

A Dream Under the Cover of Diaries

By Yanchen Ge

I always believe that my mother is the first teacher who taught me English when I was little. But honestly, people are forgetful, and who can remember things that happened in their childhood as clearly as what they did yesterday? In this way, people seem to easily forget what they used to be, and even what they used to be passionate about.

But I did find that piece of memory—in another way—by reading my mother’s diary. Not like me, she keeps her diary nearly every night, and her diaries are not about some sparkling ideas that pop up in her head; they are simple things that happened daily, monthly, yearly, and they are about me, mostly. For example, they may look like: “XX Month, XX day, XX year, my seven-month-old son, Sunny (this is my nickname they gave me when I was born. They wish me to become as warm as the sun), tried a small piece of fish for the first time in his life and learned how to identify two new Chinese words. He played with his toys happily and didn’t sleep until nine.”

What I can never forget was a page of her diary that tells me about how I encountered my second language. On that page she wrote: “My son Sunny watched a children’s English teaching show for a while; he was so curious about it, and followed the sound and read “mom,” “dad,” “dog,” and “cat” in English. His English pronunciation sounded good, and I like the way he learned all about these because I can see the light of interest that shoots from his little sparkling eyes.” Her handwriting looked as perfect as usual; her Chinese calligraphy strokes were exquisite and smooth, and each of the letters were tiny and elegant but clear enough to see. Every sentence was simple but lovely as she put all her effort on writing them and covering them under the thick book cover. Because of the age, the pages had turned old and fragile, and

when I turned the golden pages, they still made crisp and silvery sounds like the sound of my mother's smile had been released from this diary. Not just the memory, she sealed her joy deeply inside the pages and waited for me to uncover them someday.

People who do not know my mother may think that she is a writer or a teacher, and that's what she usually dresses like. However, both of my parents are dedicated telecommunication engineers, so that's why I chose engineering as my intended major, neither biology nor film study. They wanted me to be an engineer like them to give me a perfectly designed future, and they also tried to nurture my logic into a more scientific and rational way by tutoring me in science. However, my mother's hidden passion for literature, humanities and filmmaking also inspired me, even though that was not her purpose. When I am typing my ideas and experiences, I always feel they drag me out of the vortex of difficult engineering questions, and make my thoughts deep. Sometimes, when I am working on what I really enjoy, like organizing a new short film script or imagining what would the earth look like if humans suddenly disappeared, I always question myself about what I truly want to do, and what my life should be. There is no such right or wrong answer, so then I realize that is the question which a person should never forget and always think about throughout the whole life.

My mother still believed that I was born to be a science specialist because I did enjoy mastering new engineering skills or analyzing fancy data, and I always feel proud of my parents' jobs since I grew up. In primary school the English teacher let us write an introduction of our parents; I wrote:

My parents are engineers. I am very proud of them.
My mother loves reading. She likes reading all kinds of books. She teaches English to me at home.

I read that to my mother with a proud childish voice. She corrected my grammar mistakes as

usual and added: “telecommunication engineers, next time use this more specific word, because engineers have many different types.”

“What’s telecommunication?” I tried my best to pronounce that word she wrote.

She hesitated for a little while, thinking.

“Sunny, try to separate the word ‘telecommunication’ into three different parts. The first part ‘tele’ has the similar meaning of which word you know? Telephone. Right. So ‘tele’ means long distance. The second part: ‘-commun-’ you may not know. Let me teach a similar word ‘common’. ‘Common’ means people’s similar aspects, in which different people share the same things. And finally, the third part ‘-ication’ means to make thoughts into action. So, the word ‘telecommunication’ means to make people connect with each other even they are far away from each other, and ‘telecommunication engineers make this come true.”

My mother helped me memorize long English words the most when she showed me her specialty of making stories. To enable me to remember words in context, she collected my unknown words every week and used them to create a short but coherent story like my one-on-one tutor. The stories were simple, childish, and sometimes full of Chinese-English but were grammatically correct and easy enough to remember. To test my memory, she also hand-wrote her stories into fill-in-the-blank quizzes. Sometimes I got bored, but she always persuaded me to be patient. It seemed like her patience for teaching me was infinite, because she smiled all the time, and never got mad at me. Now I realize that every blank I filled in was not only a blank English word, but also the blank of her life, something she had lost a long time ago and suddenly found by teaching me, her only student.

As I wrote before, my mother spends her free time by reading paper books. She reads all kinds of books, mostly famous literatures. Once I asked why she often writes by hand and reads

on paper; she answered: “I like handwriting because I do typing in my office. Typing is for my work, but writing is not. So, too, reading on the computer happens at work, but reading paper books at home.” Every month she subscribes to a magazine about current highly evaluated movies, simply because she loves the good stories but does not like spending her time watching all of them in the crowded movie theater. Or maybe she uses this excuse because she is too busy to have time to watch them.

