

A Knotted Beach Chair

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I'm meeting a crossroads. It's a speech contest. Each Business Speech Major has to choose a topic: Love, does it have a place at college; technology, a good thing or not, and is there such a thing as a simple life? That shouldn't be a problem, but here I've been up several nights studying a piece of nightlight cutting into the post of a bunk bed. Well, if I don't have a choice, at least I have a beginning. Here it is; *I must have been five and am lying on a roll-out chair and reading a comic book. I can't remember the book but am coloring in a face with an orange crayola. Grandpa's on a chair that's strung with a knotty bamboo. Grandpa hates the news and is using the Science & Technology page to block the sunlight from entering his almond-shaped eyes. He's snoring loudly, enough to make up a small wind storm.* But after that, I'm stuck, and that won't do, so I try to see if the talk can be made to last, let's say two minutes and be done with it, but even while pausing, I can squeeze out no more than 20 seconds tops.

Having picked up a passing grade in Speech 1, 2, and 3 (that teacher doesn't have interesting topics either), I understand every speech has a point, so what's the point of lying on a knotty bamboo chair each afternoon and evening? Okay I know: it can show a simple life or a life perhaps without technology, but every time I believe I've located a way out, a new detail jumps out, lousing up the

whole arrangement. Dad makes that point: “You just don’t know how to focus, honey. Every time you start something, you get lost in a bottle, possibly of French wine, and pretty soon the whole delivery is lost.” For dad, everything’s about wine. He sells wines in a shop with back steps trailing off into the Hai River and likes to make the point that he is never off his feet. Okay, back to grandpa.

My grandpa uses his days up asleep on a tightly strung beach chair, *pause*. I remember fondly watching him, *pause; nothing more*.

After that, some other lines jump into the picture and confuse the main point. There’s the knotty bamboo. It’s pushed up against a scholar tree. The scholar has wide canopied leaves with white blossoms that stick to grandpa’s belly which is peeking out some buttons: his arms two thick logs and him wheezing like he’s scratching against the broad and flat leaves of a scholar. He snores. I prefer his deep throated breathing. It becomes a game. I have other games; for instance, watching his backside slide into the knotted bamboo anchoring the chair. Sometimes, I watch the cushion. It is round with a bulge that sticks into the upper trunk of the scholar. During the dust storm season in early March, the sharp bark and Grandpa’s belly become compassed with red cinder, and I traipse out onto a matted rectangle behind our apartment house which the neighborhood takes as a garbage dump that was used by the Japanese as a killing field. I try to take in the field just as grandpa describes it, a few lowlifes and busy bodies lined up by the Japanese and buried in shallow ditches that become papered over with thin plaits of swamp grass.

Okay, the Japanese are parading a few lowlifes and busy bodies; my neighborhood is full of them, and the residents bury the dead bodies beneath the thick stained grass because they are forced to or out of politeness. But does any of that matter? So I put off the end, hoping that my mind will be a sponge and suck up a line that the judges can take without thinking. I will be done with the mess then, and even when the guards unlock the back stairwell and we tumble into the auditorium, all of us scrambling through a tight way: I still have hope. All of us girls stuck together in the back two rows. The judges are on cushioned chairs up front, the Dean stacking sesame seeds on the left corner of a foldout table until he’s ready to go.

The other judge, an older student (I don’t have his name), has

his notebook out and is wearing thin framed glasses with equally thin lens. Ai-Li whispers he's the Dean's favorite. Ai-Li is my roommate. We girls sleep on four bunks, luggage jammed up against the posts, combs and cell phone chargers all over a moldy floor, pure chaos.

Ai-Li has a throaty laugh; she's our clever girl. But I'm not so lucky. I draw 15, four slots below Ai-Li and five below Wu-Ling who lives inside a sheet of glass and watches *Downton Abbey* nighttimes, picking up a British accent -- the envy of each Business English Major. Ai-Li jokes the accent tastes like lime, our talking bird is jealous. Wu-Ling's the only real competition. The rest of us are nobodies, though at first I'm thinking I may be wrong. The first guy's got on an ironed t-shirt (his mother must have done that) with orange fringes and follows all the pointers that our teacher has stuck in with the flat end of a pencil. *Smile* even if the room grows damp, and the auditorium stinks of rotting blossoms. *Breathe evenly. Don't bother with emotion*, okay, you're a perfect one of us. Don't look down at the computer table. *It holds nothing for you*. Step to the microphone. The room is quiet enough. *I can hear my grandpa's snoring and the laundry shaking on the line below our apartment*. The kid starts talking about moving to New Zealand. *People eat meat there every day, sometimes twice. There's no racism*. That's an interesting point, and I vow, when I get back to our bunk to find the island on a map.

