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Immigration Paper

My grandma's funny -- racist, but funny. They say that all Asian women are prone to shriveling inward, cutely, at some point in their old age, and my 74-year-old *nai nai* is a shimmering example of this. Standing a stout 5-feet from the ground in an apron that says "Pains of the World" above a phallic collection of baguettes, she laments in a most Yenta-like fashion how rude those Koreans are. In some complicated fiasco involving oranges and toilet paper coupons, she describes a tense moment with a Korean cashier who was "manly like Mao's wife." She wields a bear-shaped honey jar (filled with soy sauce) over a scrambled egg and tells me how skinny I look.

I never asked my grandmother why she came to this country because, as a second-generation immigrant, the answer was always clear to me. The proverbial "better life" is something we (Insert Ethnicity)-Americans come to understand as the ultimate guilt-trip. It is a looming reminder that the life we find ourselves Jager-bombing, shoplifting and prostituting away is something we should be eternally grateful for. That's why all us Asians become doctors and CPA's -- to give thanks.

My grandma said "you" when I asked her why she came to this country, and became rather defensive in her proceeding rant. She made it perfectly clear that the later generations were "spoiled rotten," and would never truly understand what "struggle" meant. She told me that her and grandpa brought the family here for *our* greater good -- not theirs -- and that it's important for us to always understand that.

I wondered, then, what the American dream meant for her and for us.

The surname Lum is from a fisherman clan in a small village in Canton, a southern city in the Guangdong Province. My grandpa's grandpa, Xi Long Lum, was an opium

addict living in an environment as pervasively drug-addled as present-day Detroit. He was as a farmer, leaving China on several occasions to work on the tobacco fields in Cuba. Judging from his brevity on the subject, it didn't seem like my grandpa had much else to say about him. Instead, he commented on the era. He said, "Chinese people were so poor and so sad back then."

Xi Long's youngest son, or my great-grandfather Gum Fang "Jimmy" Lum, was the third of three brothers to come to the United States. The Chinese Exclusion Act was on its last leg in 1942, as Jimmy and his brothers arrived in this country under largely illegitimate means. In a kind of bureaucratic border jumping, the Chinese in the early 20th Century managed to find loopholes around the oppressive and rigid exclusion policies. Under the "paper sons" system, legal citizens would declare (fake) children in China, and would later sell the papers for hefty sums back home.

Jimmy Lum came here under the surname Chen.

He arrived in Ellis Island with \$10 in his pocket. During the first couple of months he slept, worked and lived in a Chinatown hand laundry with his two elder brothers and uncle. The men ate days-old mush out of large steel bowls and my grandpa chuckled at the irony of these living conditions in the United States. "In the beginning it was worse than China," he said. "At first my father lived like a dog."

Within the next decade, however, Jimmy Lum and his brothers become exceedingly wealthy.

My grandfather has perfected the art of the grunt, and so much so that it takes a good 10 seconds of conversation to realize that he's not actually listening to you. His grunt has different tones -- an ascending one to answer a yes or no question, a monotone

one for agreement and a descending one for when he wants you to go away. Sometimes he just sighs.

This, sadly, is his version of English.

Grandma refers to grandpa's book-worminess as a kind of autism, throwing out words like "homeless man" and "hoarder" when it comes to complaining about his longtime love affair. For as long as I can remember, my grandpa has always been holed up in some dim-lit cavern of a room, surrounded entirely by encyclopedia sets, binders, obsolete office electronics and Belgium cookies. If he's not reading, he's *cataloguing*.

For my cousins and me, though, I think the books reassured us that even if he never talked, our grandpa was in fact a really smart (albeit tedious, isolated and lonely) man.

Grandpa attended Peking University in the north, or a substantially different backdrop to his native, rural Canton. My grandma, originally from Beijing, met him while attending nursing school in the Shandong Province. In the (somewhat bleak) words of my grandma, their relationship began as follows:

"I used to ride my bike with my friends -- you know in the park -- in the summer time. And one day, one of my friends come up to me says, 'You see him? He likes you.' And, you know, I thought first, 'Wow he's so quiet' -- at first. But, you know, we go on some dates and then that's it."

I ask her to elaborate. What was it like when he asked you to marry him?

"We had a friend in my nursing school and one day she asked me to come over to her house, one night, so I go over there and I see him there. And, you know, she is talking

to me -- he's not even talking to me -- he's just sitting there. She just says 'he wants to marry you,' like this."

I ask her why he didn't ask her himself and she said, "Because you know grandpa. He's a *erbaiwu*."

Erbaiwu is Chinese for weird.

My grandma grew up in a large Hutong with the majority of her immediate relatives. Her house, she claims, was big enough to fit quarters for "the help." She was extremely close with her uncle, a low-ranking government official who owned the property. He was apparently handsome and regal-looking -- an animal-loving family man. He gave the kids candy and told them stories. He always had money. In the winter he wore long, lavish fur coats that trailed behind him.

The Sino-Japanese war, the installment and then removal of the Republic and finally the rise of Mao Zedong all happened in my grandma's time. When she left for nursing school, she said, her house was still there. When she returned one year later however, her once wealthy uncle was half-senile, begging for money in the rubble where their house once stood. Shortly thereafter he was sent to a reform camp in the countryside where he would eventually pass away.

