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No English: My Experiences As An Immigrant

Jen Yao

Salem State University

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NO ENGLISH: MY EXPERIENCES AS AN IMMIGRANT

Honors Thesis

**Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Bachelor of English**

In the College of Arts and Sciences
at Salem State University

By

Jen-Chi Yao

Dr. John Scrimgeour
Faculty Advisor
Department of English

Commonwealth Honors Program
Salem State University
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For Jon and Laura Jane: you are family.

For Scott and Joanna: thank you for your wisdom and advice.

For Elia: I raise a glass of Pinot Noir to you.

For J.D.: thank you for your patience and inspiration.

For my siblings, Jackie, Angie, Jeremy, & Cindy: thanks for putting up with me.

For my kids, Cleopatra and Hagrid: your fluffy company keeps me sane.

Mostly for Mom: thank you for your undying love and support.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	iii
Context.....	iv
Reflection.....	v
Prologue.....	1
Long Travels.....	2
A Whole New World.....	7
Semi-American Childhood.....	11
Foreign.....	15
No English.....	19
Megan.....	26
Let It Snow.....	30
Racism.....	34
9/11.....	39
Language is Funny.....	42
Tiger Mom.....	47

ABSTRACT

After living in Taiwan for the first nine years of my life, I moved to America with my family. I struggled with learning the language, adapting to the culture, and fitting in. Now that I have assimilated, I can see that some English speakers just didn't understand how difficult life was for immigrants.

My thesis is a series of creative non-fiction essays, attempting to help people understand what it's like to be someone who struggles to learn a new culture. By recording my transition from being illiterate in English to an English major, I demonstrate the hurdles that immigrants must overcome as they adapt to the American way of living.

Our schools and culture can impede an immigrant's development. The adjusting can be made easier and faster when immigrants receive the proper help and support. My thesis talks about the struggles I went through and suggest the best way to help immigrants, especially those who cannot speak English.

CONTEXT

After a period of struggling to fit in, I assimilated to the American culture after a few years. I never fully felt like I fit in since my skin was a few shades darker and I didn't have a typical American childhood, so I couldn't connect with my peers over *SpongeBob* and other popular culture references. But I did not stand out as much as I used to because I could smoothly communicate with other Americans, I dressed like a typical American, and I lost my Taiwanese accent.

As an American and an immigrant, I witnessed that other immigrants had similar experiences. They were ridiculed and bullied for looking differently and not understanding English and cultural references. They were told to “go back to their country” and to “speak English because you're in America.” When I saw these moments of injustice and inhuman treatment, I got angry. I wanted to people to understand what it feels like to be an immigrant—how clueless and helpless you feel to be in a new environment and not know how to communicate with most people, yet you still have to make money, support your family, and keep living.

I believe that it is important to see the United States through the eyes of an immigrant because it shows the wonderful little things that people take for granted, like a beautiful pond and New England foliage. It also demonstrates the components of American culture that don't make sense, that need to be fixed, namely racism and treating people poorly based on their skin color or where they are from. My hope is that my thesis can shed light on how different the United States is in both good and bad ways, so that we would appreciate the unique qualities and fix the bad problems in this country.

REFLECTION

Upon completing this thesis, I learned that everyone lives interesting and unique lives. You never want to judge a book by its cover. Instead, if you open yourself up to communicate with people, they can surprise you with their knowledge and experience. As an immigrant, I have experienced a lot of struggles of fitting in, assimilating, and finding my identity as a kind-of Taiwanese and kind-of American. Moreover, I have witness others' struggles, especially in cases of racism and ignorance. Therefore, I believe it is important to talk about and write down one's experiences. Because if we don't communicate important topics such as these, we will never learn and grow as human beings who are social and meant to live with others. We shouldn't remain ignorant and close-minded. We need to read, write, discuss, and educate ourselves and others. I hope that my thesis gets people talking about the important stuff in life, like racism and immigration. I will certainly be talking about them.

Prologue

“So where are you from?”

That, by far, is the hardest question for me to answer. I always have to pause and think about how much information I want to give.

Usually in a very casual setting when everyone has to do a quick introduction about themselves, I would just answer, “I’m from Woburn,” or, “the Northshore area,” since that’s where I spend most of my time.

But sometimes I would say, “I’m from Taiwan...” And then, I’d quickly add, “It’s a small island next to China and under Japan.” I never assume that people know where my hometown is.

When people hear that I’m from another country, the most common response is, “Oh really? How old were you when you moved?”

“Nine or ten.”

“Wow, I can’t even tell. You don’t have an accent. You speak English perfectly.”

“Thank you,” I’d say with a smile.

Learning English was the toughest, yet most rewarding thing I had ever accomplished.

Long Travels

On May 26, 2005, my mother, two older sisters, one older brother, one younger sister, and I left our home in Taipei, Taiwan and traveled to Woburn, Massachusetts. I was 9 years old.

“We’re going to visit Grandma,” my mom said. She didn’t mention anything about living in America.

“We’re never gonna have another guava ever,” my brother said. I thought he was joking.

I didn’t know that I was saying goodbye to my childhood home. I only knew that I had to get out of bed early in the morning and get on a plane. But I didn’t mind; I wanted to see my grandmother. She was a cool, hip grandma who had lived in America for 20 years. When she visited us in Taiwan, she brought foreign toys and candies. She had told me about how life was better there, more relaxing and fun.

The first plane flew from Taipei to Tokyo Narita International Airport in Japan. It was a little over a 3-hour flight. I was bursting with excitement, too much to even care where we were going. The airplane was such an interesting place, with rows and rows of nice cushioned seats and carpet underneath my feet. As the plane ascended, I stared out the window at how marvelous it was that everything slowly got smaller. Eventually, the sun made it unbearable to look outside, so I shut the shade and talked with my sister for the rest of the ride.

Once we got off the plane, my family and I dragged our suitcases behind us, my eyes wide open to the wonders of the Japanese airport. My favorite part was the bathrooms. The toilets had so many buttons besides “flush,” and I wanted to spend forever in the stall, pressing them all and figuring out what each does. The hand dryers, shaped like a U, had a slot for your hands; it automatically blew out gentle warm air when I stuck my hands in, and they dried in seconds.

Unfortunately, we had to stay in the airport because we were waiting to get on another airplane in a few hours. This plane ride—from Tokyo Narita to San Francisco International Airport—was the longest I had ever endured. I was stuck in a confined space for about 9 hours and 30 minutes. A flight attendant came down the aisle and asked if people wanted chicken or beef. As she moved closer to us, my oldest sister turned to me and asked in Chinese what I wanted.

“Ji,” I said, the Chinese word for chicken.

“Okay, so when she asks you what you want, say ‘chicken’,” my sister instructed.

“What?”

“Chee-ken,” she repeated over and over. I tried to make those sounds. She eventually approved my pronunciation, and I was proud of myself.

But when the flight attendant stopped by our seat, I got flustered. I tried a few times, but I couldn’t repeat the sounds. My sister responded for me, and the attendant moved onto the next seat. After she left, I realized that my face was hot. A few hours later, she walked down the aisle with a cart and gave me what I ordered. I smiled when she put my food down, praying that I would never have to speak to her again.

The airplane was a cool place to hang out. I had my own television and earphones to watch TV shows on. The flight attendant gave us pillows and blankets. And the bathrooms! They were also unique. I asked my siblings where the poop and pee went.

“Do they just flush out into the air? Do people on the ground get hit in the head with poop?” I giggled.

I tried looking out the window, but it was so dark out. They eventually turned out the lights in the plane so that people could sleep, but I was too excited to do that. We were going on a trip! Another reason why I couldn't sleep was because of the turbulence. The first time the plane shook and rattled, I tensed up.

“What's happening?” I asked my mom.

“It's just the weather.”

It kept happening. The plane seemed unstable, but I trusted the pilots to not get me killed so high up in the air. There were a few times when the plane shook quite violently. I prayed that I could get off the plane soon.

Every now and then, my mom told me to get up and walk around. I ran up and down the aisles. That was the most I had moved in a long time. I wished I could have brought my and my brother's bikes along; then I could race my brother around the airplane like we did last week at a park near our house.

When we finally landed, I was ready to shove everyone out of my way. It can't be legal to keep kids sitting in one seat in a tight space full of other people for 10 hours. I was relieved until my mom told me we had to get on another plane. But she said it was

much shorter—from San Francisco to Boston Logan Airport. I groaned as I boarded the plane.

I think the main reason why I hated getting on planes was because of the severe ear pain, the worst that my ears had ever felt. No one had warned me about it. The first time the plane took off from Taipei Airport, I didn't really feel it. But when the plane landed in Tokyo Narita, I thought my skull was going to explode, and my brain was going to leak out of my ears. My brother told me to pretend that I was chewing gum and move my jaw.

“Just pretend that you're chewing something. It'll help the pain go away.”

But it didn't.

Please stop. Make it stop. Make it stop. Please make it stop. I winced.

