

Forgetting My First Language By [Jenny Liao](#)

When I speak Cantonese with my parents now, I rely on translation apps

No one prepared me for the heartbreak of losing my first language. It doesn't feel like the sudden, sharp pain of losing someone you love, but rather a dull ache that builds slowly until it becomes a part of you. My first language, Cantonese, is the only one I share with my parents, and, as it slips from my memory, I also lose my ability to communicate with them. When I tell people this, their eyes tend to grow wide with disbelief, as if it's so absurd that I must be joking. "They can't speak English?" they ask. "So how do you talk to your parents?" I never have a good answer. The truth is, I rely on translation apps and online dictionaries for most of our conversations.

It's strange when I hear myself say that I have trouble talking to my parents, because I still don't quite believe it myself. We speak on the phone once a week and the script is the same: "Have you eaten yet?" my father asks in Cantonese. Long pause. "No, not yet. You?" I reply. "Why not? It's so late," my mother cuts in. Long pause. "Remember to drink more water and wear a mask outside," she continues. "O.K. You too." Longest pause. "We'll stop bothering you, then." The conversation is shallow but familiar. Deviating from it puts us (or, if I'm being honest, just me) at risk of discomfort, which I try to avoid at all costs.

I grew up during the nineties in Sheepshead Bay, a quiet neighborhood located in the southern tip of Brooklyn, where the residents were mostly Russian-Jewish immigrants. Unable to communicate with neighbors, my parents kept to themselves and found other ways to participate in American culture. Once a month, my dad attempted to re-create McDonald's chicken nuggets at home for my two brothers and me before taking us to the Coney Island boardwalk to watch the Cyclone roller coaster rumble by. On Sundays, my mom brought me to violin lessons, and afterward I accompanied her to a factory in Chinatown where she sacrificed her day off to sew blouses to pay for my next lesson while I did homework. These constant acts of love—my parents' ideas of Americana—shaped who I am today. Why is it so difficult for me, at age thirty-two, to have a meaningful discussion with them? As an adult, I feel like their acquaintance instead of their daughter.