But I'm alone for now. The judge has his thin frames on the tip of his nose and is shuffling paper. Some girl yanks at her shoelaces. Several boys needle each other; two fall off their metal foldout chairs, starting off the Dean to give our teacher an angry look. Wu-Ling, our dreamy girl, is of course off in her fog, but the Dean makes the kid cross over the open palm of a stage dummy covering the middle step of some shaky stairs before the Dean lets go of his truth, "Life rests in worries. Death lurks in idleness," smiling to let us know that he has unwound a knotty question.

We all let out a breath, glad we're not the one facing the Dean. The kid tugs at the edges of his T-shirt and offers, "In New Zealand?"

Good comeback, all of us think, but the Dean is back to his sesame shells. He's fixed on them, stacking them neatly on a foldout table while the student judge's balancing his thin framed glasses on the tip of his slender nose. That's when I return to my grandpa.

He's busy snoring on a torn and bunched up pillow. I am reading a comic book on a cloth beach chair hovering close to the ground. The chair's been left out overnight, and Mom has to put down a towel to keep the moldiness from sticking to my back. I remember being fixed on a comic when my grandpa tumbles to hit the ground. The sound of Grandpa's tree trunk arms makes a large thump, causing the knotted bamboo anchoring his beach chair to shake vigorously.

I hear still the sound of a knotty beach chair shaking vigorously and am sure I have found an answer; *death lurks between the folds of the Technology & Science page of The Tianjin Daily that Grandpa places over his nose and mouth every early afternoon until dinner.* But that answer leaves out an awful lot; for example, as soon as the Japanese leave, Grandpa sticks the tightly strung beach chair against the backside of a scholar; then, uses a little *guanxi* (his elder sister knows a boss) to find a job at the university. *Perfect*, he becomes a Dean so locks himself in his office, making certain to see as few visitors as possible. Mom tells with a throaty laugh how he has a secretary tell any visitor (except his boss and a few Committee big shots) that he's out, and about 2, after breaking for a steamed oblong bun stuffed with pork and garlic, returns to the knotted up chair where he closes his eyes and lets the wind sway him until suppertime.

That's his routine--mom spits out. Mom wishes to have nothing to do with Grandpa. She doesn't breathe that into words. She has dad for that, but after Grandma dies, (does dad grow bitter having to pay to burn that old ghost): what are we to do? We hide Grandpa in a room not much larger than a closet, not that any of that matters.

Grandpa spends his days and some evenings (when it's warm enough) on a knotted beach chair. Mom explains the strategy. Grandpa's not much of a success, but the tallest blade is the first to be cut, and Grandpa's definitely not the tallest blade, so when the troubles start and all the other teachers and officers at the college become revisionist troublemakers emitting the odor of stinky chrysanthemums, my grandpa's left alone. Very few are aware that he works on campus, so if idleness catches up finally, it certainly takes its time, allowing him to survive the terrible times; then, sell housing which in theory isn't completely his own (the District has leased to him the apartment) before retiring to a knotted beach

chair until falling into some tangled stems fed by the bones of some nobodies, not that these accidents have a chance to save me.

Anybody can tell you that. The next few contestants don't help much either. One girl tries combining topics, explaining: *before the financial crisis, I met with friends. Now my life is simple. I have an iPod and don't need to talk to nobody.* The Dean tilts his face forward, sucks on more sesame seeds and nods his head in agreement. With what, I try piecing together, figuring if there's a point, I can thread in that point and maybe come out with a respectable score. That's all I want. Ai-Li teases me on that very point. All the other girls are climbers. Some want jobs with a big export firm. Others wish to meet a foreigner, get a green card and end up in New Zealand or Hoboken. Even Wu-Ling is a climber; maybe most of all. I'm not talking about the accent that she's grown to deal with foreign buyers visiting her dad's trade company or the hourglass hips or the sheet of glass that she uses to keep in her thoughts. All of us girls can't imagine taking a four hour plane ride alone; then to be away from our mom for four years with only a tightly woven sheet to keep off the desert flies that flood every city, so Wu-Ling's mom believes.

