

To my parents,

“An A- is not bad Dad! You should be grateful for us – all my other friends get gifts when they get an A!” I was yelling back at my dad as he was ferociously screaming at my brother. My brother received his first A- in sixth grade, and I knew that the punishment was going to be severe. He was always hard on my brother about grades, and as his grades were worsening, the effect would also trickle down to me. I could see anger in my dad’s eyes; it was as if we had committed the worst crime in the world rather than a “bad grade” and “talking back.” My dad continued to yell at both of us, because now I was in trouble too. “Forget it! It’s YOUR future, you can ruin it if you want!” These were the words I heard growing up.

I’m 24 years old now, and yet I feel like this is the means through which I can tell you how I feel. I was scared but moreover, I didn’t understand. An A- didn’t mean that his future was doomed. Rather than strict, angry parenting, it would have been helpful to be more open to discussion, to two-way communication. We could have sat down and discussed the importance of grades, education, and schooling. You could have told me your background and why you emphasize all A’s, so we could understand. Instead, whatever you said was always the right way. You expected us to listen and obey by your rules. Now, being older, I can partially understand where you were coming from. Yes, you wanted what was best for brother and me. You wanted us to succeed, to excel, to reach our best potential. You wanted to push us, so that we could have more opportunities than you did. As I am developing more empathy and learning about your background, I feel like I can see your perspective. I know that you grew up in Korea during a time period in which food, resources, and opportunities were scarce. Your childhood was during a time where Korea was still a third world nation and education was the only way to make it to the top. And you did it. You went from eating bananas as a sweet treat since they were expensive

to a college professor at the number one university. You immigrated to the U.S. through education by receiving admission to a top Ph.D. program. You worked hard, and your dad parented you very similarly – education, education, education as the pathway to success. That type of parenting worked for you, so it had to work for us right? In one sense, it did... we (my brother and I) both ended up matriculating at great colleges. But that's the thing, there's a difference between the way we grew up and the way you did. We were being raised at a very different time period, income level, and in another country, the United States.

It's strange, because growing up in the U.S., I felt closer to you both in one sense but had difficulty connecting due to cultural differences. Whilst growing up here, I felt as though we were a family unit – being the only Asians in a predominantly White area, we had to stick together to support each other. In the suburbs, there isn't much to do besides spending time with family. I remember always eating dinner together, going on walks, family vacations, and hosting dinner parties with other Korean families. We Koreans had to build our own little community, as there weren't too many of us. At the same time, I was embarrassed. I didn't understand why your English wasn't perfect. My Korean wasn't perfect either, so it would be frustrating trying to communicate. I didn't want you to hold my hand while walking to school. Why did you say you're my mommy and daddy rather than mom and dad? Why couldn't you understand that I didn't want Korean food for breakfast, because it made my breath stink? I made sure to use mouthwash twice before going to school. Why was our punishment not getting grounded to go to our room but holding our arms up in the air for what seemed like hours (in reality, it was probably only a minute or two)? Why did you pack me sushi for lunch rather than the cool PB&J sandwiches everyone else had? I now know that these are aspects of my Korean culture that I am very grateful you instilled in us. But above all, why didn't you pack a note for me in my

lunchbox like every other kid? I wanted a cheesy note too that says “Have a nice day, I love you” but of course I’m not going to tell you that, because our family isn’t that affectionate.

I understand now, after two decades, that you pushing us to do well in school was your expression of love. It was the way you received love from your parents, and that was your form of affection, care, concern. I get it...but only after I “succeeded” and after many years. I struggled during my childhood, because I never felt like I could express myself and my love for you both. As I was watching all my White friends receive a certain form of love (hugs, kisses, presents, notes, communication), there was a part of me that felt empty. Because everyone else around me got this type of affection, sometimes I didn’t feel loved. At the same time, I couldn’t share how I was feeling. We never discussed emotions in the family – it was always about school or studying rather than friendships, relationships, and hobbies. When I did try and discuss family issues, I was “talking back to my elders” or was “being disrespectful.” Although this is attributable to cultural differences, a part of me was still American and individualistic. I grew up bicultural, whether you want to accept that or not. I know that you wanted us to retain our Korean culture through language, food, values, etc. However, just because I identify as partially American, that does not diminish my Korean identity – I can hold both. I’m now thankful that you didn’t make us assimilate into the U.S. culture completely (e.g. food and language), but at the same time, there are certain American values I still hold. I want us to be able to talk to each other like equals or for you to respect what I have to say. Yes, I’m still flawed and may not know as much as you do, but all I’m asking is for you to listen. Of course, I still respect you both, and I respect my elders. Discussion and talking does not negate those values I hold close to my heart.

Since college, we’ve definitely gotten closer. I don’t know if it’s the distance or the age, but I’ve felt more love from you. That love helps me express my love towards you too. Maybe it’s

the maturity as well. I know you always said I was too young to understand, but now I'm at that age where I can understand. We can hold deep conversations and connect on many levels.

There's less pressure, because I'm independent and I "made it." You successfully completed your responsibility as a parent. But I am still working on the effects of my childhood, particularly being vulnerable with others, sharing emotions, and confidently expressing who I am.

Mom, Dad, this letter is a form of communication where I feel like I can finally express myself. This letter is still partially representative of our relationship, our difficulties in open communication. At the same time, this letter also signifies moving forward in our relationship. This letter gives me healing. All in all, what I really want to say is...no matter what, no matter our differences, thank you and I love you so much.

Love,

Your child