
Family isn't always inherited.
Sometimes, it's negotiated.
Educating
GRAMPS
CHUNJIRO

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THE STORY

Halim never knew his father — just the rumours: a drowning, a disappearance, a past no one dares to talk about.

When he signs up for a nursing home buddy program, it's not random. He's hunting for answers — anything to impress his girlfriend's well-connected father. He picks Lim Soo Hock, a sharp-tongued, bigoted old man, believing he's the closest thing to a grandfather he'll ever have.

He didn't sign up to be Lim's teacher. Or his grandson.

But as Halim pushes back against Lim's prejudices, the old man fires back with hard truths — about survival, silence, and the lies families tell to shield each other... and themselves.

Then a medical crisis confirms a painful truth: no shared blood, and Halim faces a question he never expected: Can you choose family, or does family choose you?

Halim has grown fond of the old man. He can't adopt a grandfather, but will Lim adopt him as a grandson? And does Lim have to?

What unfolds is a quiet excavation of intergenerational truths: the debts we inherit, the secrets we keep alive, and the fragile art of forgiving forward.

Witty, unflinching, and deeply moving, Educating Gramps is a story about the bonds we forge — not from scratch, but from whatever's left.

(READ SAMPLE INSIDE)

An excerpt from Chapter 3

My assigned buddy, Mr Lim, sat apart from the others — alone under a large banyan tree near the fence. He looked nothing like the photo in his profile. That picture — dimples, black hair, a firm jaw — had clearly been taken some time ago, or with generous retouching.

In front of me was a man in a baseball cap, and I couldn't tell if he was bald on purpose or just unlucky. His jaw drooped slightly. A few wrinkles lined his forehead, and the dimples were gone. He didn't smile. The coldness in his expression overshadowed the warmth of the sun.

He sat a little hunched in a wheelchair, draped in a sarong that covered his legs, and he wore sandals that revealed his

toes. They were clean and tidy. A thin singlet revealed strong arms — for an old man. A pair of reading glasses hung from a string behind his neck as he flipped through an English newspaper. I was oddly comforted. Silly of me, perhaps, but I took it as a small sign. A former government servant would surely speak English.

“Hello, Mr Lim,” I said as Sister Margaret introduced us.

These days, the go-to address for any non-Malay older man around the country is “Uncle,” regardless of language or dialect. I was tempted to use it, too, but something about his stern expression made me opt for a more formal greeting. He ignored the handshake I offered and stayed focused on his

newspaper, seemingly unaware of our presence.

Sister Margaret gently patted his shoulder and rubbed his back the way a mother might soothe a toddler after milk.

“You’re his second buddy,” she said softly, though clearly loud enough for him to hear. “He hasn’t been very welcoming. The last volunteer gave up after just two sessions. I hope you’ll be more patient.”

I caught a quick flick of disapproval from Mr Lim’s eyes, but he said nothing.

“I will,” I replied, feigning more enthusiasm than I felt.

“Let’s see how it goes. All the best.” Her smile didn’t quite mask her doubt. Maybe it wasn’t

about me. Maybe it was just him.

The message was clear: two sessions. I silently vowed to last at least three. I could've been doing something better on a Sunday — like staying in bed a little longer, soaking up the sun from my balcony, or stretching out on the couch to watch Selamat Pagi Malaysia, our version of Good Morning America.

I sat down on the bench beside his wheelchair.

"How's your morning so far, Mr Lim?"

He didn't respond.

"Would you prefer I call you Uncle instead?"

Still nothing. He continued reading, convincingly deaf to my

question.

Five minutes passed by quietly before he neatly folded the paper, placed it on the bench, and picked up another section.

“How long have you been here?” I asked.

“Didn’t they tell you?” His first words were cool and clipped — he could dub for robots in sci-fi films.

“They didn’t.” I lied.

“Then you don’t need to know.”

Fair enough. I was just a volunteer.

“So… how’s this place treating you?”

“I have no complaints.”

“What would you like to talk

about?”

“Nothing. Not with you, anyway.”

Maybe he didn’t want his newspaper time interrupted. You’d think the home would know that and schedule his buddy time later in the day. Older folks can spend hours with the paper — not skimming like office workers, but reading slowly, word for word. They probably have all the time in the world, and it soon becomes a habit.

“Do you always make life difficult for others?” I asked, polite but bold.

“Do I look like I care about this bloody program?” he shot back, still flipping through the pages.

“It’s buddy, not bloody. You may not care, but others do. I read

that the program's helped a lot of your friends here."

It took some courage to say that. No one would know from a news story exactly how many residents actually liked the program, but I needed something to hold on to.

"You read? And you think I have a lot of friends here. Keep the propaganda to yourself. And don't be naïve," he said.