"Daixuan-mei will never have that fate," Ai-Li, our little talking bird, adds.

True enough, I will never leave; well maybe, I'll be in a different apartment but close enough for me to make my favorite, tomatoes and eggs over fried rice, and on Saturdays, gossip with mom and with some cousins over sticky buns with a sweet bean inside. Not that any of that matters; my number's soon to be up, and I have to discover more than that grandpa prefers using the Science & Technology page for sun block. The next speaker I don't recognize, while Wu-Ling seems lost in her thoughts. "It's a new girl," Ai-Li adds with a throaty laugh, though later I find the girl isn't new but has recently switched majors.

Our new speaker is short--to let you know how short, a few centimeters smaller than I am. I reach above my grandpa's belt buckle and remain small enough to put my head against his belly. This girl though has as little chance as the others. She doesn't speak into the podium (our teacher has warned us about that), and she's dressed well enough, her checkered skirt pleated, but her voice has a shriek, and she likes to leap off the wooden slabs of the stage whenever wishing to make a point; for example, when her boyfriend

leaves her, explaining that her voice sounds harsh like a man's.

At first, I hate my voice, so I go back to him, begging him to take me back, pounding on the door of his room until my knuckles go red from bleeding.

The girl holds out her knuckles. The student judge moves about his thin framed glasses and squints as though figuring whether the visual evidence adds to the quality of the speech. The girl smiles showing a piece of bok choy leaf between her teeth; *he takes me back but he starts talking about my belly and my backside, she giggles. He leaves me.*

For a while, I am broken up. I start asking myself who myself am, am I a girl with a wrong sized belly and with a voice like a male bird, so I'm quiet and study hard. My life's simple, but one day, I have stinky tofu and am talking to a woman who's selling the tofu and feel dead inside but wake up and start singing for some mysterious reason the mushroom song about a girl who gets mushrooms, well you all know the song, and I feel better and start to sing more and study less, so I get myself a boyfriend; then, I say his belly has a funny shape and talk about his nose, it's flat like a tree stomp, kind of, so he adores me, very much. I leave the new one high and dry and feel a lot better and learn the meaning of a simple life, which I have told you.

We girls study the carpet tearing up at our feet. Wu-Ling smiles politely, maybe she's not listening. Ai-Li clears her throat. The Dean starts acting lively. He's playing with a sesame shell on the foldout and doesn't bother with a question. The kid with the thin lens marks down his score: 2 for content, 1 for pronunciation, 1 for overall impression. The highest score is 10, I note, having casually moved from the back row, my head about touching the student judge's rounded shoulders. Ai-Li puts her lips next to my ears that are sloped the same as my grandpa's: "Boyfriends are never."

I smile cutely, not that I get the point; I don't but Ai-Li must know, being the only girl in the dorm with a boyfriend. Ai-Li takes me one afternoon to watch him play football. She explains the boy's an idiot, but she likes the shape of his butt. Ai-Li can be very direct. That's her game, and once after studying her boyfriend, he's a fullback: Ai-Li drags me to a drugstore where she has me mull thoroughly some boxes of condoms to find which gives the snuggest fit. Ai-Li brings over the sales clerk, an old lady who perhaps wishes

at that moment to be resting on a tightly strung chair above a couple of heroic Chinese but instead was being asked which “condom in the sales clerk’s general experience provides a suitable fit: considering that the size of a typical Chinese penis was overestimated by the typical foreign multinational.”

Ai-Li bends over and says to the clerk who’s adorned in a nicely checkered blouse: “Everyone knows foreigners produce the best.”

The clerk’s cheeks and chin turn a nice chrysanthemum red. I also look down at the glass case. It shows Ai-Li grinning broadly: her blotchy skin dissolving in a green pack of chewing gum. Then, I feel my breath clouding up the glass case and remember that still I have nothing more to say than *I have once been very young and read a comic book while listening to my grandpa wheeze and snore on a pillowed beach chair*. I can’t fathom the Dean of the Business English School being pleased with that picture and become fixed on Wu-Ling; as usual, she has a glass sheet around her head, the glass sticking into my own fingers and open palm. I remember right before the start of the grave-sweeping holiday, a little less than a week before the contest, Wu-Ling gives us girls stories. That’s not unusual. Plenty of us girls give out stories, Ai-Li’s have pockets full of deep throaty laughter and cute winks, but Wu-Ling lets go of hers with an unsteady breath that Lady Mary would use if Lady Mary could speak Chinese (this is how we all hear her subtitles). Urümqi where her family works is packed with Han Chinese like us.

