



Video Story Transcript

My Chinese Grandfather

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Link to YouTube Video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sdPqrKiANXQ>

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.

I'm Brenda Wong Aoki. And when I was a little girl, I used to wish that I could trade in my grandpa because I felt like I got cheated 'cause I know what grandpas were supposed to look like. You know they have, like, white hair and twinkly eyes and you go to their house for, like, Thanksgiving or Christmas or something. Except my grandpa wasn't like that. My grandpa didn't have any hair and he didn't even have a house. So, I, I, ss... he was Chinese. But now that I'm older, I wish that I spent less time thinking about trading in grandpa and more time getting to know him.

My grandpa lived in an old, tin roof shack. It was built out of tar paper and pieces of wood he'd just find on the beach. He had no electricity, no running water. He never really learned English and his strange gruff ways used to scare me.

I can remember my first trip to Grandpa's was 1959. I was six years old. We were in our old Chevy station wagon and along the way I saw a sign that said, "How Wong" 'cause I just learned how to read. How Wong. That confused me. But my mother explained that How Wong was Grandpa's best friend. They had come together from Canton, China when they were only 18 years old.

And then I saw a dwarf, right out of Snow White. It was Grumpy. No, it was Grandpa. Inside his shack, he had frogs big as my head, living in his sink and they were ribbiting. (Ribbit! Ribbit!) My mother gave me some flowers to give to Grandpa, a bouquet of flowers. He wouldn't take it (giggle). "Moano zhu tou! Zhu tou! Stupid bamboo head!"

It turns out, bamboo head, that's what you call ABCs. American-born Chinese, because we're hard on the outside and hollow in the inside and Grandpa thought I must be a stupid ABC if I didn't know that cut flowers are an omen of death. He thought I was trying to kill him or somethin'. That summer, that night, Grandpa laid down blankets on bales of seaweed and blew out the kerosene lamp (whooo). We are at the edge of the ocean. There are no streetlights. Nothing. You can't even see your hand in front of your face. And I didn't remember seeing a bathroom. Mom hands me a metal pail. "What's this for?"

"You know."

"You mean?"

"Um huh! We call it a thunder bucket."

When we left, our car was covered with pigeon droppings like icing on a cake. I had never seen anything like it. And that's what I remember from my first trip to Grandpa's. And after that, we would return to Grandpa's every summer, and help him gather seaweed 'cause this is how Grandpa made a living. He would gather seaweed, spread 'em out to dry. Then later on, cut 'em into little pieces, put 'em in packages and sell 'em to Chinatowns throughout California and even over to China.

When I was 16 years old, we returned to Grandpa's. This time the sign said, "How Wong is the Chinaman." My mother explained, "Somebody must have written that because they were being racist."

That summer I found myself wearing men's galoshes, Grandpa's overalls and this big coolie hat. I looked totally f.o.b. (fresh off the boat). And after they left me at 3:00 or 4:00 in the morning, whatever time the tide was low, his little green flashlight leading the way, we climbed down the cliffs on these little steps my grandpa had hewn out of the rock. Now I was slippin' and sliding trying to keep up with Grandpa's short, stocky legs. He was just like buh, buh, buh, buh, buh, buh, buh! Buh, buh, buh, buh, buh, buh, buh, and down. And I was hangin on for dear life. When we finally get down to the bottom, there was tidepools but tidepools like you can't see anymore. Tidepools that were like jewels with pink and green sea anemones, orange starfish, little baby crabs, golden fish, eh, gorgeous! But there was no time to look.

Grandpa would say, "Fai Dee! Fai Dee! Hurry up!"

Oh, the tide would not wait. So, twist and pull and throw in the basket. We gathered seaweed. Twist and pull and throw in the basket. Not the green one, not the brown one, just the black one for sushi. That kind. Twist and pull and throw in the basket, twist and pull and throw in the basket. This was terrible on my fingernails! Twist and pull and throw in the basket. This was not the way I was supposed to spend my summer. I have a new, brand-new bikini with white polka dots. And I was supposed to be on the beach, listening to the Beach Boys with my transistor radio instead of here with him. And he can't even understand English. Twist and pull and throw in the basket! Twist and pull and...