To help me feel better, my mom got me a Sprite, my go-to soda whenever we went to McDonald's. I would've preferred the Taiwanese apple soda, but she said that the airplane didn't have it. I took a few sips and sat back, staring out the window as the plane turned towards the runway and took off. I closed my eyes, and the next thing I know, my mom was shaking me awake.

“What? What happened?”

“We can get off now.”

Wow, that was a very short ride.

My aunt, uncle, and cousin were waiting at the bottom of the escalator. I hadn't seen them since they were at my house in Taipei a few years ago. We loaded our suitcases into their car, and they took us to McDonald's.

I ordered what I always get in Taiwan: a fish filet sandwich and fries. One bite of the sandwich repulsed me. The filet was room temperature and reeked of bad fish. It didn't taste fresh like it always did. The fries were overly salty and slightly cold as well. I instantly missed the Taiwan version of McDonald's.

Final stop of the day was Grandma's house. By then, I was sick of traveling. I just want to settle down and stop moving.

The drive was weird. Out the window was pitch black, and I couldn't see anything. In Taipei, streetlights lined every road in Taipei, even on the highway, so people could see everything. I lost my sense of security here. What is this place?

A Whole New World

On my first day in Woburn, my grandma took us on a tour of the area. Everything was so different from Taipei. For once, my lungs breathed fresh air instead of the stuffy, dry city soot. Drivers in Woburn always allowed pedestrians cross the roads first, so I didn't have to worry about getting run over. Here, we didn't have chant prayers to find a parking spot. Driving in Taipei was always a constant stop-and-go with traffic backed up for miles, so we always used public transportation. But Woburn had hardly any traffic, though public transportation was not as accessible. There weren't as many streetlights on the highway and regular roads whereas Taipei was well-lit everywhere. The houses in Woburn were so big, two- or three-stories tall, with enough space to run around and play in the yard. Meanwhile, Taipei had mostly apartments and no personal space between neighbors.

While there were many big houses in Woburn, my grandmother, however, did not have a spacious house. She rented a two-bedroom apartment with her son. The kitchen area felt crammed with just two people, and the dining table can only sit two. The living room had enough floor space that my family and I ate, did homework, and spent our leisure time there. At night, we slept on the rough carpet, arm to arm. The area became more cramped when my aunt and her two sons came to visit.

“Ugh,” I cried, “why are they coming over? Where are they gonna stay?”

My mother yelled at me for having a bad attitude and told me to be grateful about the family reunion.

When we wanted some alone time, we went to the condominium's outdoor pool, played at my school's playground, or walked to the nearby pond, my favorite place in Woburn.

It was a big body of water called Horn Pond. Alongside it was a concrete path lined by trees and flowers. Mallards swam across the pond, the males with their beautiful turquoise heads and females with a bit of navy blue in their wings. Sometimes, you would see the swans with their newborns. It was best not to approach them because the parents would attack.

However, the bird that ruled the area was the Canadian geese. Their droppings covered the grass and sometimes the concrete pathway. They had zero fear and would not hesitate to let you know you're getting dangerously close. Once, my boyfriend was walking next to a Canadian goose when it attacked, lunging its neck to him like a snake.

Whether it was sunny or gloomy, parents walked down the path with baby strollers, teens jogging by them. Families walked their dogs while elderly couples sat on the benches, bathing in the sun. The water sparkled like diamonds in the sun, as if it was waving at me and welcoming me to the suburbs.

On average, it took me and my family about an hour to walk around the pond, but there were many hidden trails that only the locals know. Next to the pond was a little mountain. At the summit, people can see the beautiful skyline of Boston.

On a beautiful day when the wind is calm, the pond perfectly reflects the trees like a mirror. I have often gotten lost in the beautiful scenery, in awe of the wonders of nature. I especially loved when the sun set. The sky is a gradient or mixture of pinks, oranges,

and purples. And I couldn't help myself; I fell in love with the place instantly. There was nothing like this back in Taipei.

I frequently walked around the Pond, at first with family and my Chinese-speaking American friend, Megan. We petted other people's dogs, saw some girls riding on horses, and were harassed by some bees that were vicious and would sting even when we didn't provoke them. We made a game out of avoiding the goose and duck poop, as if we were in a game of Mario Kart.

In high school, I walked with my boyfriend who knew all the hidden trails because he grew up near the Pond. We hiked around the pond for hours. He showed me a field of flowers in different shades of pinks, oranges, yellows, and whites. We passed by people playing golf and some runners, but other than that, we were left alone with nature. Once, we were hiking upward with me in front of him when he pulled me to a stop.

"Look!" he whispered and pointed to the trees.

A female deer was facing us but looking past us. She stayed so still, I almost missed her. We stared at her for a while. I had never seen a wild deer before.

"She's probably waiting for her fawns," he said. "We should go."

Sometimes I walked or ran by myself, soaking in the sun's warmth with the wind pulling my hair back. Every summer, I admired the fuzzy little geese and swan newborns waddling after their mother. During the fall, the red and orange and yellow foliage took me by surprise, making me wonder how nature can be so incredible. In the winter, snow covered all the trees, paths, and the pond—a textbook image of a winter wonderland. When spring time comes, the rain washed away the snow, and flowers of every color bloomed along the concrete path and on trees. The vibrant pink flowers that grew on trees

were especially beautiful, and my mom always stole a little section, brought it home, and left it on the kitchen to display.

After a year in Woburn, my family and I moved out of my grandmother's tiny apartment and into a condo with three bedrooms, farther away from the Pond. I was sad that we didn't go to Horn Pond as often. So, when I reached high school, I walked there by myself at least once a week. I plugged in my earphones and brought music as company as I took an hour round trip to the Pond on a nice day. Sometimes, I was too tired to walk all the way around the Pond, so I walked down the path on Arlington Road, just enough to see the water dancing and shimmering in the sunlight, and then I made a loop towards home. This trip to the Horn Pond made me feel like an adult, independent to do whatever I wanted to do.

On a warm 75-degree afternoon once, I made my way to Horn Pond. With a carton of Ben and Jerry's Cherry Garcia, I sat down on a bench and enjoyed the sun, the cool breeze, the scenery, the ice cream, all of it. I couldn't believe this was my life now, a life that I have gotten used to.

Semi-American Childhood

Even though I spent most of my childhood in Taiwan, I experienced bits of American culture. My dad frequently traveled to the United States for work, and he always brought back presents for me.

Once, he gave me a Dr. Seuss computer game. It taught the alphabet one at a time with funky characters and cool animations. Each letter was associated with a word. For instance, A had a yellow background, and a little girl said something like, “A. A is for alligator. A, A, A.” And then from the left side of the screen, a green, unusual-looking alligator marched across the yellow backdrop. It was wearing a harness and a seat on its back, carrying an elegant lady with a fluffy hat. I could click words or letters to make the game repeat sounds.

The secret challenge in the game was finding two little creatures hidden somewhere on the screen. I wasn’t sure if they were a mutation of human and mice, but they hid well and ran fast. For some letters, the little rascals were easy to find; but for others, I clicked just about every character and object and still couldn’t find them.

At the end of the game, two yellow furry creatures sang the ABC song, voiced by two little girls. They sing the entire song the first time, and then I could opt to repeat the entire song or repeat individual letters. My older sister taught me to click a single letter really fast to make the game stutter. The first time I did it, I roared with laughter.

I got a kick out of this game. It was colorful and had unique characters who could do funny things if I knew where to click. I especially loved how the characters looked. After I moved to America, I learned about the author Dr. Seuss and read his books in

elementary school. In the books, the drawing style was the same as the game, but I couldn't understand the words. Why would anyone want to eat green ham?

Another time, my father brought back Fruit by the Foot in a giant box of assorted colors and flavors. I instantly fell in love with it. I loved the concept, how you have to unroll the candy to eat it. My favorite flavor was the red, but the other one was cool too, because it changed colors, from orange to yellow to green and back to orange. In Taiwan, there was no candy as colorful and sugary as Fruit by the Foot.

I didn't get a Fruit by the Foot often because I was quite mischievous. Once, I hit my older brother on the head with a trash can. I think we were fighting about something, and I got angry at him. He ran off to tell Mom, so I locked myself in the room. Karma came back to bite me, because I couldn't unlock the door after. I bawled my eyes out as people were trying to tell me how to unlock it. I just couldn't get my little fingers to unlatch the door. My mother had to call someone with a long metal ladder. He went down the back of the house, moved his ladder to the window of the room I was in, and climbed up. I was so grateful when he climbed through the tiny window and unlocked the door.

Because I behaved poorly, I was rarely rewarded with Fruit by the Foot. So, whenever I did get one, I would save it for a time when I really needed it, like at school when I wanted to seem cool or when I wanted to celebrate an achievement. And I would try hard not to eat the whole thing, but it was so delicious that I couldn't help myself. On a rare occasion, I would unroll the paper, tear off a piece, and put the rest back in a wrapper. This practice allowed me to eat Fruit by the Foot over several days. Though it was hard to control myself, as I was eating the candy, I knew it was worth it to not stuff the whole thing in my mouth the instant I get it.

