she is too tired. I tell him in English that she has been forgetting things and can't finish her sentences. She interrupts me and says in Chinese,

Tell him I know what I want to say in my head but my mouth won't say them out loud.

I translate; he sits back in his chair and sighs. He explains to me that he wants to run some tests because it sounds like it might be something to do with her brain. I don't even register what he is saying and when he finishes, I instinctively turn to my mother to translate what he has said. She looks worried but she smiles - it's her turn to reassure me. I open my mouth to explain but nothing comes out.

Before my mother goes in for surgery, I fill out all her patient consent forms for her. My eyes gloss over the risks and complications and this time, real bile rises to the back of my throat. I've never felt more like a child but I play my role as caregiver, shielding my mom from the words I know she will neither understand nor want to. I place the pen into her hands and tell her to sign. She hesitates for a moment, her hand hovering above the paper. I go to help her.

I know it, just wait.

For the first time in my life, my mother looks small.

When I am older and realise how little I know about my mother, I think back to these moments when she was most fragile and how far I felt from her. I imagine the doctors cutting open her skull and probing between the tender grey matter to extract the tumour that had grown to the size of an egg. I wonder if they found the secrets behind the moments where my mother eluded me most; forever stuck between a memory and a fleeting curiosity.

A hushed phone call to my aunt abroad assuring her that life here is what was promised. My mother - sitting alone at the edge of her bed, her hands crossed over her lap in penance, a rushed smile when she notices me standing at the doorway. Did they find out how the tumour had gotten there in the first place, gone undetected for months before diagnosis? I think of the twenty years spent in a foreign country, of constantly trying to articulate the thoughts in her mind that her tongue had not yet learned the language of. I think of the twenty years before that, spent in China where the act of speaking out loud your thoughts was punishable by death. Perhaps she had spent her whole life reaching and grasping

for the words that she wanted but couldn't say until it had become a home to her. The walls are suffocating and there are no lights but there's a comfort in familiarity, isn't there?

It would be easy to say that this was when I learnt to untwist the knot of anxiety that had been sitting in my chest for the entirety of my life. But reality is not digestible. I cannot tuck this narrative into a single character arc and there is no offer of a simpler alternative. Because there will always be moments where I'll realise the things we have lost in this generational fire. My cousin's wedding - my aunt's wet cheek against mine, she whispers something in Shanghainese in my ear but I can't reply - the thoughts in my head, my mouth can't say out loud. A spring afternoon, my father shows me a video of poverty-stricken Shanghai.

It's different now, if we had known... he trails off.

He spends the rest of his afternoon in the garden, tiring out his body until his mind catches up. Just a few years ago, I tell my parents to be careful because they are beating elderly Chinese people - innocent scapegoats for the ongoing global pandemic.

Don't worry, we're always careful.

I wonder if the same knot that exists in me, exists in them as well.

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October 2016. I am two years into dentistry and I have just quit.

Okay, my mother says.

It is silent, but the air is heavy with all that is unspoken. I try to offer up a reasoning that would explain away my single act of selfishness but find myself lost for words. I had spent years of my life imploring my mother to leave the home she had built out of her silence only to realise I was encaged in the same walls.

Okay, I echo back at her.

But it is not okay. Words could never offer resolution in the space of where expectation once lived. My degree is not just a degree. It's years of sacrifice, it's going to work three weeks after brain surgery, it's swallowing belittlement for the sake of a better future - it's resting easy at night knowing that life here is finally worth its promise. Freedom is worth so much more than you think.

After the call, my mother texts me

Don't worry be happy 为你骄傲.

I have to Google Translate.

Proud of you.

It is hard to shake the feeling of inadequacy, a shared burden that now exists between all three of us. But in my moments of vulnerability, my parents are kind. They are patient and they are proud. I wonder if I have ever extended them the

same courtesy. A soft breeze blows through my curtains and specks of sunlight filter through, painting freckles of light onto the floor. It reminds me of home and I don't know why.

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I am 29 now and I still don't really know what it means to do your tax return. I still occasionally call our telephone provider impersonating my mother and if I were to pluck all the white hairs from my father's head now, I'd probably have a small fortune. I do my best to be patient and I'd like to think I feel pride more than shame these days. I know that my name is Brittany Jing Yao Xu. Not like zoo or like Jew, but like Xu. I know that my mother visited a shaman before I was born and my name was gifted to me - it means Golden precious one. At Chinese New Year, my aunts and uncles usher me into the dining room. *Ni Hao Ni Hao*. It sounds like a warm invitation, just like how it was intended. But it's more than that, it's a welcome home. I greet them back. *Ni Hao Ni Hao*.