"Watch waves."

"What are you talking about? Watch waves."

"Watch waves!"

Ah! This was really dangerous work. There's no lifeguards out here. Ah, huh! When we were done, the beach was covered with all these big baskets full of wet seaweed. My grandpa would take this big pole and he'd put the baskets on either side, and he'd just climb up the cliffs. Buh, buh, buh, buh, buh! Buh, buh, buh, buh! Uuh! Buh, buh, buh! Uuh! Buh, buh, buh, buh, buh! Uuh! They must have weighed about 200 pounds easy, those two

wet baskets. And when he was finished, I was up there spreading 'em out, spreading 'em out, spreading 'em out 'til we had, like, I dunno... seemed to me like a football field full of thick seaweed. Then when we're finished, Grandpa would go into the shed, into his shack. He'd light a fire in the stove. (Shhhh!) Shoo the frogs out the sink. "Go now. Go. Go!" and they'd hop away.

He'd take a great big wok and make dinner. (Shh, hhh, hhh!) Sometimes on special occasions, Grandpa would bring out a Chinese delicacy, pickled chicken feet. Little toenails clicking, he'd walk them across the table towards me. Eeheeheeheh! He loved to do that. Heh, heh, heh, heh! After supper, Grandpa would take 180 proof Chinese whiskey, pour it in a teacup and in another, he'd pour me tea.

He'd say, "This fo' me. This fo' company!"

He'd light a big stogy, (ooh, whoo), look me in the eye and say, "Ooh, whoo, ah, Blenda! Blenda! How's skoo?"

Brenda, how's school? That was Grampa's favorite American line. You see, in Chinese, words take on different meanings if you change the intonation. So, my grandpa would change his tones and think he was saying a whole bunch of American words. Our conversation used to sound somethin like this.

"Ah, Blenda! How's skoo?"

"Grandpa, tidepools are cool."

"Ah, Blenda! How's skoo?"

"Tomorrow can we take a day off?"

"Blenda! How's skoo?"

We used to talk like that for hours. At the end of the summer, Grandpa poured gasoline on the rocks and torched them. I remember standing with him watching the flames burning on the waves. He said that was so the old seaweed could die and the new seaweed could grow.

When my parents picked me up, I gave my grandpa a big kiss on his bald head, right between his big, floppy ears (smooch). And he said to me, "You go now! Go! Go!"

And he stood there all alone in the cow pasture with his little green flashlight. And that beam never wavered until we'd gone all the way up the mountain and dropped over the crest.

My grandpa died when I was in college, and we buried him up near San... up near San Francisco in the Chinese cemetery. Cem... cemeteries were all segregated. And the Chinese cemetery is right behind Home Depot, so I can always find it. Everybody put cut flowers on his grave, but I remembered and brought a small green plant that still had its roots.

Recently, my Uncle Victor passed away and I found out that my grandpa was one of the last seaweed gatherers off the coast of California. This was a community that had been there for 100 years. They'd escaped the purging of the Chinatowns when Chinatowns throughout California were burned down. And fleeing Chinese were shot or lynched or put on barges and left out in the open sea without water or food. Grandpa and a bunch of men and their families, they, they gathered seaweed quietly on the coast. And they were respected because they weren't in competition for the ranch hands, uh, jobs or anything. They also had money. They were merchants. They sold to China; they sold to Chinatown.

And I interviewed one of the ranch hands and she said that my grandpa had saved them during the Depression. She said, “We were starving. The ranch hands were starving but your grandpa came with baskets and he brought us Chinese food. It was the first time I’ve ever had Chinese food.”

And I thought, “Chinese food and baskets.”

She said she'd never had fish or crab before in her life until grandpa came and saved them during the Depression. So, my grandpa was a well-respected merchant. Georgie Wong, the Chinaman.