

The Apartment Language

I did not grow up with one language. I grew up with pieces. English at school, Tagalog at home, but only when my parents didn't want me to understand something. The rest of the time, we spoke what I now call apartment language. It was not official, and you definitely would not find it in a dictionary. But it was ours.

The way we spoke was never just one thing. It was part English, part Tagalog, mixed with food names, hand signals, childhood phrases, song lyrics, and words that only made sense inside our apartment. It shifted depending on who was nearby: my grandmother murmuring something while stirring a pot, my cousins yelling over which show to watch, my mother pausing mid-thought, searching for a word she had not used in years. It was disorganized, a little chaotic, and never rehearsed. But to me, it felt whole. It was familiar. It was how we understood each other without needing everything to be said the right way.

When someone forgot a word, I knew what they meant. When a sentence drifted off, I could still follow where it was going. I never thought of it as a skill. I thought it was simply what families did, reading between the lines, finishing each other's thoughts, stepping in gently when the words would not come. It felt normal to me, that quiet kind of understanding. Like speaking was only part of how we listened to one another.

At school, I began to notice the same pattern. I was often the one people turned to when they could not quite find the right words. During group projects, I picked up on the silence when someone wanted to speak but hesitated. In writing workshops, I found myself more focused on how something sounded than whether it followed every rule. I did not just listen to what people said. I paid attention to the pauses, the tone, and the part they left out. Somehow, that always seemed to say more.

Now, language is how I connect. It is how I show people they are heard, even if they are unsure how to say something out loud. When I write, it still feels like translation, turning a thought into something clear without losing what made it real.

I do not speak perfect Tagalog. I do not use flawless grammar in English. But I speak in a way that makes room for people. That's what I learned in our apartment. In the noise. In the mix. In all the unfinished sentences that somehow added up to a full conversation.

That is where my voice lives; in between languages, in between people, and always listening.