After I learned where my mother put the box of candy, I devised a strategy. At the age of 6, I was a genius. When people weren't home, I grabbed a chair from the kitchen and climbed up on my tiptoes to grab the box. I pocketed one of the candies and carefully slid the box back on the high shelf. Then, I climbed down the chair and carried it back to the kitchen like nothing had happened.

Even though I played the Dr. Seuss game every day and devoured every Fruit by the Foot I got, my favorite present from America had to be Legos. We had a giant box of Legos, all different shapes and colors. With my older siblings' help, I built my own dollhouse out of Legos. I customized bedrooms with desk, chair, and computer. I made bathrooms with a shower head, a sink, and a toilet with a flushing handle. I created a kitchen with a stove that had a hood over it; a sink deep enough to put dishes and cups in; shelves to store the clean dishes; and a set of dining table and chairs. I even made a living room with couches, a TV, and bookshelves. I inserted windows in all the rooms, so the people living in the house could breathe fresh air. And sometimes, I even built secret passageways for my characters to escape when bad guys broke into the house.

I liked to put together my own Lego people, pairing a red shirt with green pants for a bald guy with a mustache and a blue outfit with a pearl necklace for a lady with lipstick and a ponytail. They were awesome little guys because I could clip Lego cups into their hands.

My favorite character, though, was this tiny Pikachu figure that didn't come with the Lego set. Cute and chubby and half the size of an average Lego person, this Pikachu often traveled in my pocket, ate dinner with me, and tried to help me with my homework. My sister made him a house out of paper, but I thought he needed a bigger home, so I

made one out of Legos. He got along well with Lipstick Lady and Mustache Man. He was the best at escaping from bad guys. Unfortunately, he always fell out the window of his bedroom. He also didn't sit still on any chairs and would often fall out of the bed.

When we moved to Massachusetts, my mother didn't bring our Lego set. I missed the days when I could build cool things with Legos. Even though I am an adult now, I purchased a BB8 Lego set because I wanted to play with Legos again. And like Pikachu, BB8 is an awesome character.

As I was juggling hundreds of little pieces and trying to build the droid with my younger sister, I kept messing up where the pieces were supposed to go. A few times, I finished one of the major parts of BB8 only to discover that I had to take everything apart and rebuild it. I gave up, handing the whole thing to my sister to do. While she skillfully put it together, I recalled the times when I used to create PAC-MAN-like creatures with just basic rectangular Lego pieces. They wouldn't be as detailed as BB8, but I had more fun creating my own characters from my imagination.

To this day, I still think Legos is the best toy ever invented. It inspired me to be creative and taught me to be nimble. I never had a blueprint; I just built whatever I wanted. My dream to become an interior design started with Legos. Then, I got the Sims 4 game and built houses of many styles: modern, contemporary, and rustic. But, it wasn't the same as my Lego houses. Sure, there were more details in the furniture and decorations. But with Legos, I had to imagine that a block that is sticking out of the wall is a toilet paper roll.

Foreign

Alien is another word for immigrants, for people who move from one country to another. That word cannot be more accurate for describing how I felt when I came to America.

I knew nothing about the culture. I moved from a city on a tropical island to a suburban town in a coastal state. Instead of having a dry and a wet season, I had to deal with four distinctive seasons in a year and sometimes even experience multiple seasons in *one day*. My clothes from Taiwan, a pink shirt with a fuzzy bear in a tutu and flower-patterned pants, made me feel awkward at school. On top of that, I didn't speak or understand a word in English. And it didn't help that people often laughed at me.

Once in school, after I had been here for maybe six months and knew some English phrases, my fourth-grade teacher asked me, "How come?"

At first, I was confused. "What?"

I can't remember what it was regards to, but she asked me again and again.

My palms were wet. My body burned with sweat. I felt like I was a suspect being interrogated by Jack Bauer in *24*, a show that my family watched in Taiwan.

"I don't know," I responded. I could tell that she was frustrated with me, but I couldn't help it. I didn't understand the question, so how could I respond correctly?

In college, I worked a job where I was a shuttle dispatcher. I answered calls that requested for rides and sent drivers to pick them up. There was a lady with a thick Chinese accent who called me. She didn't know where to get picked up, so I tried to describe the location to her. I tried my best not to yell, but I was frustrated as I told her to look at a map to find the restaurants I was talking about. She still didn't understand me,

so I explained the same thing in several different ways to her until she finally found the pick-up spot. I saw myself in her that moment, a confused and lost immigrant who needed someone to be patient with them, to explain things differently instead of being told the same thing repeatedly.

In another instance, my class in sixth grade was talking about pickles for some reason.

I raised my hand and asked, “What’s a pickle?”

Everyone turned and stared at me.

“You don’t know what a pickle is?” someone said.

“How do you not know what a pickle is?” another said.

My face heated up to a cherry red. The teacher tried to calm everyone down and said that someone would bring one in the next day to show me.

When lunch time came, everyone headed downstairs to the cafeteria. People ran by me, laughing and yelling, “I can’t believe you don’t know what a pickle is.”

I tried to explain that I probably knew what it was, but I don’t know the English word for it. They didn’t care though. It was funny that a foreigner didn’t understand commonly used vocabulary.

In high school and even college, people have made fun of me because I didn’t understand cultural references and jokes. In high school, the friend group I was in would play rock band every weekend. They teased me when I didn’t know popular alternative songs like, “Bohemian Rhapsody” by Queen or famous bands like the Beatles.

“You don’t *know* that song?” they’d exclaim.

“How have you not heard of that band?” they’d said.

While everyone sang along and rocked out on their toy instruments, I sat in the corner of the room, feeling out of the loop.

In college, my friends and peers did the same thing.

Once, a friend jokingly said, “Can you feel it, Mr. Krabs?” I looked at him uncomfortably.

“It’s a reference... to *SpongeBob*... you know?” another friend explained.

“Oh, I’ve never seen *SpongeBob*.”

“WHAT?” he cried. “You’ve never seen *SpongeBob*?”

I couldn’t stand it anymore; I had to say something.

“No, I haven’t,” I snapped. “I didn’t *grow up* in this country. Just like if you moved to Taiwan, you wouldn’t understand a lot of cultural things.”

The phrase I hate the most is: “You don’t know what that means?” People have said that to me throughout my life instead of telling me what something is or what something means. That sentence always made me feel stupid and helpless, even though I tried my best to learn and understand this culture. Even though I look like an American and talk like an American, I didn’t feel like one.

Thankfully, I worked with this girl, named Lexi, who once understood my position.

She said to me one day, “Teach, don’t preach.” It means you should be teaching people what they don’t understand instead of making them feel bad for not knowing.

I have met some people who have never seen *Star Wars* or *Harry Potter*. They were like me: they whispered with shame that they had never seen such an iconic series, an “American staple.” I could tell that they were ready to defend themselves because they had a lot of people reprimand them for being “uncultured.” And ironically, some of these people grew up in the United States and have been living here their entire life.

Lexi’s phrase, “Teach, don’t preach,” stuck with me. Even though I am a *Star Wars* and *Harry Potter* fan, I knew I didn’t want to make them feel how I felt: foreign, awkward, angry, annoyed. And honestly, is it *that* big of a deal that someone doesn’t know all the words to “Bohemian Rhapsody” or hasn’t seen *SpongeBob SquarePants*?

No English

Before I moved to America, my elementary school made us students take an English class. And while we were reading thick Mandarin Chinese texts with intelligent and meaningful content, our English textbook was a children's book: thin and soft-cover with lots of colorful pictures and one or two lines at the bottom.

We learned vocabulary words like “Coca-Cola” and “cookie,” which the main characters of the book—a female and a male frog—often held and consumed. Besides those two words, which I kind of understood, I didn't know any other English. My peers seemed to understand the material, but hard as I tried, I sat with a blank stare and a nervous squirm in class, hoping that I wouldn't get called on.

When I got my midyear exam back, I wasn't surprised to see a big circled 32 in red ink right next to my name. But I was terrified; because I got an F, I had to get my mother to sign it. I knew that if I showed her, she would hit me with a long ruler. So, when no one was looking, I threw the exam in the recycling bin in the classroom. I didn't even understand why I needed to know English. It wasn't like I would ever leave Taiwan.

A month or so after that, my mother announced we were moving to America.

Great, I panicked, I'm dead.

After we moved, I was immediately enrolled in second grade. Though I was in third grade at the time, my mother thought that being in a lower age group would help. But it didn't. I was unprepared to be in a room full of foreigners speaking a foreign language. Luckily, it was the end of May, so I only had to suffer for a month.

On my first day in an American school, Mrs. Freeman selected a girl to show me around. Her name was Caroline. She had these gorgeous blue-as-the-sky eyes and shiny blonde hair that ended around her waist which she kept tied in a low ponytail most of the time.

