Maryland, 2014
MIDDLE SCHOOL

Alright, now get into your assigned groups.

Hey Sarah! Don’t worry, I got a sheet for you.

Thanks!
No problem!

Do you mind if I ask what ethnicity you are?

I'm Chinese.

Me too!

Hey, so am I!

What a coincidence! The only Chinese kids in the class are grouped together.

I wouldn't think too hard about it. Let's just get this assignment over with.
You don’t understand us? Aren’t you Chinese?

...Yeah, I am.

You don’t know Chinese?

Yeah, but not Mandarin. I speak Taishanese.
Huh? What’s that?

It’s a different dialect. It’s similar to Cantonese.

That’s pretty cool!

Yeah, it was pretty cool.

In elementary school, there weren’t many other kids who could say they were bilingual.

Because I only knew one other person who could speak Chinese, it’s always just been me and my family that mattered whenever it came to my second language.
But now...

...what's the point of me knowing a language no one else knows?
After that incident in middle school, I never experienced another time when I would feel so ASHAMED to know Taishanese.

It was always in the back of my mind though. Sometimes a few classmates would ask if I knew how to speak Chinese. I would always answer “yes,” but not without feeling a little embarrassed. Except for these few moments, I was never truly bothered by these feelings again.

However, in high school, things changed.
The Chinese student population grew even bigger, which meant there were even more students who knew Mandarin.

“Snap!”

You okay?

Sorry, I was distracted.
Do you know what they’re talking so loudly about?

Mmm...just some game.

Alright everyone! Get in your seats.

HA HAA HA

She’s cradling the fuchsia in her hand and breathed in its scent, which reminded her of home.
Ahh yes, it was moments like these when I got embarrassed. I was probably the only Chinese kid who didn’t understand what they were laughing about. Being surrounded by many Mandarin-speaking kids, there were many times when I would be reminded of my inability to speak with them.
I don’t necessarily want to speak Mandarin, nor do I want to become really close with all the Chinese students...  

HA  HA  HA  HA  HA  HA

I know there are Chinese kids who can’t speak or understand any Chinese at all.

It’s just that I’d like to be able to connect to someone through my second language.

We’re all Chinese, yet I feel like I’m on my own island.
I was wondering if I could copy down the English homework for tonight.

Yeah, no problem.

I'd ask Mr. Turner for it, but I didn't want to be on his bad side after he yelled at our class earlier. He sure is scary when he's angry. To bad Adam had to disrupt class like that.

Hi Lucy.

Sarah!

Thanks! You're a lifesaver.

Wait. I thought you know Chinese?

Yeah, I wonder what he even said. They were laughing a lot.
Huh?

Why?

Um, yeah, but not Mandarin. I speak a lesser-known dialect.

Why?

I wish I could do that!

No way! That's so cool!
I think it’s awesome that you can speak any kind of Chinese. It’s better than not knowing any at all like me.

I guess...

...but I also feel like there’s no point if I can’t use it outside of my personal life. I don’t know anyone else who speaks what I speak.

That’s fair, but I still think it’s better than nothing. My grandparents only speak Chinese so being around them is always awkward. I don’t even know any traditional greetings or prayers either.

Huh. That never really crossed my mind.

I’ve always wanted to be closer to Chinese culture. It’s just not the same unless you know the language, you know?

I can’t believe I had never thought about it like that.
Actually, now that I really think about it, Taishanese is completely rooted into my life. Without it, what would my life be like? What would happen to my family?

Our conversations?

The stories my parents tell me?

The jokes my siblings and I make?

Is language really so necessary to fit in that I would devalue the one I already know?
No

...because I still belong in the Chinese American community whether I know Mandarin or not.

I can't believe I thought Taishanese was useless this whole time.

Of course it's useful! It's like your family has a secret language.

Secret language huh?

Oh gosh, that sounds corny...
...but not wrong.

Taishanese is something that just my family and I share where we can talk about whatever we want, spread traditions, and have our inside jokes. Unfortunately, I took things like culture and being able to speak to my family for granted.

I'm not desperate to learn Mandarin. I never was. It was never about knowing Mandarin, but all about "feeling" more Chinese. Mandarin just happens to be the wider-known dialect that I don't know.

I'm still Chinese, and I don't mind being able to only speak Taishanese to my family as much anymore. After all, it makes eventually finding someone else who does speak it...

...all the more special.