"Naïve?"

He didn't elaborate.

I wasn't sure whether that counted as breaking the ice or making it thicker. I was beginning to understand why his previous buddy gave up so quickly. I should've insisted on being under the guidance of a more experienced volunteer, like Sister

Margaret suggested — just to get a feel for how to deal with the elderly.

Doubt crept in. Maybe I'd approached him all wrong. Or maybe he simply preferred solitude. Maybe he was intensely private. Maybe he'd talk about things unrelated to himself. Maybe.

Still, there was no excuse for rudeness.

I was clear of my true reason for being here — to find out which of these men was my grandfather.

I glanced at the front page of his newspaper lying on the bench. The headline quoted something the prime minister had said — something likely absurd, like most of his remarks — but always enough to stir chatter among

news junkies. I made a neutral comment. He didn't react.

For a good twenty minutes, we sat in silence. He wanted us to be strangers — and he succeeded. Two metres apart, yet worlds away. He never looked up. I threw him the occasional glance and pretended to read the book I'd brought, all the while wondering what to do next.

Then came a gust of wind, dramatic and well-timed. One of his flyers — a small insert about some local event — was swept up by it, tossed, and landed at my feet. He watched, then looked over the rim of his glasses, expressionless. I smiled.

"It's an offence to litter," I joked. No reaction. I picked it up and handed it back.

“But since enforcement’s lacking, you’re off the hook.”

“Thank you,” he said. Then, almost as an afterthought, he extended his other hand for a handshake. Awkward, but maybe it was to convey that his word of thanks was genuine. I stood up, shook his hand, and gave a small bow.

“This isn’t Japan,” he said.

“My name is Halim,” I said, keeping my voice steady.

“I know. I heard her earlier.” He slipped the flyer back into his papers, folded them neatly, and took off his glasses. For a while, he stared blankly at the space in front of him.

“Are you always this blunt?” I asked.

“Depends.”

“On?”

“The situation.”

“You could try being friendlier.”

“I was never trained that way. If you want to meet friendly guest relations officers, go find the china dolls in town.”

I held back a smile.

“What did you do before retirement?” Government servant, yes, but knowing which ministry or department would be good. That could help me frame our conversation.

“Just leave me alone when I’m reading,” he snapped.

I offered him an apology. Maybe I had interrupted him too much.

“So… what’s in the news today?” I tried again.

He turned and looked at me. “Tell me about yourself.”

It sounded more like an order than a request.

“I’m twenty-eight. Previously I joined two buddy programs in college, but this is my first time doing so in a place like this.”

“What makes you different from the others?”

“I don’t know the others.”

“What’s your job?”

“I work in investment banking.”

“Rich kid. Overseas graduate?”

“Yes.”

“What’s a rich kid doing here?”

“I’m not rich,” I said. “I went overseas on a scholarship.”

“So, you’re smart.”

I didn’t answer fast enough.

“But you’re Malay. Didn’t say so, but Halim’s a giveaway. Unless you renamed yourself Harlem.”

I smiled faintly.

“Government scholarship?”

I nodded. I hated how this was turning into an interrogation.

“Then it’s not a sign you’re smart. Meritocracy doesn’t exist in this country. You all get those scholarships. Competing only among those of your own race. There are smarter people who don’t get the same chances.”

I’ve learned to ignore this kind of

talk. But something in me refused this time.

“Mr Lim, I don’t have a father. He died before I was born. My mother never remarried. I grew up with my grandparents in a small village in Wakaf Bharu until I was fifteen. You’ve probably never heard of it.”

“I know where Wakaf Bharu is.”

“Then you know how rural it is.”

“Yes. I also know that most people over there laze around all day long.”

I decided not to take the bait.

“I was hired by the bank in London months before graduation. My ethnicity didn’t matter. They believe in equal opportunity. Two years ago, I asked for a transfer home. I

stayed because they don't practice racism. I hope my race doesn't bother you either."

He shrugged. "You're one of the commendable few."

I felt a flicker of pride. Then came the sting.

"But let's not pretend. A lot of your people benefit from privileges they didn't earn. The NEP made that possible."

"This is 2008, Mr Lim. We've come a long way since then."

"Have we?"

"Yes... and no."

It was like arguing with a wall. But I pressed on. Sometimes arguments may be educational, as long as both parties remain unemotional.

“Would you feel better if Malay business ownership still stood at four percent like before the NEP? Redistribution of opportunities and wealth under the NEP helped the country, not just one group.”

He turned away.

“Yes, I acknowledge the abuse of privileges by some people. Some took more than they should. And yes, those in power too.”

“You’re confusing rights with privileges, young man. Go and read the Federal Constitution.”

I winced.

