



# My grandparents from China risked everything to start a humble grocery store in an unlikely place—and changed my family forever.

**M**Y SIBLINGS and I stand in the utility room, in front of the giant cardboard box full of cardboard boxes. The box is large enough to fit all of us. At 15 I'm the eldest, so I have the plan.

"Here," I say to my sister as I bend into the giant box and lift a smaller-but-still-large box out. We make a stack of boxes, and then sort them for quality: The good ones stay with us, the beat-up ones go back into the giant box. Twice a week, a recycler stops by my grandparents' grocery store and drags the box of boxes out of the utility room, through the store, and out the front door, emptying its contents into a waiting truck. He recycles them in Juárez, just on the other side of the border from El Paso, Texas, where our store is.

My sister and I pull our boxes into the store, our 8-year-old brother following behind. We pull them past the Formica table at the rear of the store where my grandparents eat dinner, and stop in front of the freezer. Here, we set up our operation, opening up all the boxes and connecting them, fitting smaller boxes into larger ones. We construct a multi-room house, and I ask Grandpa to cut out some windows for us with his box cutter. Then we crawl into our little house and decorate the interior with markers and Wite-Out.



The spot where we set up our cardboard house is still part of the store—it's past the butcher counter, before the beer and soda coolers—but it's filled with the personal: medications, old shoes, a small TV with a VCR. Sometimes we sit at the Formica table and watch *The Sound of Music*, *The Wizard of Oz*, or *Giant*, the 1956 James Dean movie about a wealthy Texas ranch family. These are the few movies my grandparents have on VHS, taped from TV broadcasts; we fast-forward through the commercials. I find *Giant* boring, but Grandpa seems to like it.

We are Texans, but nothing like the family in *Giant*. We are immigrants who bet everything on this store.

**T**he store was named after my grandfather: Paul Chew Grocery.

Its name announced who we were—Asian—in a town with few of us. Every summer, my mother and us kids flew from Houston to El Paso to visit for two weeks. My siblings and I rang up sales on the store's single register and helped bag groceries, but mostly we played in its aisles and raided its ice cream freezer.

Everything unfamiliar was fascinating: the beer-stocked walk-in refrigerator that we'd stand in until we couldn't take it; the roll of butcher paper that we'd tear giant pieces from to write on; the manual adding machine; the sticker price gun; the cardboard boxes.

When I was learning to walk, I pulled bags of chips and boxes of light bulbs down from the shelves. I rested my head on a loaf of bread as if it were a pillow and my grandparents laughed. Not until I was much older did I understand the sacrifices my family made and the opportunities the store gave us, the lavishness of using a loaf of

bread as a pretend pillow.

At home in Houston, my mother spoke a standard Hong Kong Cantonese with my father. But in El Paso with her family, she reverted back to village dialect. It was the Cantonese of where she was born, an accent that marked our rural origins. Today, on rare occasions in San Francisco where I live, I will hear it in passing and its melody will sing straight to my heart. I'll want to turn around and follow the speakers, tell them *I come from the same place*. But I can't speak it, can't prove I'm one of them.

**M**y grandfather grew up one of eight children in a family that farmed rice. Three of

his siblings did not survive childhood. When he was 13, the Second Sino-Japanese War interrupted his education. He remembers bowing to the occupying Japanese soldiers whenever his family took their goods to market.

He married my grandmother in an arranged marriage. The eldest of five, she had spent her childhood looking after her siblings, never attending school. Staying in the village meant that you would

always be poor. After his daughter—my mother—was born in 1950, my grandfather left by himself for Hong Kong, and eventually, America.

He opted to come by plane rather than ship, a choice that would get him to America faster but cost three times as much. It took almost three days, making connections in the Philippines, Guam, and Hawaii before landing in San Francisco, where he was detained by immigration. To relieve their boredom, the detainees pooled their money and asked a janitor to buy a TV for them. Although they didn't understand much English, they watched the images of this country they hoped to join.

After two weeks, my grandfather was released, and took a train to El Paso. An ancestor had come to America to work on the railroads, and his son—my grandfather's uncle—had trained at Fort Bliss for several months before being deployed to Europe for World War I. He liked the sun so much that he returned to El Paso after the war. This is how my family ended up in the Texas desert.

Like many immigrants, my



grandfather went to work for relatives, slowly paying off the debt he owed them for bringing him to America. He learned English and Spanish on the job, working his way up from stock boy to the assistant manager of a grocery store. After seven years, he sent for his wife. After 17 years, in 1967, they struck out on their own.

Because they had little money, they could only afford to buy a store in a low-income neighborhood. Everyone told them that that particular store was a bad idea. *It wasn't in a good neighborhood. It wasn't on the corner. It cost too much for what it was.* But what other chance would they get? My grandparents and their American-born children moved into El Segundo Barrio, living right behind the store. The living quarters were behind the utility room, which was behind the retail space. Like the cardboard house my siblings and I built, each section was arranged one behind the other, all contained within one building.

They never took a day off; the store was open every day from 7 a.m. to 9 p.m. They learned what their customers liked and kept the store well stocked. They ordered apples and pears—oranges not so much. They kept more tortillas on hand than bread. They sold loose cigarettes and single postage stamps and toilet paper by the roll. They sold *veladoras*, tall candles with images of saints, gentle lights that burned many hours for prayer.

