

## Lost in Translation

An essay inspired by Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*

- 1 MOM: Hello?
- 2 ME: Hi Mommy!
- 3 MOM: Ai-yah, why you no call me in so long? Did you forget about me?
- 4 ME: No, Mommy, I've just been busy.
- 5 MOM: You go to Boston and you just forget I exist, huh.
- 6 ME: No, Mommy, I've just been busy with a lot of school work. I had three midterms and an  
7 essay due the last week, so I've been in the library every day until 3 or 4 a.m. By that time, it's  
8 too late to call you.
- 9 MOM: (*talking to a customer*) Hi! How are you? *Laughs*. I'm doing great, thank you for asking.
- 10 ME: Mommy, did you hear me?
- 11 MOM: Uh-huh, uh-huh, so, why did you call me?
- 12 ME: I just wanted to talk to you... but oh! Did you get my passport back from the visa office  
13 yet?
- 14 MOM: No, but I'll get it back soon. The office should be done processing it.
- 15 ME: Okay, just making sure since I'll need it for MISTI. *Sigh*. Mommy, I've been so busy these  
16 last few days, I keep forgetting to eat. I'm so tired, I barely sleep three or four hours every night.
- 17 MOM: Okay, so should I send your passport through mail? Or will you be home one of these  
18 days to pick it up?
- 19 ME: Mail, please. Did you hear me before?
- 20 MOM: Uh-huh, uh-huh. Oh, also, listen! The other day, I was talking to my friend. Her daughter  
21 just graduated from Haa-var'd. Haa-var'd! She was telling me all about how her daughter double-  
22 majored in Computer Science and Economics, and is now working at Google. Gooo-gle! Hello?  
23 Ying Jie? Are you even listening?
- 24 ME: Uh-huh.
- 25 MOM: My friend said that her daughter also got an offer from Microsoft. They even pay more  
26 money! But Microsoft want her to live in Japan for two years. So she took the Google offer to be  
27 closer to home. Isn't that *great*?
- 28 ME: Uh-huh.
- 29 MOM: And then your cousin, Cindy. You know Cindy? Same year as you? Charlie's daughter?
- 30 ME: Uh-huh.
- 31 MOM: She has it all in her head that she want to be a lawyer. Isn't she silly?
- 32 ME: Why is that silly?
- 33 MOM: She do not understand that being a lawyer as a Chinese woman is dumb! No one want to  
34 hire a *Chinese woman* for a lawyer! How foolish! Listen up, *Ying Jie*.
- 35 ME: Uh-huh.

36 MOM: Remember when you said you felt guilty? Because college tuition is expensive? Well, it  
37 okay, it totally worth it! Now you at MIT, you can find a successful and rich husband. That way,  
38 you can live a stress-free life! Totally worth the price!  
39 ME: Mommy. You've told me this before. And like I've said before, I'm not here to find myself  
40 a *husband*.  
41 MOM: Well, finding a successful husband is important too! Think about how stress-free you can  
42 be if you make a lot of money, husband make lot of money too!  
43 ME: So, how's Victor doing? Is he still with his girlfriend?  
44 MOM: *Ai-yah*, the other day, he drove up to see his girlfriend in Connecticut. He got into an  
45 accident. *Che zhi bao le!*  
46 ME: Is the car okay?  
47 MOM: No, *che zhi bao le!* The front lights shattered, and the car so old that insurance won't do  
48 anything. Luckily, he wasn't hurt.  
49 ME: Oh, that's good to hear, that's what's most important. How are you, Mommy?  
50 MOM: Mhm, mhm. (*talking to a customer*) \$8.70, please.  
51 ME: Well... Okay, Mommy. I've got to go. I have plenty of homework to do, okay?  
52 MOM: Okay, remember to eat more fruits, okay? It okay if they expensive, price not a problem.  
53 ME: Uh-huh. Love you.  
54 MOM: Okay, okay, bye. *Click*.

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Line 3: *Ai-yah, why you no call me in so long? Did you forget about me?*

These are my mom's favorite questions to ask. When I was younger, I always believed that she was jokingly asking, so I thought nothing of them. After my sister Erica moved to Chicago though, she would often comment on how "it already two weeks since Erica called," or how "Erica think she so busy she can't spare *five* minutes to say hi," and I began to realize that there was a well of emotions underlying those seemingly casual complaints that I was completely unaware of.

Last Christmas, my mom took us to a small hole-in-the-wall dumpling shop in Chinatown that my sister and I had grown up loving when she suddenly spewed, "Your generation don't understand *anything!*"

*Oh my god, how festive.*

“What do you mean? We don’t understand dumplings?”