Caroline walked me around the classroom, pointing to each person and telling me their names. I just nodded and smiled sheepishly; I couldn't tell her that she was wasting her time, that I wasn't going to remember anyone's name, especially when I didn't know what she was saying. Then, she walked around the school with me to show me the bathrooms, the cafeteria, the offices, the library. The entire time, I hopelessly smiled and nodded, pretending like I knew what she said.

One day, Mrs. Freeman asked if I needed to use the bathroom. I just stared at her blankly. She asked me a few times, then gave up. She called Caroline over and told her to take me to the bathroom. Then, she ushered me out the door as Caroline waved me over. When we got to the bathroom, I figured out what Mrs. Freeman was asking me. I hated that we couldn't communicate.

Another time, I forgot that no one understood my language and went on a rant in Chinese to a male student. I was very vocal and wild. He was so confused afterwards and chased me around the room, asking me what I said. I just ignored him until he stopped asking me, feeling awful that I couldn't explain myself.

During that month, I met a girl who annoyed me no matter what she did. She followed me around and would not stop talking. I couldn't stand it anymore; I had to make it stop.

The next time she annoyed me, I turned to her and yelled, “Shut up!” She did stop annoying me, but she also told the teacher on me.

My second-grade teacher scolded me, “You cannot tell people to shut up.”

But, I didn’t understand what she was saying to me because a couple of weeks later, I told someone else to shut up.

Mrs. Freeman talked to my grandma about my bad behavior. Grandma suggested me try, “Be quiet,” because it was a nicer thing to say to someone.

I barely got by the first few months in America by hand gestures and body language. When summer started, so did the hard work. My mother was determined to make me learn English before school started again, so she used the summer reading booklet about bridges that all second-graders received to teach me. She sat down with me at the small dining table and told me to translate all the words with the handheld electronic translator device she bought for me.

After a couple of sentences, I wanted to quit. My heart wasn’t in it. I hated English, especially because I had already failed an exam once.

I complained, “I don’t want to do this anymore. This is torture! Why did I even need to learn about bridges?”

She didn’t care if I wanted to or not; she made me continue. I got into a fight with her, screaming and crying. But still, she told me that I had to continue translating all the words in the booklet.

It was a small booklet with maybe 10 or 12 pages and words simple enough that second graders can understand. And yet, I had spent the entire afternoon pouring out frustration and anger because of it. By the end, I was so sick of bridges, I couldn't be near one.

That summer, we devised a more fun strategy to learn English. We borrowed my grandmother's library card and rented a lot of DVDs. We also watched TV shows like *The Price is Right*, *Foster's Home for Imaginary Friends*, and *Suite Life of Zach and Cody*. We always turned the subtitles on because we couldn't follow the actors' words as fast as they spoke them. And then, I noticed all the words that I didn't know.

Grateful that the subtitles showed me how to spell them, I would write them down, then used one of the thirty dictionaries in school to look up their meaning. Eventually, I got tired of waiting until I went to school to look up the words. So, I stole a dictionary, labeled the first page of all the letters with sticky notes, and kept it in my room.

"It's for a good cause," I told myself. "How else would I learn English?"

The public schools also came up with a way to help me learn English. They had a program called ESL or ELL, which stood for English as Second Language or English Language Learner. It was an unofficially class, just for me and sometimes one or two other students. The teacher in charge of the program would pull us students out of our regular class schedule and bring us to another room.

My first ESL teacher was Ms. T. She was very patient and nice to me since I couldn't communicate with her at all. She read me books like *Amelia Bedelia*, and I loved it, especially how her name sounded. The drawings fascinated me. Ms. T and I also played games like Candyland and Uno. I enjoyed these games as well because they were a part of this new peculiar culture that I was trying to get used to.

We also did grammar worksheets and went through vocabulary flashcards. I learned odd and non-sensical things like the plural of goose is geese, but the plural of moose is moose.

Shouldn't it be meese?

I couldn't wrap my head around these weird rules and their even weirder and numerous exceptions.

I spent many ESL classes learning how to write as well. In Mandarin Chinese, the symbols usually write from top to bottom and right to left, but English is written from the left side to the right, each line under the previous. The punctuation marks are in the middle of a sentence in Mandarin, like a regular symbol, getting their own space. Meanwhile, English punctuation is usually tucked at the bottom and not always spaced out in a sentence. Despite all of these complicated rules, I tried my best to memorize them: when to use "s" or "es" to make a noun plural, how to conjugate verbs in the past, future, perfect, and conditional tenses, and where to put the subject and object nouns in statements and questions.

In fifth grade, I watched myself improve at a tremendous rate. My English class did weekly spelling bee contests where we had to stand up and spell words that the teacher gave us from our vocabulary list of the week. I was winning just about every

week's spelling bee. Besides that, I quickly learned cursive and actually enjoyed the grammar exercises we did. Better yet, I was no longer the last one to hand in in-class writing assignments.

While I was trying to master English, I also had to take Spanish or French classes. This was confusing because I could barely speak English, let alone two more foreign languages. In the end, I was grateful that I had to take Spanish for several years, because I could speak three languages.

Spanish came in very handy at times. Once, I was in an Uber and the driver only spoke Spanish. I could tell because we didn't talk much; when he did speak, it was only Spanish. Because Uber didn't recognize my dormitory's address, I had to tell every driver where to drop me off. In this case, I used the limited amount of Spanish I still remember from high school and the first two years of college.

“Aquí?” he asked.

“No,” I said, the gears in my brain churning, “más... y a la izquierda.”

After I thanked him and got out of the car, I realized what would have happened if I didn't know any Spanish: pure awkward silence, most likely having to walk in the 5-degree wind chill for a few minutes, freezing my butt off, and hating that I had no way to communicate with someone.

Spanish also came in handy at one of my jobs. When I worked at a sushi place in Salem, the people that worked in the kitchen only spoke Spanish, one person spoke minimal English. Meanwhile, my bosses spoke mostly Chinese and heavy-accented, broken English. They often asked me, “Jen, can you ask Cristina if she wants to eat dinner?” or “Jen, can you tell Cristina that I need sushi rice right now?”

With an English-to-Spanish translator website on my phone, I tried my best to communicate with the Spanish-speaking ladies.

Even on my days off, my boss called and asked me to communicate with one of the women that he only wanted her to work Thursday's to Saturday's. I was confused and frustrated at times because I wasn't sure if I were doing it well enough. But I remained patient, remembering how much I had struggled to communicate with people when I didn't know any English. I spoke slowly to the woman and tried to explain things differently to help her understand the message.

I never thought that I would need to utilize all three languages in one place. But of course, it was an awesome experience. Language is wonderful because I realized that I can connect people based on language skills that I have. But it is also difficult, especially for people who are trying to learn a new language. They need a lot of patience and help from native speakers in order to learn quickly.

Megan

Megan was a year older than I. Her hair and eyes were a milk chocolate brown, but they shone a golden caramel in the sun. Her skin was a beautiful olive shade. She looked very white, but her mother a Chinese woman named Lee. The elementary school that my brother and I attended introduced my mother to her, so that she could have a translator.

When Megan and I first met, we sat silently in the backseat of a car. I didn't know how to say anything in English yet, so I shifted in my seat uncomfortably. But then when I held the car door open for her to get out after me, she said thank you in perfect Chinese.

I was taken aback. *She can speak Chinese?*

I made my first American friend.

One day, they invited me over to their house in Billerica.

When I watched American movies, like the *Home Alone* series, I always thought, "These houses can't be *that* big," "There are *stairs* in houses?" and "I can't believe people have grass in front of their houses."

But indeed, people do have their own two- or three-story houses with a front yard or a backyard, sometimes a swimming pool, many dogs and cats, and other luxuries. And I got a firsthand experience at Megan's house.

They lived in a three-story house. I often ran up and down the stairs, fascinated and excited by the indoor wooden steps. It would be so much cooler if their house had the

tiny elevator that the house in *Home Alone 3* had. I still found it fun to ride down the stairs with nothing under me.

“The key is to ride on the edges of the stairs, because when you hit each step, it slows you down,” I told Megan.

We had competitions to see who could reach the bottom of the stairs the fastest.

We also took turns sliding down the rails. We’d climb onto the rail, our chest and stomach resting on it, and we held on until we felt secure to let gravity to the work. Too soon would our feet hit the floor, so we went again and again. It was like going down a slide, but better, because it was more risky.

When we got bored with the stairs, we played in the giant room next door. It was like a Toys R Us: the room had boxes of Barbies and Legos and shelves board games and card games. The carpet made the floor comfortable for us to sprawl down on and play for hours. When we got bored with one toy, we could easily switch to another: the options were endless.

During the summer, we mostly played outside. We rode bicycles and scooters around the house and to a nearby park and school parking lot. I almost felt like I was in Taiwan again, riding a boy bike in the spacious outdoors of a giant apartment complex where I learned how to ride a bike in the first place.

For a long time, I never saw Megan’s dad; the first time I did, I realized that Megan gets her American look from him because he is white. I couldn’t communicate

with him at the time because I didn't understand or speak any English. We only awkwardly smiled and nodded at each other.

One of the times he spent time with me and Megan, we were going to have lunch. Her mom said that we were going to have barbeque.