My grandparents paid off their little store in two years. Income from the store supported not only their three American-born children, but also my mother and my great-grandmother who was raising her in Hong Kong. The long hours they put into making their store successful meant that they could finally send for my mother. She immigrated to the U.S when

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she was 19, a stranger to her family. My mother worked in the store, as everyone in the family did. She clashed with the rest of her family, having gone from being in essence an only child to a grown woman with much younger siblings.

At the store, teenagers attempted to rob my grandparents, and thieves made mad dashes out the door with armloads of beer. Customers with bills on credit skipped out; checks bounced. But they persevered. I asked my grandfather once why he thought his store was successful. He knew what his customers wanted, he said. That—and luck.

In the '90s, as big, brightly lit grocery store chains became commonplace, sales slowed at my grandparents' store. In a photo I took of my grandfather during that time, he stands with his palms flat on the counter. He looks as if he is bracing for something.

Behind him in the photo, wooden shelves run to the ceiling, stocked with cigarettes, shaving cream, candy bars, padlocks, and a jar marked "Beef Jerky" filled with plastic combs. Items at the top, like stockings and shoelaces, hung from hooks and could be retrieved with a long metal stick. In front of him sits the high-backed cash register, its keys smooth and substantial. At the center of the white counter is a large patch of brown. The top layer had rubbed down to its foundation after so many decades of transactions across its surface.

In the photo, my grandfather stands behind the counter, his white apron worn to near translucence. A customer in a white T-shirt and red cap is at the door. I took the photo as he opened it, and a line of light crosses the floor of mismatched tiles. The door had a screen, which swung open on a spring. A little bell hung from the spring and chimed pleasantly whenever anyone walked in.

If I close my eyes, I can hear it chime, and I can hear my grandmother sweeping. Every evening, she started from the back of the store, sweeping the day's dust and dirt out onto the sidewalk. Then, she swept the sidewalk.

**I**n 2006, I visited my grandparents' village with my parents, my siblings, and my mother's cousin and his family. We took the ferry from Hong Kong to Zhuhai, a booming, skyscraper-filled city of 1.2 million people. From there, we hired a driver and piled into a '90s-era Toyota van. After an hour or two, Mom's cousin instructed the driver to turn left onto a small, dusty road.

The village was not what I expected it to be; it was denser than I imagined. The brick buildings were two stories, with tile roofs, and close to one another. The paths between them were so narrow that if you stood between two buildings and stretched out your arms, you could almost touch them both. The driver maneuvered carefully. My mother's cousin and his wife got out of the van to move people's scooters out of the way so that we could pass.

Our empty family home was still there, stripped of all the metal that could be taken. Someone had even come inside and pried the metal handles off of drawers. Over the decades, members of our family left one by one and scattered beyond the village. When you leave the village, you leave it for good.

The visit was my mother's first time back since she left as a child for British Hong Kong. Mom walked from room to room, remembering. *This was the room where I lived with your grandma. This used to be the kitchen. The floor used to slope here.* Little remained in the house, just a few pieces of wooden furniture and a collage of photos, including some

of my grandparents and great-grandparents.

Standing in the house, I thought about how my grandfather left for America and how his father would pass away before he had the chance to see him again. When he left, did he say goodbye to his parents knowing that he might never see them again? What do you take with you when you are leaving forever? How do you say goodbye?

We walked back to the waiting van and made a series of complicated turns through narrow streets that were built before cars existed. We passed old men sitting beneath a tree and old women in hats riding bikes. We passed other villages, and then stopped at a cemetery to pay respects at the family grave. "Just do what I do," my mother said, slender smoke uncurling in the air from the incense in her hand. I mimicked her motions.

We bowed to our great-grandfather, who was never allowed by the government to leave the village. We bowed to our great-grandmother, who returned to the village at the end of her life. She asked my mother, whom she had raised, to return one day and visit her grave when it was safe to travel to China. My mother stood at her grave for a long time, tears flowing down her face.

**S**ometimes I try to find the village on Google Maps, but it is too small to have a name in English and I cannot read Chinese. I retrace our steps from the trip: We drove about this long, which means we went about this far, which means

**They never took a day off; the store was open from 7 a.m. to 9 p.m.**



it is somewhere in this area. *I come from the same place.* But I don't even know where that is.

**I**n 1997, after 30 years, my grandparents closed their store and retired.

One night recently, I feed the address into the internet. This is how I learn that the building became a church, and then a multi-family home. The 1960s building has been remodeled and painted a nondescript white. When it was our store, the façade had maroon tile and was painted doughnut-box pink.

My grandfather says he was lucky to come to America when he did. Today, everyone drives to the supermarket instead of walking to the corner store. There are not as many little grocery stores. He sees none where he lives now in Jackson, Mississippi.

But in dense cities, they are still there. If you visit your local bodega, there will be a shopkeeper like my grandma who will tease you with a mean but loving nickname. There will be someone like my grandpa who knows what you're looking for. There will be neighbors hanging outside the store, drinking soda or beer.

"You know, in the evenings, in the summertime, everybody was sitting around on the sidewalk. Some of them sat right in front of my store," my grandfather explains to me one day over FaceTime. "They're just sitting there—there's not even A/C—in the evening, talking and talking. I felt very comfortable."

"Did you ever go outside and talk with them?" I ask.

"Once in a while. But I go back to the store. We had lots of things to do."

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