

## **The Second Mouth - Angelica, Year 10, NSW**

Speak, that you may be heard — that is what the world demands. But what of the woman whose words were born in the soil of another land, who holds in her mouth centuries of thought and tenderness, but finds herself struck dumb before systems that mistake silence for ignorance and accent for failure?

She is my mother.

I became fluent in survival before I became fluent in speech — for I have been my mother's second mouth since before the world gave me a voice of my own. I was already translating sorrow into syntax, taming her thunder into syllables soft enough to survive the scrutiny of strangers.

Mother speaks not with absence, but with richness. With fire. With a clarity born from survival. Yet when her mouth opens before strangers, the words collapse just behind her teeth.

They are trapped not by confusion, but by translation. Arrested not by thought, but by a language the world has crowned as the only one worth hearing.

And so I step forward. Again, and again. I do not speak for her. I speak instead of her, and the difference is a silence only I can feel.

I have been her voice in the aisles of pharmacies, behind service counters, beside clipboards and confusion. I have translated dosages, instructions, accusations, and apologies. Not by choice, but by necessity. And with every sentence I speak, I fear I am stealing one she never got to say. Not because she cannot speak, but because the world refuses to listen unless her truth arrives dressed in the right accent, in the right rhythm.

Without tremble. Without interruption. Without proof of difference. Fluency has made me visible. Her silence alone has made me necessary. And still, I wonder: what is the word for a child who must translate adulthood before her own has even arrived?

The first time I spoke for her, I was eight. The doctor looked at me instead of her, and I translated a pain that wasn't mine into a language she couldn't own, and I have not stopped translating since. I learned young that to survive certain systems, truth must be softened — not because we lack the right to rage, but because the world is not built to hear us when we do.

There are moments that pass, and moments that root themselves — this was the latter. During a phone call, she asked me to find out why the payment had not arrived, her voice composed, but her hands betraying her.

“Tell them it’s their fault,” she said. “Tell them they lied.”

It wasn’t about the money. It never was. It was about being taken seriously.

I looked at her. I looked at the phone.

“Hi,” I said. “We’re calling to follow up. The payment hasn’t arrived, and we need to understand why.”

The voice on the other end answered, clipped and cold, practiced in the kind of detachment reserved for systems that forget they are speaking to people.

They mistook my composure for obedience, but I was not translating peace — I was translating fury in a tone they would not punish. I held the phone steady, offering practiced courtesy in place of confrontation, each “thank you” shaped like a shield.

Behind me, she watched with arms crossed, jaw tightening, the weight of her silence pressing into the air like an unspoken storm. Her frustration gathered in the corners of her mouth, but she said nothing. Not during the call. Not until it ended.

“Tell them they lied.”

I froze. The line was still open, but I said nothing. My fingers tightened around the phone. I murmured something else — softer, safer, a version of her truth diluted enough to survive the call. What I said was enough to be heard, but never enough to be her.

She stared at me, disbelief swelling in her silence. Her mouth did not move, but I felt the accusation flood the room anyway. There is a violence quieter than war — the kind that strips a soul of speech, and makes her beg for worth in the language of those who never asked her name. I said what needed to be said, found the answer we had been waiting for, and ended the call. Yet even as the task was complete, something remained unresolved, as though the silence that followed carried more weight than the words that had filled it.

“That’s not what I said,” she snapped.

She asks why I do not speak with fire for her, yet raise storms against her — but a storm must first feel the heat it carries, and I have only ever been her echo, never her flame.

That day, I realised something cruel: the world listens more willingly to the child born after but only if she has learned how to sound like she never came from before. And I have. I have practiced fluency like survival, trimmed my tongue into something sharp enough to cut, but soft enough to be welcomed. When a mother is made small by language, her child must become large enough to carry her. She does not want civility. She wants thunder, not restraint,

and I was raised to speak like rain. Belonging, in my mouth, has always come at the cost of honesty in hers.

They call me her daughter. She calls me in her voice. But I have never been either without burden. I am not her flame, only her diplomat — shaped by duty, not desire — and that is why I speak with clarity, not fire, and still carry the heat of what she could never say. Some are born into freedom. Others must translate their worth line by line until someone finally listens. I have not done this to be heard, but to ensure that silence would not speak for her in my absence.

I was never meant to be her voice. Only the proof that she had one.