“Sorry, Mr Lim. You’re right. I used the wrong word. I know the difference.”

He didn’t smile, but there was a gleam of triumph on his face — as if he’d won something.

My journey in buddyship had just begun, and it already promised to be bumpy.

I silently hoped my grandfather — wherever he was — wouldn't turn out like Mr Lim. I hoped he wasn't a man who scorned the rural, or dismissed people like me. I wished he was here to argue with this man. One Mr Lim against another.

Still, a part of me wondered — what if my grandfather turns out like this? Would I walk away? Or would I try to change him, gently, one conversation at a time? This Mr Lim may not be my grandfather, but there is something oddly tempting about challenging him. Not to win, but to open a window. Education isn't just about teaching — it's about helping people recognise

that there can be more than one perspective of every situation.

Mr Lim picked up his papers. I went back to my book. For a long while, we sat quietly. I'd learned from Sister Sujita that the buddy program wasn't all about chatter. Silence could be therapeutic, too. We were both reading. That was enough.

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An excerpt from Chapter 17

I sat down again, watching the corridor pulse with life. A teenage girl exited the lift with a wrapped parcel in her arms. A man wheeled in a folded stroller, and I wondered if he was heading to the paediatric ward since children below a certain age were disallowed as visitors. Overhead, the digital screen announced visiting hours and ward restrictions, but no one seemed to be reading.

Twenty minutes passed.

Jerome didn't return. His text message came in his place.

"Not to worry. Suspected septic shock. UTI confirmed. Serious, but stable condition. Moving him to ICU now. Needs blood transfusion."

I let the words sit for a moment, reading them twice. Septic shock. Not that I understood much about what that meant. But why “suspected”? Why not “confirmed”? UTI. In short, urine related, that much I remembered. I also knew he needed blood. But the consolation was, he was in stable condition.

“I can be a donor.” I texted back.

Then his second message came through:

“That won't be necessary. OO blood types are common. Records show your grandpa has donated blood so many times, the hospital’s basically returning the favour. Karma, man.”

OO?

I reread that word like it was written in Greek. My mind scrambled. Wait. What?

Gramps was type O? Double O, to be precise.

I was AB+. I had double-checked this before. I'd always thought it made me unique. Rare, even. Only about three, maybe four, percent of Malaysians had it. I used to joke that I was a collector's edition.

But that also meant something else. No longer a joke. And definitely not something I could ignore.

An OO blood type grandfather couldn't biologically produce an AB+ grandchild, that much I understand. The maths didn't work. The science didn't lie. You could argue culture, memory,

names, but not blood. That was hardcoded.

So, when he said there was no blood ties between us, minutes before he collapsed, he was telling the truth.

Gramps — Mr Lim — wasn't my grandfather.

The heaviness didn't come immediately. It hovered for a few seconds, then landed all at once. I wasn't sure if I was more disappointed at the confirmation... or at myself, for still hoping. I typed out a quick thanks to Jerome, trying to keep it casual.

"Appreciate it, bro. Glad he's in good hands."

A third message came minutes later.

“A bit odd though. Nursing home reported he has no known relatives. But you said you’re his grandson?”

That twist of discomfort returned. Tightened. I stared at the message. What was I supposed to say?

“It’s a long story. Meet you at the canteen when you’re available. I’ll explain.”

Of course, he was available. He had come from a game of tennis, he was not supposed to be working that Sunday.

I wondered what it was like in the ICU. Behind those sterile double doors lay a coma-induced man I had fought so hard to believe was my Gramps.

Now, he was simply… Mr Lim

again.

But I still cared. And that, more than the blood type, was what surprised me most.

I didn't wait for Jerome's reply. I assumed he would meet me at the canteen.

The hospital canteen was noisier than I expected, a hive of clinking trays, murmured conversations, and bursts of laughter. It was a non-working day, and the tables were half-filled with not-so-chronic patients in loose hospital attire, enjoying brief reprieves with visiting family. Children shared nuggets, aunties peeled mandarins, and patients — IV lines tucked discreetly into sleeves — sipped Milo. The television in the corner played a news channel nobody really watched. I joined the queue,

ordered a tall glass of soya milk, and found a seat near the back where the sounds faded to a low, steady hush.

Jerome showed up. He looked fresh, probably had a shower while I waited. He had changed out of his sports attire, and although he was off duty, he was dressed much like what a doctor should, minus the stethoscope over his shoulder. His ID badge swung lazily from a blue lanyard, catching light with each step.

He slid into the seat across from me, and when he opened the lid of his thermos, the rich scent of coffee wafted towards me.

"Are you about to crack open a family drama on TV?" he asked, lifting up the steaming thermos.

I gave a weak smile. “Feels more

like a rejected pilot episode.”

“So, spill.”

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