



# Video Story Transcript

## My Life as an English to English Translator: Learning to Accept My Korean Immigrant Mother

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**Link to YouTube Video:**  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pi6lT70uLjY>

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Note : The following is a transcription of a spoken story performance and may not reflect textbook perfect English. It will guide you as you listen (or read) along.

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Hi, I'm Elizabeth Gomez. It was 1983 in Virginia. I was laying in my room in the dark with the covers over my head listening. She was yelling and I was only nine years old so I wasn't really sure what to do. My mother and I had been here before, just listening to her struggling and screaming. I pull the covers tighter over my head when I heard, "Risa, Risa, you come here. You come here now!"

As I walked out of my sanctuary, my eyes widen and I slumped into the kitchen. She stood there in a polyester robe with a brown phone dangling from her hand.

"Risa, you speakie to him. He no understanding me."

I stood there flushed with embarrassment, and took the phone from my mother's hand, "Hello."

"Hi, ma'am."

"Could you just help us get your mom's account number. We'd really like to help her."

"Mom. What's your account number?"

"Oh, you terr him, you terr him, jero-jero-sex-sex-four-eight-sex."

"It's 0-0-4-8-6." (0-0-6-6-4-8-6)

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“As I talked to this man, my mom walked around in the kitchen. She was pacing back and forth, getting angrier and angrier. She didn't understand why Americans didn't understand her when she spoke to them, especially because she'd been in this country for over a decade. I watched her pace through the kitchen, back and forth, her small Asian frame just blowing in and out, and in and out until she was rounded out like one of those monsters from *Where the Wild Things Are*.

After I completed the phone call, I hung up. I looked at my mom. This lady demon who was slowly morphing back into this four-foot-something Asian lady.

“Why they don't understanding? Why don't understanding me? I speakie good English.”

I watched my mom sit at the kitchen table and I put my hand over hers. I looked at her as her face was beginning to worry and her body started to fill with self-doubt. At that moment, I decided I have... I had to stop. I had to stop running away and hiding and I had to really commit to being her English (*English*) to English (*English*) translator for the rest of my life. And it was always like that.

My father was a Puerto Rican-American, U.S. citizen, who served in the military. He met my mother in Seoul, Korea. They married; they had kids. Most of my mom's life, as a military wife, was traveling abroad and she spent very little time in America. While she was here, she did okay. But when my dad was gone on duty or training missions, my mom had to make her way through and I was rela... relegated to just, basically, being her translator.

I spent tons of time just, like, watching her try to talk to sales people and clerks and merchants, just trying to get what she needed. It was like watching a Charlie Brown episode where the teacher's talking to Charlie Brown and all Charlie Brown can hear is this muffled sound of nothingness. And I would just stand and watch my mom wave her hands around, and gesticulate, and try to convey what she needed, without being able to tell them in the way that they needed to hear it.

And every time, I'd be broken up with this sound, “Risa, Risa, you terring him, you terring him right now, Risa. You terring him, ‘Me want to buy fridgey.’”

“She wants to buy a fridge.”

“You terring him we need to move to Browning Street.”

“You mean,”

“She wants you to know that we live on Brown Street.”

“You terring him, ‘It's too expenses’.”

“She means it's too expensive.”

If that wasn't bad enough, she named me Elizabeth. She doesn't even know how to pronounce Elizabeth, so she started calling me Lisa, which she also does not know how to pronounce. In addition to that, my mom would have to go to conferences, like, parent-teacher conferences, and those were the most embarrassing, humiliating, and petrifying moments of my life. There they were, these well-articulated, ecedga... educated teachers looking at my mom with these plastered smiles, just nodding their heads, trying to understand what she was saying.

And my mom is basically screaming at them, trying to convey, “Oh, Risa, she sorazy.”

In addition, I couldn't have any friends. Anyone who came into my house, got pinched by my mother when she would say things like, "Oh, you so fat!" Or, "Oh, why your eyes so big?"

Every single friend I ever made, who came to my house, basically, never came back and I accepted that. That was my life. I was gonna be the town recluse and I always was gonna have this rude mother.

Late one night, I could hear my mom talking to someone on the phone and it was my dad's new girlfriend. I dropped my blanket and I walked to the wall that separated my room from my mother's. And I could hear her just softly begging this woman to let my father go. And I heard her say, "Prease, prease go way. We have kids."

I listened for a long time, and my heart started pounding as I felt for her. And I just listened, as she kept begging and begging. And I didn't even really like my father and, up 'til that point, I'm not sure I liked my mother that much either. But at this moment, I felt what was going on with her, and I understood that this was painful. And I pressed my head closer against the wall as I listened to her hang up the phone and sob and cry. And I wanted to go to her but I couldn't. I could just listen. And I did. I listened until I fell asleep to the sounds of what pain was for her.

A few, a few weeks later, after months of not seeing my father, I was really surprised when he came to pick up me and my brother to go to New York and see my grandmother. Not only was I surprised to see him, I was surprised that I was allowed to leave with him.

"I don't wanna go."

"Risa, you take good care of Ab-e. You be good girl, okay?"

"No! I don't want to go."

"You go."

As we drove up to New York, my father stopped at a rest stop. He went to go use the phone booth. And as he was in the phone booth, I could tell that he was just being himself - super charming, and laughing, and flirtatious to someone on the phone. Eventually, he started walking toward our car, and I felt a little weird. And I wasn't sure what was going on. So, he said for us to come over and, uh, talk to this person on the phone. And I pick up the phone and, huh, I hear this voice come over.

"And she says, "Hello, Elizabeth. It's me, Jane, your dad's friend. How are you?"

At that moment, all the anguish I had for my mother, the loss of my father, the not understanding of what had been going on with my whole family, this whole entire time came rushing at me. My heart pounded. My ears... like sounds of, like, waves came through my ears. And I felt nothing but anger when I replied, "I know you're not my father's friend. You're his girlfriend! As a matter of fact, you keep calling my house, and I hate you for hurting my mother."

And I hung up the pho... er, I dropped the phone and I ran back to the car. And I watched as my father, like, fumbled around with this phone and he's spewing out apologies. And then he comes back to the car, he slams the door shut, and smacks me across my face. And he starts talking, just talking about something or another, and I have no idea what he's saying because I don't care. I just didn't care.

All I knew was that, at that moment, I had been able to tell this woman the things that my mom wanted to say to her. And in some small way, this 9-year-old was able to score a big point for my mother.

After our trip was over, we came home. I could hear my mom and my dad arguing out in the front porch about this or that or what the kids knew or didn't know. And I was pretty sure as I was standing in the kitchen, that when my mom came back, she was gonna spank me or discipline me for re... disrespecting my father. Instead, she walked in with these bloodshot eyes, mascara tears dried on her cheeks. She looked at me. She made me a bowl of hot ramen noodle soup. She smiled and then she went back into her bedroom.

I still translate for her to this very day, especially with my own family. I mean, huh, we're still not used to the idea that when you get pinched, and to be told, "You're fat," that that actually means, "Hey, are you hungry?"

We've learned to communicate in ways of, like, laughter and shared experiences and gestures. And now, when my mom asks my husband and I if we've bought a condom, I know she means condo.