“What's barbeque?” I asked.

She tried her best to explain it to me, but I couldn't picture it. I watched from the living room as her dad went out to the porch to set up the grill. He took a bag of charcoal rocks and dumped them into the grill. He sprayed gasoline over the rocks and lit a flame. Then, on the wire rack, he cooked burgers and hotdogs. The only burgers and hotdogs I've had then were either from McDonald's or the school cafeteria, and nothing tasted as fresh and juicy as the food that Megan's dad cooked that day. Megan's mom laid out salads and drinks. I had a feast and my first traditional American experience that day.

Another time, Megan's family invited me out on a boat ride. We drove a truck, hauling the boat behind us. We girls both brought a stuffed animal with us. I brought a dog or a wolf, mostly because I was scared yet excited—I'd been on big boats but had never been on a small, personal one before. So, if something bad happened, my guardian dog-wolf could protect me.

As the boat began to move, everything was peaceful. The sun was hot and unbearable, but the breeze cooled us down, blowing our hair back. Megan and I sat on white-leathered cushion seats in the bow while her father sat behind us at a wheel too big to fit in a car.

I looked down at the deep blue water, sparkles dancing on the surface. It made *shoosh* noises as it flowed around the boat. I felt inspired and in awe, one with nature... and then the boat started to rock harder.

At one point, the boat was bouncing up and down—gently at first, and then the bounces got more violent. I have always loved water, the beautiful shades of blue it had, and the way it flowed, but not that day.

I held onto my guardian dog-wolf. *What's going on? Are we gonna die?*

“Ahh,” we girls screamed. One of the bounces was too violent. The bow dipped down into the ocean and saltwater got into the boat and on us. We were soaked and upset. When I looked back at Megan’s dad to see if he got drenched too, but he was smiling, teeth shining and not a care in the world.

When we got back to her house, her dad immediately went back on the boat. I watched him wash the salt off and wax the boat until it looked brand new. I felt super grateful for that trip and for his hard work. Because of him, I got to be an American girl and experience some major American experiences, like barbeques and boat rides.

Let It Snow

Filled with awe, I stared out the window of my grandmother's house. White specks fell from the sky like skilled paratroopers gracefully floating in the air and landing on the ground. I stood on the cushioned chair, my hands gripped the windowsill, speechless and lost in wonder. It was winter 2005. I was nine when I saw my first snow.

Hot and sweaty or humid and rainy: that sums up the weather in Taipei. I grew up on a tropical island where there was a dry season and a wet season. Summer lasted three months—June to August, during which the temperature got up to 100 degrees Fahrenheit or higher. The second you walked out the door, you would be covered in sweat. The humidity made the sweat stick to you like a Command strip. For the rest of the year, residents enjoyed a cool 60- to 70-degree day, with the lowest temperature at around 50 degrees at night. Rain often poured from the sky, causing floods, and sometimes we had acid rain warnings.

Back then, the concept of snow wasn't even reality, not even when I saw it on *Home Alone 3*. Even though I didn't understand English, I still laughed at parts when the villains fell into black gooey matter, were sprayed with cold water, got a haircut from a lawn mower, and received extreme electric shocks to their butt. But the scene that stood out to me the most was when a snowstorm hit Chicago.

What is that white stuff?

When I asked my mom, she told me it was snow and that we would see it when we moved to America. I couldn't believe her. I thought it was something the movie made up. And then we moved to Woburn.

That day, I fell in love with snow. I could not believe it was real, but it was right in front of my eyes, floating through the sky and collecting on the ground. Eventually, it covered everything: from the bushes to trees, the cars to the front doorstep, and even the lines that ran between telephone poles. It was especially beautiful at night in the yellow glow of the streetlights. Each snowflake sparkled like diamonds, and I wanted to go out with a pillowcase and catch them all.

One afternoon, a family member handed me a cooking pot filled with snow and told me I could make things with it by squishing it together.

So, it's beautiful *and* it's something I can play with? I inhaled deeply and grabbed a handful of snow.

“Ah!” I immediately dropped it back. “It's *cold*.”

I picked up another handful and squeezed. The winter solid snow turned into clear water in my hands. I marveled at the transformation. Now that I knew how snow behaved, I stuck both hands in the container the second time and kneed it like it was the dough I used to play with in Taiwan. But after a while, everything turned to water. I asked for another pot of snow.

The next morning, my mom said we could go out and make snow angels. I have always loved angels and was eager to lie down on the white sheet of snow. But the second I got outside, I changed my mind. My body was freezing, my face hurt, and my nose and toes lost feeling.

Stomping around in snow was all the interaction I could stand. *Crunch, crunch, crunch*. I loved the noise it made under my heavy snow boots. But still, I wanted to return

to the hot climate where I could wear tank tops and shorts and enjoy iced drinks and watermelon slices.

After the first few snowstorms we had, I quickly grew sick of the weather. I was still amazed at the beautiful scene of white flakes falling from the sky, but I cringed the next day at the mountain of white snow. It looked gross when it turned dirt brown and black or when dogs peed on it. Every winter, I despised the cold air that I had to endure.

Sometimes, 40- and 50-degrees and sunny days were actually nice, but the wind could destroy beautiful winter days when it blew at 15, 20 miles per hour. On a typical winter day, I had to wear a tank top, a shirt, a sweater, and a jacket on top and a pair of fleece-lined leggings and jeans or sweatpants with two pairs of socks and snow boots. And even with all those layers, I could *still* be freezing.

Every year I told myself, “Why do I live in a place where the air hurts my face?” I grunted as I stuffed my face behind a scarf with a knitted hat and threw the furry hood of my winter coat over my head.

I often contemplated hibernation. I wanted to be like a bear, snuggled up against other bears in the warmth instead of feeling the violent cold wind that managed to push me around.

I thought I knew everything about American winters, but then I encountered ice. I was eleven and on my way to school for breakfast. My favorite was the apple churros powdered with sugar and a small carton of grape juice. I dressed in thick layers and heavy winter boots, prepared for the cold. But then, I got out of the car and could not stand it. I ran up to the front door and *woosh*.

I landed on my butt hard. I felt betrayed. What I stood on looked like snow, but it wasn't the powdery stuff or the chunky pieces.

Later, my family told me that it was ice. It was slippery, and I needed to be careful where I walked. Since that experience, I became paranoid. In the winter, I always took one baby step at a time. Sometimes I would put a foot down and slide it around to see if it was icy. I would take a step only if I trusted the ground not to betray me.

When I learned what black ice was and what it could do, I grew to hate winters in New England even more. It wasn't just pedestrians who could trip, but drivers weren't even safe to drive because their cars could slide on the ice and crash. It was like the weather was trying to kill you.

Even though having no school on snow days is nice, I growled at the evil white matter on the ground every winter. Some of my peers expressed that they like the cold and the snow, but I could never understand that. I came from a tropical island; my body was used to warm climate all the time.

What I found shocking was that New England even had snow in the spring months, like March and April, and in the fall, like October and November. Whenever it snowed early or late, I held a grudge against Mother Nature for forcing me to wear layers of insulation. Every year, I vowed to myself and everyone that I would move to California or Florida so that I could return to my natural environment, to the weather that I am used to. But I am still here in New England, battling every winter like the warrior I am.

Racism

When I lived in Taiwan, everyone looked the same: straight black hair and dark brown eyes. Some people, like my second older sister, were pale as snow, but most Taiwanese had olive or tan skin. I remember watching American films, shocked and surprised that people had blonde or light brown hair and blue or green eyes.

“Do they really exist?” I asked my mom. “They didn’t dye their hair, did they?”

I thought that everyone was born with black hair and eyes so dark and black that you couldn’t see any brown or gold unless they were in direct sunlight. Then I moved here and met people of all different colors.

At school, I marveled at the people who had blonde hair and blue eyes. Each strand of their hair was thin and glowed under the sun. And they didn’t have just one color all throughout their hair; they had different shades of brown and yellow mixed together. Usually, the brown colors appeared at the roots of the hair or the innermost layer while yellow and gold layered the top. Their eyes ranged from a light sky blue to a medium ocean blue and sometimes had specks of green, gold, gray, white, or brown. Once, a guy sitting next to me on the school bus had blue eyes and dark brown hair.

“Are you getting off at this stop?” he asked and turned to me, our eyes met.

I lost my ability to speak.

Wow. How did they get such amazing natural hair and blue eyes pattern? And more importantly, why were *my* hair and eyes so boring? I was sure that I was cursed to look boring.

There was another type of hair in my class. Two girls with darker skin color had tight black braids against their scalp with beads at the end. It was so cool! I had seen

many hairstyles, but this was the first time that I saw pretty beads in hair. And they change every few days: from small bright-colored beads to giant sparkly ones. When the girls turned their heads, the beads clashed together—*clink, clink, clink*.

In high school, I officially learned what racism was. We discussed how black and white people had to go to schools run by their own race, use separate bathrooms, and sit in different sections on the bus. Baffled, I couldn't even imagine what that life was like because I had always lived in a homogeneous society.