My mom apparently did not appreciate my humorous reply, and continued, “No, *Ying Jie*, your generation just too selfish! You only think about *you*. You, you, you, and no one else!”

“Ah.” I leaned into the store counter, taking in the savory aroma of pork, chives, and soy sauce. *Getting dumplings on Christmas is fun. Dumplings, Christmas, fun. Dumplings, Christmas, fun. If I chant it enough, it’ll be true. Dumplings, Christmas, fun. Dumplings, Christmas, fun.*

“Are you even listening to me?” she said, snapping me out of my chant.

“Of course!”

She let out an audible sigh. “Look at your sister! Christmas Day, and she don’t even want to come home to visit. Say it too expensive for her. Huh! Is family too expensive?”

“No, of course—”

“Not even one phone call, one text message. Is that too much to ask? Raising her so useless. What the point of raising children if they going to run away when they grow up?”

Understanding that it was useless to reply, I decided to keep my mouth shut, only letting out a soft “hmm,” which I hoped was enough to convince her that I was, unfortunately, still listening.

She grabbed my shoulder, forcing me to face her. “Are you going to run away too, *Ying Jie*? When you get older, will you just forget about me? Will you just run far, far away?”

Her eyes told me that there was only one acceptable answer, that regardless of any grand aspirations I had of working and living in sunny California, which was four times as far as Chicago was to New York, the “correct” answer was no. After all, on her side of the large

generational and cultural barriers that separated us, family always come first. Filial piety was of utmost importance. Envisioning a future that did not consider my parents was treason, unthinkable, and quite ironically, unbeknownst to them, although they had both decided to leave their families in Fuzhou for the prospect of a better future in America.

So, as the obedient Chinese daughter that I was raised to be, I neatly tucked away my dreams, my aspirations.

“No, of course not.”

*Line 6-8: No, Mommy, I've just been busy with a lot of school work. I had three midterms and an essay due the last week, so I've been in the library every day until 3 or 4 a.m. By that time, it's too late to call you.*

What I said here was not inaccurate; I *have* been extremely busy recently. I *have* holed myself up in the library until the wee hours of the morning. So by the time I trudge my tired, worn-out self back home, it *is* too late to call my mom, who makes it a routine to sleep before midnight, and I just convince (or perhaps comfort is a more fitting word here?) myself that, tomorrow, this weekend, next week, I'll remember to do so.

Yet, a small voice in my head won't stop uncomfortably reminding me of the cliché, “There's no such thing as being too busy, and if you really want something, you'll make time for it.”

*Line 9: (talking to a customer) Hi! How are you? Laughs. I'm doing great, thank you for asking.*

Working in retail is difficult and demanding. I've learned that from watching my parents work at our small Chinese restaurant in the Bronx since I was only 5, and have been continuously reminded by my own interactions with unpleasant, rude, and drunk customers while

working at my parents' liquor store. So I *know* I'm being unfair when I say that I was hurt by her lack of response to my attempt to engage in a non-shallow conversation. *But I can't help myself!* After all, I am *her* daughter. When I told her that I had been staying at the library until the morning, I expected some sign of worry or concern, and my childish desire to be noticed and cared for longed for her to chastise me, tell me that I was more important than my schoolwork, urge me to take better care of myself.

And yet? Nothing! Did she just not care *at all*?

*Line 15-17: Okay, just making sure since I'll need it for MISTI. Sigh. Mommy, I've been so busy these last few days, I keep forgetting to eat. I'm so tired, I barely sleep three or four hours every night.*

Led along by the possibility that perhaps, my mom had not chosen to ignore me but instead, simply did not hear what I said, I decided to try again, only to be doubly disappointed.

*Line 18-19: Okay, so should I send your passport through mail? Or will you be home one of these days to pick it up?*

I want to make this clear: I do *not* think my mom is a bad mom. She knows and goes through all of the motions of being a mom. She fulfills all of the responsibilities of a “good mom”: she makes sure that I'm fed, that I always have enough money in my pocket, and that I'm always safe. Still, I *do* think that there is something fundamentally missing—and something that I desperately crave—in my relationship with my mom: emotional support. I want her to ask me about my day. I want her to ask me about my hobbies and interests. I want to be able to tell her when I'm happy, tell her when I'm sad. I want to be able to ask her for advice when I face a

problem, or simply distressed. I want her to be my friend, instead of my business partner or a manager.

