

A vibrant garden scene with a winding path, colorful flower beds, and a small waterfall. The path is made of green grass and leads through a variety of flowers, including red, yellow, and purple blooms. In the background, there are lush green trees and a small waterfall cascading over rocks.

Pruned to Perfection: The Bonsai Child's Letter for Asian Parents' High Expectations

by Ysabelle Calahi

To my carers, my parents:

Like a bonsai tree, I was shaped with precision. I was trimmed when I grew in the wrong direction and confined to a pot of perfection. I was nurtured with the fertilizer, discipline. This fertilizer is known to lead plants to success, resilience, and honor. To admirers and onlookers, I was beautiful. I was a well-behaved tree that never dared to expand her roots further than what was potted by you. Though I am a beautiful bonsai, these high expectations have stunted my sense of self, worth, and success—my roots burned from being oversaturated by your fertilizer in my pot. While I am grateful for the care I was given from you, I sometimes wonder how much stronger I could've grown without the damage to my roots and sprouts of anxiety, perfectionism, and fragile sense of self. How much stronger could I be if I hadn't been clipped out of curiosity for the world? How much stronger would I be if I hadn't been cultivated to be the perfect daughter?

Your expectations for me were built by the bricks of your determination to get out of poverty and cemented with your unfulfilled dreams. Your hands are rough and calloused from the time you spent harvesting in your parents' backyard for food, and your voice scorchy from hours of shouting for customers to try your *taho* (a cup full of brown sugar tapioca and silken tofu), the labor you had to endure was just to make ends meet, growing up in the Philippines. I know you worked long hours to get here; I know you long for your home



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the same way I long for a place that feels like home; I know the expectations you have set me are high because you care. My success will become the harsh weather that erodes the pot you have confined me to or the handyman who ensures the pot you crafted for me will never crack.

You have embedded the belief that success comes from within, and you stand as proof of it. Your expectations are the quiet murmurs of wanting your children to have stability and security—to never face life the way you had to. Your love has always been rooted in duty and discipline, as this is the only way you know to love. But, undermining my potential and passions just because they were not ones that would “honor you” has damaged me more than you can see. The years of jeers and tears from you, alongside the gratitude I felt I owed to you, has made me mentally confused over the years. Even as I grew to push these beliefs aside, I still felt wired to watch myself closely—measuring every leaf, every bend, afraid that the smallest misstep would invite the shears.

Sometimes, I feel as if your love is conditional. Your love, at times, is hard to decipher. You have never openly commu-

nicated your love for me, and if you did, it was often overshadowed by the repetitive lectures I have adapted to disregard. Your impact on me is truly complex. You've created a strong stem within me with my resilience and ambition, but my xylem has gaps in my emotional understanding. Every argument is magically and silently resolved by a sudden switch-up in your mood or a platter of fruits by my door, but I am still left to ponder my worth every time, alone. At times, the lack of communication among us had germinated in me as an immense desire to seek validation elsewhere, even while recognizing the depths of your intentions. I wanted to be sprinkled with words like “I love you whether you believe you succeeded or failed” instead of “You should've done better.” I know you said those words because your parents did too, but sprinkling this into my pot could've healed not only my roots but also your own. It would probably feel awkward because this type of easily

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given love is something you may have never experienced, but acknowledging past mistakes doesn't mean failure—it symbolizes growth.

When pretty flowers started to form, they were plucked away. What made me unique was seen as a limiting factor to my success. In turn, it stunted my ability to discover and express myself. From an early age, you told me that I should become a doctor—“a promise of wealth and lifelong security will wait for you!” But to achieve such a treacherous goal that I wasn't even sure I wanted, I

had to study relentlessly. Slowly, I substituted my play time for learning algebraic functions, as I believed exploration was only permitted if it came with a shiny medal.