After I learned what racism was, everything made sense. I understood why I received unfair treatment from my peers and why people sometimes separate themselves because of their skin color.

The first time I sensed racism was in elementary school. My peers treated me differently. They often referred to me as “yellow” or “yellow-skinned,” which was confusing because my skin is more of tan than yellow. Meanwhile, fairer skinned students were not called “white,” “nude,” or “pink” by their peers.

During recess, I noticed that the students with darker skin color tend to spend time together and the fair-skinned students gathered in their own group. Since I was the only Asian person in school then, I felt like I didn't belong. So, I spent time with whomever would play with me and found the white kids to be just as nice as the black kids. We all liked to play Tag or Four Square or Mancala or Candyland. Why couldn't we play together?

What bothered me the most was when people in middle school called me, “Ching Chong, Ching Chong.” In their teenage minds, they probably thought it was funny, but I felt offended and annoyed that people were taunting me with noises that mimicked Chinese.

When I learned about racism in history class, I understood why the two groups of people didn’t always get along. For years, their relationship had been filled with hatred, anger, belittlement, abuse, bullying, ignorance, and misunderstanding. No wonder why the two groups couldn’t mix well together. And it’s also because of ignorance that I was treated poorly. People just didn’t understand.

As an immigrant who came from a homogeneous society, I had so many questions: why would people enslave other people and hit them and starve them? Why does my skin color mean that I’m a math genius while dark skin color signifies stupidity? And why did people have to go to different schools, have different teachers, and go to different bathrooms just because they have different melanin levels? After all, aren’t we all the same biologically? Are we not all the same species? Why am I labeled “yellow,” fair-skinned people “white,” and dark-skinned people “black”? It’s not just that I’m not even remotely close to yellow; “black” people aren’t literally black and “white” people aren’t literally white.

The biggest question I had was why it was socially acceptable for black people to call each other the N-word. This happened often in high school and college: I watched two black guys do a “dap” or a “bro hug” and say to each other, “What’s up, nigga?” I’ve even seen an Eastern Asian or a Latino do that with a black person. That word always

made me uncomfortable, probably because it was used as a derogatory term to minimize someone's worth as a person.

The N-word also made my high school English teacher uncomfortable. Once he heard it in the hallway and told the student to stop.

“Doesn't matter,” the student replied. “I can say what I want. I'm black.”

Is that why people can say that? What about the Eastern Asians and the Latinos? Is it because they're not white? I was afraid to ask. I didn't know who to ask and if they even had answers to these questions. And I knew it was a sensitive topic, just like racism was. I often saw people acting like racism didn't exist anymore. Teachers talked about racism as if it ended after desegregation. But I still saw examples of it, especially as I got older.

When I was in high school, I was walking towards downtown Woburn. This middle-aged Caucasian man was talking on the phone on his front steps. As I walked by his house, he noticed me and sneered with disgust to the person on the phone, “This Chinese girl is walking by me.”

I had never spoken to or met this person, yet my walking past his house disturbed him somehow. I was taken aback, hurt because I'm not Chinese and because I didn't know what I had done to receive such a negative reaction. I pretended like I didn't hear him and kept walking. But inside, I boiled with anger. This random guy didn't know me and had never spoken to me, yet he already made judgments about me based on how I look. What the hell!

In college, someone spray painted on a baseball bench, “Die, nigger.” The incident made the local news. My school held an assembly to assert that racism would not

be tolerated on campus. I thought that acceptance was common sense, that we were beyond hatred and ignorance. I thought we knew to take care of each other and be nice to each other. Even though everyone looked the same in Taiwan, I was always taught to treat everyone with respect and good manners.

Eventually, racism infected me. Around the time I was in middle school, I began to feel annoyance and dislike towards black people who have never done anything bad to me. I ignored them and stayed away from them. I started thinking that they were stupid and uneducated. But when I opened myself to communicate with black people, they were friendly and smart and all the things that I thought they weren't.

So why did I treat them like they were all bad?

When I realized that racism was changing me, I quickly corrected my behavior and thinking. But it was a constant factor in my life, trying to excuse me to treat people poorly. I fought it every time, reminding myself not to judge someone before getting to know them.

9/11

When you say 9/11, the first thing that Americans think of is one of the greatest tragedies that occurred in this country—the event that drastically impacted the United States’ attitude on security, people from the Middle East, and immigration.

It happened in 2001, four years before I moved to America. I was so confused every time someone mentioned the date. In seventh grade, I learned about what happened from my homeroom teacher. We watched a documentary in class then had a discussion about the event.

I could see the impact it had on other people. I knew the facts and understood the pain: how two planes crashed into the World Trade Center. How the debris fell from the sky and some people on the street got hurt. How the Towers both eventually crashed. How people who were stuck in the buildings had to jump and commit suicide, because they were stuck in the buildings and could not get out. How many police and firefighters died in action. How terrified people were that their aunt or dad or best friend who worked in one of the buildings or nearby could have been hurt. How panicked people felt when they could not contact their loved ones. Watching footage from that day, I felt sad but not the same way Americans did.

To get a better grasp of how 9/11 impacted people, I interviewed many people who were between three and 36 years old when it happened. I wanted to understand what that day was like for people. Teachers at schools said they watched the live broadcast in the teachers’ lounge. Stay-at-home parents stared at their television screens as the second plane crashed. Adults snatched up their phones and quickly dialed their loved ones to make sure they were safe. Teenagers and college students were shocked as the news

spread from classroom to classroom. Many people thought it was an accident, especially when the first plane crashed. But then the second plane crashed, and they realized that there was intent—an attack. That day, people were silent and quiet, feeling hopeless and helpless.

People my age said they remembered their parents frantically picking them up from school. They watched the news and felt confused. Some said they were scared mostly because of their parents' reactions than by what they were told and what they saw on TV.

September 11, 2001 was a day filled with emotions, yet I felt nothing except awkward whenever people talked about it.

In my first semester of college, I took a first-year seminar music class with Professor Abraham “Abe” Finch. One of our classes fell on September 11th, so Abe had us nine or ten students reflect on 9/11 and write a poem about it.

I snuck a peek around the room. Everyone was scribbling intently or typing something on their smartphone. Meanwhile, I squirmed in my seat and stared at the blank Note screen on my iPod. *What do I write?* I tried to type a few phrases but deleted everything I wrote. No words fit. I was stuck. I had never been this clueless and hopeless in a creative writing piece before.

“Alright, let’s share what we got,” Abe said.

Oh no, did time go by that fast?

We went in a circle. The first person shared their poem. It was deep and heartfelt.

Why can’t I write something like that?

The next person also wrote a wonderful poem, and I think someone teared up in response.

Oh great. I'm going to look so stupid.

The girl beside me shared hers, which means it was my turn next. Her poem was beautiful.

What do I say?

“Jen?” Abe said. I felt all the eyes burning into me.

“I didn’t know what to write,” I practically whispered. “I wasn’t in this country when it happened so... I don’t really feel anything.” I felt like I had to keep explaining myself or apologize profusely.

But all Abe said was, “That’s okay.” And he meant it.

We moved on. I felt a burden lift off my shoulders and I could breathe easily again. No one condemned me or made me feel more of a foreigner than I already felt.

This experience majorly impacted me. Yes, I am not born in the United States. Yes, I don’t understand a lot of things, because I didn’t grow up the same way Americans did. But I shouldn’t have to feel bad for not having the same childhood as my peers. I shouldn’t have to feel guilty for being a foreigner and not understanding American culture.

After all, America has always been so diverse, with people from all over the world who can speak different languages, have different cultures, grew up with different experiences. And I am just a part of that crowd that is different from the current definition of “Americans,” a term that is constantly being redefined.

Language is Funny

Language is funny.

I went from not knowing a single English word to knowing when to use slang words, like “cool” or “whatever,” in a few years. My younger sister, Cindy, and I would gab on and on in English. Once, my mother heard us and said that we were like machine guns firing English words nonstop at a speed that she could not follow.

For a while, I was uncomfortable speaking to others. So, when we had reading class and each student had to read to their group, they always skipped my turn. One day, my small group wanted me to read. *Why not*, I thought. I only read a page. When I stopped, one of the girls, Kayla, yelled for the teacher to come over.

“What’s going on?” Miss Ross asked.

“Jen read! She read a page!” she cried with excitement. But I just shrugged; I didn’t think it was a big deal. “Do it again! Read the next page.”

By then, the whole class was staring at me. I hated to be put on the spot like that, but everyone was waiting. I read the next page. It was awkward, especially when I stopped, and everyone celebrated and told me that I had done a good job.

I just wanted to stop feeling like a freak.

Accents are also funny. The older my family members are, the more of an accent they have when speaking English. My younger sister has none. My mother has a very thick accent, but she tries to speak English well and I can usually understand her. I used to have a very thick accent, but I have lost it for the most part, though it peeks through sometimes. *Th*’s are difficult for me sometimes, because the *s* wants to sneak out of my

mouth. My body still tenses up when I have to read out loud, and I try to slow down by enunciating every syllable carefully.