I don't know how much my mother's English had influenced my own English, but I believe that her well-hidden passion for films did influence me a lot. To practice my speaking, she asked me to copy my favorite dialogues when I watched every English film and read them in different characters' voices to her with emotion and passion. If the film had no English subtitles, we watched together to figure out what the actors were saying word by word, and copied them down by handwriting. At the beginning, my performance was awkwardly unnatural. I stood rigidly like a straight telegraph pole, holding the scrip tightly in my hand, trembling, hoping to hide myself behind that tiny script. Unlike a strict teacher at school, my mother sat inside her armchair, and showed me I could start whenever I was ready. I began to squeeze those words out of my lips although I had tried my best to recite them. I lowered my voice. My eyesight drifted and suddenly, I saw she still sat inside her chair. Her eyes were closed, and she smiled to tell me to continue. Then I stretched my arms, cleared my throat, and took a deep breath to start again. My voice sounded louder because those words flowed through my lips like a stream of water. This stream then began to become a torrent, a waterfall, a flood roaring in my heart and erupted through my voice. My only audience stood up when I finished, applauded and told me she had never heard such a vivid play before. My “mimicking” skills developed quickly with my only audience's support. I could understand what characters thought and felt, and imitate their voices

or even make new dialogues with myself and act them out. After seeing me practicing and stepping back and forth in my room with the door open, she smiled: “Like the young Hamlet, who wanders around questioning to himself.”

I knew she made a difficult decision to enroll me in the international high school program. Once she said: “If you choose to study abroad, your parents will eventually have nothing to teach and to protect you, because you are going to find a different way for college and for life than us.” She was correct, because the first month of my international program was as difficult as we expected. Tons of obscure words about math, literature and science flowed to me, and it seemed impossible to memorize them with my mother’s stories. I had to memorize them all by myself every day, and my mother could teach me nothing but only encouraged me. We stopped talking a lot like before, and she realized that her only student had graduated from his first English teacher forever. However, I successfully adjusted to the bilingual study with my own effort, and I formed my “short film making” club. Chatting and making short films constituted the most enjoyable days I had in my high school. My ambitious friends sat in a circle, sharing their thoughts with flames of passion that burst out from their eyes. I also realized that I could be a storyteller who depicted his deep ocean of provoking thoughts on the screen. One day when I finally told her my dream of learning filmmaking in college, she looked calmly shocked.

That night I saw her dream, a tiny dream under the cover of her diary. She looked at my eyes, and she deftly unlocked a drawer, gently and swiftly picked an old diary covered with faded pink color leather. Then she quickly turned on one page, hesitated for a while, thinking, and began to read in the voice she used to read her English stories. “When I was about eighteen, I suddenly had a crazy dream about becoming a Chinese literature teacher because I deeply love kids. However, I didn’t become one, because my parents were not teachers, so they wouldn’t

support me, and I didn't believe I had the talent to become one. Also, I found that I always love math, and being an engineer could satisfy this long-term interest. This was how I set my life goal, and you should carefully set yours." I listened and nodded, saying that I would find my own dream, but I was confused. I was confused about why she thought that she could not be a teacher just because of her parents' disagreement, and I don't know why she persuaded herself to end up being an engineer although that was not what she truly wanted to do. "Sunny, you cannot let your interest block the path of your life," she added.

I didn't notice that my mothers' parents may have shown her the same words when she was just at the same age as me, but now I wonder about my goal of being an engineer, a path she carefully prepared for me, hoping for me to be happy and safe in the future and not need to worry about jobs or money forever. However, just as she cannot teach me English eternally, she cannot protect me and guide me in the future, and I will leave her and have my own life someday. I also realize that there is a common phenomenon in China, that teenagers cannot study what they want because their family does not allow it, and they are being forced to follow their parents' paths. When those teenagers grow up and become parents, they will say the same words and do the same things to their children, also locking and sealing countless beautiful dreams inside those old, shattered diaries.

Something I had to notice: my mother's English skill was deteriorating: she forgot or misused some words, and her tongue transformed into something unclear and unfamiliar. In our parent-teacher meeting, she let me translate for her. And last year, when she E-mailed my college counselor about how to submit my scores, she hurriedly began her letter as:

Dear Mr. O':

I am mother of Elix (My English name used in High school), I have a question to ask you. A University require 'Self-Reported Academic Record', Need we do it by ourselves? Or you do it?

Thank you very much!
Elix' mother

When I saw this e-mail printed in Professor O.'s hand, I could not find anything to say at that moment. However, I never forgot it, and it still flashes back in my brain. I saw in that Chinglish email dreams being forgotten, like a page of diary being torn up and thrown into a trashcan. And I saw those forgotten dreams fade quickly in people's memories, like things that happened in their childhood. By teaching me, she found the only alternative way to fulfill her missing parts, but, still, she lost them once again. I suddenly understand that her diaries are the secret place where she protects her memories and her dreams. Those old, yellowed covers and pages carry the weight of her world, and keep her most tender memories protected. Although she cannot chase her childish, unrealistic dreams anymore, she opens a diary, hiding, sealing, and locking her little sparks of madness, and calmly faces everything that comes to her daily life.

Several weeks after leaving home and studying in America, I received a short video sent by my mother about my four-year-old little cousin whose family lives in Singapore and speaks English every day. I saw my mother was playing with him, speaking her familiar and unfamiliar English with her smile on her face. While they were speaking and laughing loudly, her eyes shone, her voice sounded like a child.