But after almost twenty years of our current relationship, how could I tell her that I want more than a functional or working relationship? Furthermore, how could I demand more of my mom, who is already working twelve to fourteen hours a day to help provide for our family, who is always so exhausted that even after work, even on her days off, she can't find the energy to do anything she enjoys?

I just can't.

Line 21-23: Uh-huh, uh-huh. Oh, also, listen! The other day, I was talking to my friend. Her daughter just graduated from Haa-ward. Haa-ward! She was telling me all about how her daughter double-majored in Computer Science and Economics, and is now working at Google. Gooo-gle!

My mom loves telling me stories; more specifically, she loves telling me stories about her friends' successful sons and daughters. So while most parents read fables and fairy tales as bedtime stories, my mom read and told me stories about the triumphs of others' daughters and sons. To her, these successful daughters and sons were the heroes and heroines of the modern age.

“You know, *Ying Jie*, my friend has daughter in Cornell. Cornell is okay school. But she is president of five club right now! And she has 4.0 GPA!” a story may begin.

Or, “Ai-yah, my friend has son who work in summer at Apple. This summer! My friend is poor and own Chinese restaurant but cannot hire any new workers. So son say he help out on weekends!”

Or, even better yet, “Listen, ah, my friend has son and son graduate last year. But son got a job that make over \$20,000? No wait, \$200,00 a year! So successful!”

Perhaps, the moral of these tales did not translate well from Chinese to English, or were lost in translation because as I listened to her, I could never focus on the supposed success of these strangers she loved to brag about. Instead, what I heard in every story was, “*Ying Jie*, you not good enough. No matter what you do, no matter how good your grades are, no matter how far you take your passions, you’re always below my expectations. Why you not president of a hundred clubs or get good 4.0 GPA? Why you not land an Apple internship, or make over \$200,000 a year?” Each story is solely a reminder of people who are far more successful than I am, and that my mom wishes I were more like them. As a young girl, I constantly strived to match, if not exceed, my mom’s expectations. I wanted her to brag about *me*, not these strangers. But now that I have developed my own passions for dance, lacrosse, video game development—passions that she can’t understand—I just want her to accept me for who I am. I know that I am not, and never will be, the perfect daughter. I know that I may not be the president of five clubs or an intern at Apple, no matter how many stories she tells me, and I wish that she would realize, too.

Line 35-36: She do not understand that being a lawyer as a Chinese woman is dumb! No one want to hire a *Chinese woman* for a lawyer! How foolish! Listen up, *Ying Jie*.

I do not know or claim to know the validity of her statements; I do not know how foolish it is to want to be a lawyer as a Chinese woman, nor do I know how unlikely it is for a Chinese woman to be hired as a lawyer. However, what I *do* know is that, whether I like it or not, her words, even when not directed at me, have had an impact on who I am and how I see myself. Even though I do not aspire to be a lawyer, her remarks have made more conscious of my sex, and how my sex may somehow dictate my future success. Surrounded by my bright female peers

at MIT, I can't help but get angry, for while I would love to believe that she is entirely wrong, the gender pay gap tells me otherwise.

Line 38-40: Remember when you said you felt guilty? Because college tuition is expensive? Well, it okay, it totally worth it! Now you at MIT, you can find a successful and rich husband. That way, you can live a stressful life! Totally worth the price!

My mom has grown up understanding that women are inferior to men, that it is of utmost importance that a woman marries a rich or successful man, that a woman's role is to take care of the house while the man puts food on the table. So, if I squint my eyes really hard, I could probably understand why she said what she did. Still, it makes me angry to know that even though I don't want to rely on someone else's success because *I* want to be successful, she still believes that my place will inevitably be in the house.

Line 48: *Is the car okay?*

I'm not quite sure why I asked about whether or not the car was okay first, rather than my brother. *What was I thinking?*

Line 49: *No, che zhi bao le!*

I'm not quite sure how much more I was supposed to understand from her repeating the phrase, but in one fell swoop, I realized exactly how thick the language barrier separating my mom and me was. How could we possibly get to know each other more, if we couldn't even talk or convey basic ideas?

*Line 54-57: Okay, remember to eat more fruits, okay? It okay if they expensive, price not a problem.*

Was this her subtle way of showing that somewhere, deep down inside, she cared? Or am I getting my hopes up, again?

*Line 57: Okay, okay, bye. Click.*

“I love you” is a phrase that I found the courage to tell my mom after coming to college; after all, it’s much easier saying those three simple words over the phone, than in person. Still, her response is different each time: sometimes, she’ll reply, “Ai-yah, I love you too!” while other times—like this time—she simply agrees, and then hangs up. Will there come a day when I can say those three words and be confident that she will reciprocate?