Accents are interesting because in 5th grade, when I still didn't speak English well, my best friend said that I was like Miley Cyrus: when we sing, we lose our accents. Since she told me that, I wanted to always sing instead of speaking as if I were in a musical. I wanted to hide my awful accent somehow, especially because my peers made fun of my accent and the way I spoke.

In middle school, I would sometimes try to copy other singers' voices. Around eighth grade, I found Ellie Goulding. I quickly fell in love with her talented songwriting skills, her ability to sing a wide range and sing well live, and her hauntingly beautiful voice when she sang melancholy songs. I found it easier to sing her songs with a British accent the way she does. I knew I didn't necessarily sound like myself, but everyone thought that British accents sounded cool and that Eastern Asian accents were laughable.

Grammar is funny too because there are rules and also many exceptions to those rules. And nothing makes sense. Like if the plural of goose is geese, why isn't the plural of moose meese? And why is the verb tense after "if" correct in my last sentence, but sometimes I have to use the conditional verb tense after "if," for example, "If it weren't for you, we wouldn't have to cancel our plans." Even my Grammar and Style professor, who has been teaching the course for years, still does not know how to apply all the rules and when to use the exceptions. What's more frustrating is how poorly English grammar is taught in schools. Some of my peers and I shared that we have learned more about grammar in Spanish classes than I did in English.

When I first moved here, English grammar was difficult for me to grasp. Nothing made sense, and I found English grammar to be quite the opposite of Chinese grammar. For example, if you want to say, “You’re always good at finding me,” in Chinese, the direct translation from Chinese to English roughly means, “I every time immediately by you am found.” When we ask people, “Okay?” or “Do you understand?” the direct translation from Chinese to English means, “Okay, not okay?”

But once I got used to using English grammar, I completely forgot how to apply Chinese grammar. One day, I was casually conversing in Chinese when my mother’s roaring laughter stopped me.

“What?” I asked.

“You’re using English grammar to speak Chinese,” she exclaimed.

As I became fluent in English, I realized that I had forgotten how to read or write Chinese. Now, I can only speak very broken Chinese. Actually, everyone in my family, even my mom, speaks some Chinglish. Sometimes, it’s because we forget the word in Chinese, so we have to use English. Other times, it’s because we have a word or phrase in one language but not the other—at least not the same meaning. For example, we Taiwanese have a phrase that is used for when someone is parting ways with you and you want to wish them well in their travel back home. In English, the closest we can get to that is, “Get home safely,” or, “I wish you well,” but the Chinese two-word phrase contains both meanings. On the other hand, English has many expressions, like “cross your fingers” and “raining cats and dogs” that Chinese doesn’t have.

Language is funny, because when my family doesn’t want an English speaker to understand what we’re talking about, they will switch to Chinese. When my mom met my

college boyfriend, she was very warm and welcoming. But then, she pulled me aside and asked in Chinese if he smoked or did any drugs. I rolled my eyes and exclaimed in English, “Mom! No, he doesn’t smoke or do drugs! That’s the first thing *I* asked him. It’s like you don’t trust me sometimes.”

Language is weird, because my mom has never sworn in Chinese but has in English. Once, we were driving and someone cut us off. My mom hit the brakes hard and called out, “Asshole!”

I turned to her in awe. “Mom!”

“It’s true!” she said.

Accent are cool because now when I speak Chinese in the Taiwanese dialect, I don’t have an American accent. I still have my Taiwanese accent, and I’m not sure how I am able to keep them separate. At the Chinese Christian church my family goes to, adults who spoke Chinese to me were surprised that I had no American accent. And when Americans learn that I used to be unable to speak English when I moved here, they are in awe of how perfectly I speak now.

Language is funny because when I tried teaching my boyfriend how to speak Chinese, he found it difficult to pronounce some sounds. He couldn’t properly pronounce the second symbol of “nose”—“zi” with a “down” intonation. Like how I first had trouble saying “chicken” in English, I have witnessed people having trouble saying it in Chinese: “ji” with a “neutral” intonation. When I taught him Chinese words, I slowly said the word, enunciating every symbol clearly so that he could mimic the noise. Yet, he still struggled.

“I can’t say it!”

“Imagine me then,” I said. “That’s why English was so difficult for me, because my mouth was not used to making these sounds.”

Tiger Mom

A term coined by Yale Professor Amy Chua in her memoir, tiger mothers are strict parents who demand and expect high achievements from their children, especially academically. Having Eastern Asian parents often feels like you're in the army. They have a specific way they would like you to do things, and you must stick to their strict regimen. They also have high expectations of perfect performance. If you fail or disobey, parents use fear and insults to teach children not to step out of line and to motivate them to perform better. Tiger moms also dictate what you can do with your time. The only activities you can participate in beside schoolwork are activities that will win you something, like chess or piano recitals. You can't do things for fun, like spending time with friends or playing video games.

My mother was a tiger mom. She forced me to eat everything on my plate, be polite to my elders, do well in school, and be able to play instruments. And my mom was feared. She often screamed at us when we misbehaved. In Taiwan, corporal punishment is allowed; when we did something wrong, she demanded we put our hands out, then hit us with a ruler. Sometimes, she made us kneel on the ground or stand for hours. My mom scared us into behaving well, though it took me longer than my siblings because I was stubborn and mischievous, fighting her every step of the way.

When I was around three years old, my mother demanded a lot of me. She was feeding me lunch one day, and I refused to eat another bite. My mother, also stubborn, held her hand in the air with a spoonful of food.

“Open your mouth,” she yelled. “Eat this.”

“No,” I screamed.

I kept trying to dodge her spoon, and she kept trying to shove it in my mouth. The standoff continued until my mother cried. “You made me hurt my arm. Why didn’t you just eat it?”

She gave up and left me in the kitchen. I didn’t know what the big deal was; I just didn’t want to have another bite.

Once when I was around five, I addressed my mother’s friend by her first name. I didn’t add the title “aunt,” which could be used for non-family members in Chinese, because I wanted to imitate my mother’s behavior. To my surprise, my mom immediately slapped me across the face. I wailed while she yelled at me to stop being rude.

When I was about six, I got home from school and wanted to watch TV or play computer games. But my mother made sure that I did my homework first.

“Work, then play,” she’d always say.

I did my homework begrudgingly for a while, and then it became a habit. Sometimes, my mother urged me to spend time with her.

“Come downstairs,” she’d said. “Go out with me,” she’d ask.

“No, I have homework.”

That “work, then play” mentality became so strong that, in my first semester of college, I disappeared for a week. My psychology professor assigned a ten-page research paper, and I didn’t hang out with my friends until I got it done.

It’s a stereotype that Eastern Asian parents want their kids to practice piano until they die, but that is more true than racist. I have a photograph of my playing piano when I was five or six. I thought the upright Yamaha we had was a toy, smashing the keys to make noises.

At eight, I started taking piano lessons from a family friend who also taught all my siblings. My mother forced me to practice piano for at least one a day. Sixty minutes felt like eternity. I cried and fought with her every day because I wanted to quit.

When I was seven or eight, I played at my first and only piano recital. Hearing the size of the giant crowd, I thought I was going to faint. Gratefully, all I could see was the spotlight when I stepped onto the stage. I took a bow and sat down in front of the chair. I squirmed to get comfortable. It was *almost* like the seat at home, so I put my mind there. I took a deep breath and started playing.

It was my favorite song that I was learning at the time, upbeat and groovy. But, playing it on the stage, I didn't hear that. Instead, I focused on my fingers, trying to forget all the eyes that were on me. I had practiced enough not to look at my hands, but I couldn't help myself.

The ending of the song always gave me trouble. I had rehearsed that part thousands of times beforehand and was prepared. Then when I got to that part, I still messed up. I was ready to run off the stage, but they made me take another bow in front of the thunderous crowd. Everyone thought I did so great, especially for a little girl, but I hated myself for making mistakes that I shouldn't have. I should've practiced more.

When we moved, my mother didn't get another piano teacher. We shipped our Yamaha over, but it got severely out of tune on the way. Mom kept urging me to practice on it. I tried, but nothing sounded the same. Without a teacher and a functional piano, I gave up.

She hounded me for months. "You're gonna regret it. You need to play. Just practice a little bit every day. You're going to regret not being able to play."

I groaned and rolled my eyes. Her words went in one ear and out the other.

After our big move, my mom slowly shed her tiger mother identity. My father had passed away the year before we moved, so my mom transitioned from being just a mom to being a mom *and* a dad.

After a couple of years in America, she learned to drive and got a full-time job. On weekdays, she woke up between 5 to 6 a.m. to send me and my four siblings to school. Then, she worked a 9-to-5 job. When she came home, she cooked dinner and did laundry. Even though she didn't understand English, she worked hard to make a living for us and helped us as much as possible to adapt to our new lives. My mother was the Wonder Woman of all mothers.