Yet every so often, school started to offer sunlight in different forms that I had never considered before. There was music, the type that didn't require rigid sheet music; there were stories about animals

doing silly tricks rather than their fun facts; there were dances I could choreograph and perform in PE; and there were pages and pages of dialogue I could reenact in school productions. These patches of refreshing light drew me in, and I began to bloom with creativity and curiosity. Beneath the surface, there was a little seed of imagination waiting to germinate, and once it did, I became not only a student, but an artist too. Different career paths started sprouting, but all my ideas were snipped with a “you can’t earn any money.” I could imagine who I wanted to become, but I didn’t know who I was allowed to be—my sense of self shifting each time my worth was measured against your approval. You urged me to fulfill dreams shaped by your own sacrifices, dreams that would’ve made the effort worth it. And while I am from you, I am not entirely you; pieces of you will always live within me, biologically and psychologically. I always believed your relentless hard work was meant to spare me

“ But happiness is what will allow a plant to truly bloom. ”

from the survival struggle you once knew, so I could live a childhood shaped by curiosity, play, and possibility rather than poverty. Yet, while I was spared material poverty, I grew up navigating emotional poverty, where play and curiosity were often exchanged for achievement. Restricting me to one direction just felt unnatural; the right path was not right for me. Though you continuously encouraged me to become a doctor, I realized my natural caring heart would be better suited as a nurse. For some people, this compromise is not easily made. But happiness is what will allow a plant to truly bloom for many years to come—even long after the passing of the carer. You decided that family honor is the best thing to come out of my fruits. Your expectations for me may be a natural expression of love and responsibility but have created an immense pressure in my pot. This pressure has attracted the pests of stress, burnout, and mental health issues that you end up passing off

as pollinators. The fear of disappointing you started to overshadow my true passions and needs. I could no longer grow. Like a plant, I tried to evolve and get used to the shade I was planted in by you, but I wasn’t happy—any thought of going beyond what was expected was swiftly pruned and shaded. The emotional toll of constantly striving for perfection left little room for rest or vulnerability, wiring me to suppress my struggles in silence. Mistakes were dangerous things—proof that I was wasting the sacrifices made for me. I learned to chase perfection not out of passion but out of fear. Over time, these struggles begin to overflow within my pot and left me in a cycle of feeling unworthy unless I am constantly achieving. Rest felt undeserved, and stillness made my thoughts louder, every pause filled with the fear that I was just falling behind, failing silently, or becoming unworthy. I became a fruitless child. What was worse was that you never noticed. My own roots started strangling me, and my years of adapting to please you made my silent cries for help slip by. If you had just recognized me drowning, instead of shaming me for failing, maybe I could’ve been

re-potted; maybe you could’ve snipped away at the burnt roots and taught me to succeed for myself rather than for those around me. But it’s not your fault. Though my burnout will always be scarred on my roots and may reopen when things start to get too much, I am slowly learning how to tend to myself with more care, patience, and compassion.

Like a bonsai tree, my beauty comes at the cost of its wild potential; perfection is expected at the expense of a child’s emotional wellbeing and personal identity. Though discipline and structure may cultivate resilience and success, they



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can also suffocate the very spirit they aim to strengthen. Beneath my polished leaves are hidden knots of stress, burnout, and confusion—signs of a life grown in limitation rather than liberation. Anxiety taught me to stay small, perfectionism taught me to perform, and somewhere in between, my sense of self learned to disappear. But now, though the marks on my roots remain, I like to think that they’re proof the damage caused by control is reversible with reflection and change. I’m starting to unlearn the belief that my worth depends on constant productivity and learning to exist without measuring myself against perfection. To truly thrive, we must begin to reimagine what it means to nurture—to prune not for control, but to support growth in all directions. The time has come for me to question the pot you’ve placed me in and consider whether I might grow stronger beyond it. Letting me bloom freely is not a betrayal of our roots and your sacrifices—it is the truest way to honor them.

From your eldest daughter, *na lag-ing magmamahal sa inyo,*

Ysabelle



About the Author

I am a Filipina-British student writer and the eldest daughter of first-generation immigrants, currently navigating the complex landscape of cultural expectation and personal identity. Through my work, I explore the nature of growing up in a high-pressure environment, where discipline was the fertilizer and perfection was the only acceptable shape. Having spent years substituting playtime for academic excellence and hiding my true feelings in the pages of my Winnie-the-Pooh diary, I now write to give a voice to the child who was once forced to stay silent. My prose captures the delicate balance between the gratitude I feel for my parents’ immense sacrifices and the quiet struggle to define a worth that isn’t tied to achievement. Today, I am learning to step out of the “ring” of expectation, unlearning perfectionism, and finally allowing myself to bloom without apology.