Outside of Chinese jurisdiction, Hong Kong was a kind of safe house for mainlanders. By the 1950s, hoards of displaced citizens sought refuge on the tiny southern island. My grandma's brother swam all the way from the capital to Hong Kong on a tiny board with a group of other men. Receiving checks from her now more-than-wealthy father-in-law, my grandparents and Aunt Liz (their only child at that point) had no trouble getting to Hong Kong. In 1956 they arrived there on a plane waiting for their next move to the United States.

My grandma had four kids by 1964 and I asked what the trip to America was like the following year. I imagined their journey west in a steerage-like situation -- complete with crying babies, caged chickens and hoards of disgruntled, desperate Chinamen. My grandma said there were ice sculptures on their "luxury" cruise line to the states, and an all-you-can-eat buffet with constant live entertainment. She recalls a large peacock-shaped swimming pool on the main deck.

Upon boarding the flight to Palm Springs Int'l airport I had a kind of stereotypical belief that California was crawling with Asians. Stepping off the plane, though, it appears this belief only extends to Northern California. My family is large and rowdy, complete with boisterous ethnically ambiguous toddlers and loud, complaining senior citizens. The sunburnt white people lugging golf clubs and rolling leather luggage look at us in what I interpret as contempt and confusion. I consider the irony of the situation for a moment, or how bothered I am by how bothered I feel.

En route to the Four Seasons for an absurdly expensive wedding, I wondered if this was an American dream.

Aunt Liz, Uncle Larry, Aunt Linda and my dad rarely see each other. Over the years the first generation's embarked on their own version of the American dream, settling down in all corners of the country. When they are together, they take on a kind of lighthearted nostalgic rapport, engaging in a laughter-filled dialogue that goes on for hours. I'm always surprised at how they manage to look back on such dark, painful memories with such insensitive humor. I recall one Christmas when they, trying to catch their breaths, reminisced about that time grandpa locked himself in the basement for weeks plotting what they thought to be his own suicide. He emerged, though, just in time to see Aunt Liz dropout of nursing school.

Financially, the four kids came to this country without struggle. The second they arrived off the cruise they were escorted to their Archie Bunker-like house in

Whitestone Queens. Most of the neighborhood, primarily working-class Italian and Irish, knew them as the Lum kids. Their grandfather's restaurant was one neighborhood away and was, at the time, one of the most famous Chinese restaurants in New York City. Since I was a kid, my dad has always found some excuse to remind me of how Jimmy Lum invented Chicken McNuggets, and how their menu set the "universal template" for most present-day take-out joints. When we pass what was Lum's Restaurant (now a Korean banquet hall) on Northern Boulevard in Flushing, my dad always says to me, "Look, that's our restaurant."

By the time the kids were teens they had forgotten most of the Chinese they came here with. Uncle Larry and my dad took up little league while Aunt Liz and Aunt Linda dated white boys and got part-time jobs. In the years before the second generation, the boys went on to higher education while the girls grew apathetic about their mediocre grades and obsessed with their significant others. Aunt Liz married a Wisconsin-born marine and got a hysterectomy, while Aunt Linda married a self-hating Hispanic hippie who was arrested for running naked in the streets (sober) after proclaiming that he was Christ. After having Aretae, the first of my generation, Aunt Linda would eventually divorce Uncle Fred.

In spite of her racist tendencies, my grandma rarely uses my half Korean-ness against me. She does do the occasional "stop eating like a Korean" or "you have a Korean mouth," but always in good spirits. Oddly enough, my paternal grandma is bearer of both my parents' immigration stories. My mom passed away when I was four-years old and, raised by my dad's mom, have been more or less alienated by my Korean family. To this day I feel as if I'd been taught more about my mom than I actually remember. My mom came here in 1972 from her home in South Korea. She studied painting at SUNY New Paltz and married my father outside of her father's consent. She was a Gemini like me.

My dad said that my mom's American dream was to become a famous painter, like Monet or Picasso. I asked him what his American dream was and he said "to be successful," in a way that implied it hasn't happened yet.

My cousin Aretae, the resident overachiever and horned bridezilla, looked beautiful on her wedding day. I read a poem at the ceremony and chose the petit sirloin for dinner. Listening in on a family gossip sesh I heard that she'd be making well-into the six figures at some hoity-toity D.C. law firm next year. I looked around the wedding hall and all the lavish decor, and I wondered if this was Aretae's American dream.

In the end, Jimmy Lum and his brothers sold the business and a long, drawn-out embezzlement fiasco ensued. There was more or less nothing monetarily left from the restaurant as Jimmy Lum moved to some hi-rise condo in Macau with a 22-year-old Puerto Rican dancer. My grandpa deserted academia (unwillingly) to gamble and resent himself, quietly, in his dark office.

They tell me I won't be successful without a master's, or that I'll never get rich if I don't try hard. I thought about how I felt playing youth ice hockey in Chelsea Piers, reading Bukowski on the train and getting my driver's license. For the first time, I thought about the American dream as nothing more than something I was already given -- not something I would always hope to achieve.

I thought about Jimmy Lum and I thought about my mother.

Until very recently, I realized that I've had a kind of idealistic notion about what that American dream was. Aside from its various working definitions, I think I've wrongly conflated it with *things*-- a cruise ship vacation or a fancy wedding. I thought about why people come and go, why people leave home and why people make homes in other places.

And even though I've been here my whole life, I thought about why I should be thankful for being here now. With a sudden urgency, I wanted the older generations to know that, from the bottom of my American heart, I was grateful to them.