Since she wasn't home as much, she couldn't monitor me as much and therefore couldn't be a tiger mom anymore. Yet, she still had high expectations for me. She's always wanted me to excel at school and play piano, and then she started nagging at me to learn Chinese.

"You'll regret it if you don't," she said. "All the businesses are done in Chinese. You can be a translator. Look at how many things are in Chinese. You already have the basics, you just need to keep practicing." She even gave me books that we brought from Taiwan. "You can use these to practice. Just copy the words. Practice reading and writing."

Eventually, I gave into her and tried to learn some Chinese myself. But it bored me, so I gave up and ignored her insistent nagging. After a few of years in America, I

completely forgot how to read and write Chinese, except for my name. If she weren't gone during the weekdays, the tiger mom in her would have had made sure I spent at least an hour writing and reading Chinese daily.

When I was in middle school, there was an instance when I realized my mother had completely lost the tiger mom identity. One night, she and my sister, Cindy, were in the bathroom. Cindy was filling the sink up with water and playing in it. By accident, she splashed some water outside. Mom saw it and yelled at her to think before doing something. Cindy was scared at first, but then Mom said, "You need to sink, sink, sink."

My sister burst into laughter. "Okay," she said and pretended to dunk her head into water.

She ran out of the bathroom and told me what happened. In my laughter, I realized that none of us would have dared to laugh while being disciplined. And while my older siblings and I got physically punished, Cindy never had to endure anything similar. My mother didn't have the ability to control us and dictate what we spend our time doing anymore.

Even though I was often frustrated with my mom, she taught me that hard work pays off. In college, I took a basic piano class to satisfy a general education requirement.

The second I sat down at a piano, instincts kicked in. I remembered to put my fingers on C, D, E, F, and G and to maneuver my thumb under my fourth finger to play A, B, and the next octave C. I remembered to sit up straight and leave my feet near the pedals in case I needed them. I remembered to relax my wrists and shoulders, so that I could jump to different places on the piano. My professor saw that I had some experience and gave me some harder pieces that required two hands to play.

Out of all the songs he gave me, I chose Johann Sebastian Bach's "Praeludium I." It sounded beautiful and relaxing, and it reminded me of my house in Taiwan when my sister played the song on our Yamaha. The first four measures gave me no trouble, but I struggled in the middle and the end, for my small hands stopped me from easily reaching some of the keys.

So, I practiced.

You can't leave till you have mastered this part, I said to myself.

I practiced until my hands hurt, took a break, and practiced more. I only left the practice room when I felt confident that I had improved.

At the end of the semester, I played "Praeludium I" in front of the entire class. The melody transformed the classroom into a magical wonderland. At the end, I felt proud of myself for mastering this song. Deep down, I knew that I owed my strong work ethic to my tiger mom.

But at the same time, I didn't need a tiger mom. Because without that side of her, I didn't have anyone watching my every move, so I learned to be independent and mature.

As a sixth grader, I knew how to cook without burning the kitchen down; after school ended, I would make a quick meal for Cindy and my older brother, Jeremy. Then, I helped Cindy with her homework and made sure that Jeremy or I cleaned the house. Because our mom wasn't home during the day, we had to wash all the dirty dishes and vacuum the whole house. If we didn't, she would be angry that we didn't do any chores. Although she no longer punished us in the ways she used to in Taiwan, we wanted to help relieve some of her stress when she got home from a long day of work. Therefore, my

brother and I always made sure we vacuumed at least half of the house. Eventually, Cindy volunteered to help out. An elementary school student, she saw vacuuming as fun. She even did the stairs, dragging the body of the vacuum up every few steps.

When I became fluent in English, my mother asked me to make calls with her. We spent hours in her bedroom or the kitchen, trying to sort things out with MassHealth or Comcast. I hated these phone calls because we were put on hold or bounced around to different representatives. And I felt as confused as my mother did, especially when we called MassHealth. Health insurance should not be a maze with innumerable twists and turns designed to confuse and trick you. After sitting through two calls with MassHealth, I couldn't deal with it anymore. I made up some excuse, usually about being busy with homework, when my mom asked me to take a call with her. I preferred that her be confused and ask them for a translator than to sit through another boring, lengthy call.

When my mom was trying to get her associate's degree in early childhood education, she asked me for help with her assignments. She brought home a giant book with readings, multiple-choice questions, and essay questions. She answered as many multiple-choice questions as she could and circled ones she couldn't figure out for me and Cindy to complete.

"Can you also write the essays for me?" she asked.

I didn't feel like that was right, especially when I wanted to be an English teacher. I was always told that plagiarism was a serious offense.

"No, but I'll edit them for you."

Maybe she was upset that I didn't help her write her papers, but I wanted her to put some effort in, just as she wanted me to put effort into things that I didn't want to do. She whined and begged me to help her, but I didn't give in. She eventually wrote the essays herself.

After she got her associate's degree, she got a raise from her employer and thanked me and Cindy for helping her through the process. I felt so much like an adult then, equal to my mother in some ways.

By the time I was a high school senior, I had long forgotten what it was like to be a child. I worked at a bank, so that I didn't have to ask my mother for money to go out with friends. I took Cindy out to restaurants sometimes, just as my mother or my oldest sister would treat us to a meal. I had a folder of important documents like my social security card, my health care forms, and letters from my bank. And I had to apply to college by myself, which I thought was the norm. But then, I learned that most of my peers solicited help from their parents. Meanwhile, I had to research schools, send in applications, and complete FAFSA by myself.

Sometimes I wish that I were less independent. One day, I was discussing with my physics teacher the complicated process of FAFSA, hoping that he could help me out a bit. I mentioned that it was ridiculous to have to pay when you apply for financial aid.

"You don't have to pay," he said.

"*What?*"

"There is a free and official version. You shouldn't have to pay for FAFSA," he explained. "The paid versions are just trying to steal your money." While he gave me the

correct address to use, I couldn't help but think that I wouldn't be so helpless if my mom had helped me.

As I became more American, my mother and I began to have opposite perspectives. She was old-school, traditional, and very religious while I adopted an American millennial perspective—lax, accepting of all people, focused on myself, and believing that I could be whoever I wanted to be. Our opposing views caused a rift in our relationship. For instance, she felt like I was rude for asking for rides to places without considering that she might have plans herself. She said that I was being self-centered, but I saw it as the norm. America emphasizes children and their welfare and needs while Taiwan values elders and respect for the older generation the most.

Even though she couldn't be a hardcore tiger mother anymore, she was still upset when I told her I wanted to major in English in college.

“Don't do that. You're not going to make any money,” she warned. “You should study medicine or something more practical.”

“Well, you're not paying for my school, so I can do whatever I want,” I replied. I wanted to study something that I was passionate about and skilled at, not premed or prelaw.

When I was in high school, my mother and I disagreed the most. I often ran out of the house for a few hours because I found her unbearable. I was almost an adult, yet she still yelled at me about every little thing. “Don't wear that lipstick,” “Change your outfit,” “Don't be picky with food,” “Don't spend your money on that.” My mom was

trying to control every little part of my life without understanding the struggles I had to deal with.

One of those struggles was depression. When the school found out, they pulled me into the office and put me on suicide watch. I was 18 at the time, so they gave me the option to call my mother and tell her or not. Even though I specifically said no, they still did. She made a huge deal about it.

“Why are you sad?” she asked. “You should pray. Pray that God will make you happy.”

On my behalf, the school counselor tried telling her that we need to try different methods like therapy, but she didn’t understand it. She just wanted to pray. She had her way of doing things and didn’t want to try other techniques. There was still some tiger mother in her that wanted to dictate what I do and how I should live.

Every time she insisted that I should pray, I ignored her. Meanwhile, the school counselor kept insisting that I see a counselor. I told them that I couldn’t get a ride to a therapist’s office because my mother was a nervous driver and hated going to new places. But, it was mostly because I didn’t want to involve my mother since it was too complicated to talk to her. The school complied and had a therapist meet me during last period every week.

My therapist was a nice Russian woman. During one of our sessions, I told her that my mother and I were having difficulty communicating because she didn’t understand my point-of-view. I felt like she only had criticism for me and not a single word of praise. The therapist suggested that I should use, “I feel,” statements instead of, “You do this and that to me,” to alleviate feelings of blame in our relationship.

The next time my mom and I fought, I tried to tell her what I felt. To my surprise, this technique backfired. My mom continued to nag and yell at me instead of hearing my position. Frustrated, I wanted to quit trying to improve my relationship with her that night. Her complaints about me made me see myself as the terrible failure of a daughter.

At the same time, I was also talking to my physics teacher about my life because he had a lot of wisdom to share and was patient with me. Near the end of my senior year, he handed me an enclosed letter to give to my mom but wouldn't tell me what it was. After she read it, she ran into my room.

“How does he know how to do that?” she asked me.

Confused, I looked at the letter. It was composed entirely in Chinese.

Unfortunately, I couldn't read it. “What does it say?” I said.

“He told me all the great things that you're doing and that I should be proud of you,” she replied, then gave me a hug. “I am proud of you.”