Grandfather has made me his favorite and decides to take me (who won’t take our girl with very pale skin and vanishing hips) out. Some minorities are living in the desert surrounding our city. Grandfather says their women have knotted up scarves over their faces. The scarves are made of a thin cloth that the powerful wind does not shred into thin pieces. At the time, I am not much higher than Daixuan-mei is (Wu-Ling says with a cute smile) and could barely get my head above the dash. At first the road is paved with uneven sprinklings of gravel, but when we leave the Han area, it becomes covered with red grainy sand, which catches the windshield so that the two of us are blind. Grandpa brakes and opens up the driver’s side window. A car is on the side of the road. It is about the same as grandpa’s compact, down to the body, except the other is turned on its side. Its wheels spin like an insect without wings. I study the shattered glass on the driver’s side and

find a knotted-up scarf. Brown and white stripes cover its slender fabric. A woman's lips peak through a torn middle and leak what looks to be a breath. Grandfather turns the key several times. A red chunk of sand coats our windshield. The two of us are blind again. I never ask what happens to the woman or the knotted scarf. I know that my grandfather will never answer. All of us girls are quiet, absorbing Wu-Ling's story like little sponges: her accent coating our skin and filling our breath. It is past the dorm curfew. I shut off the lights; that's my job. Then, Ai-Li taps my elbow and asks if I want to go. "Where?" ready to follow her to New Zealand or Urümqi.

"Away," she laughs, "my guy's got a buddy."

I smile cutely and say, "I know," and this time I really do, the buddy having chunky arms and an invisible neck, just my type: his family with an auto business taking up two lots bordering the killing field, where his family is firmly planted. But I surprise myself and answer that I want to spend the four-day weekend preparing for a speech contest. Ai-Li shrugs. The other girls also leave, stripping their mattresses: the four-day holiday giving an excuse for a laundry run. The dormitory empties, and I close my eyes, letting my lips loose to suck at the only paragraph that I've been able to put together. The lines blur as a result of my unfortunate habit and look like several small streams instead of the parts to a single river. Wu-Ling pushes at our door, a bottom hinge broken; it's one in the morning. All of us have left, so I am finally able to study her eyes. They have lines blurring like the picture of my grandfather (or hers) spread out on the middle line of a notebook with a red line bordering a left column.

"Wu-Ling-mei," I mumble underneath my breath.

Wu-Ling looks up. We girls call each other little sister all the time, but no one's considered sticking Wu-Ling with the tag. Wu-Ling returns to the edge of her lower bunk and starts ordering her books and papers for the next day's study.

"It's that you look tired," I decide to explain.

Wu-Ling nods, "I miss home, Daixuan-mei," and relaxes her palms against a wooden post holding her and Ai-Li's beds together.

Wu-Ling draws out a photo of her father, mom, and grandpa from a side pocket of a book bag: her parents, even her grandpa

share the same slender hips and pencil thin eyebrows and I say thinking of my own family, "Yours is beautiful."

We become quiet. Wu-Ling goes outside to the shower facilities, and even though I've already showered and brushed my teeth, I take a break from my speech on a knotted beach chair to go after my roommate. The road between the dorm and the washing facility has bulletin boards on both sides, and I make certain to stay near the middle so the staples don't stick me. Wu-Ling bends down and covers her face with brownish water before flooding her face with suds; Wu-Ling squints as if she's looking too close at the sun, and reaches for a bow knotting her hair in place.

I'm shocked to see my roommate's wavy black hair tumble over a pair of slender shoulders. Wu-Ling shakes her hair and picks up her tube of toothpaste along with a plastic handled hairbrush. I palm a hairpin while picking out a strand that may have blocked the drain. When I get back, I expect to hear all of us including me chirping away. But the room is quiet, the flies and night crawlers leaking through the one torn screen. Wu-Ling takes a cotton cover fringed with an intricate mesh and puts the sheet over her flat nose. And I study my roommate's almond-shaped eyes and clear sheeted forehead except for a pencil-thin birthmark; then, shut off the lights and listen to my roommate's uneven breath. A few boys are talking outside, so I grow frightened and close my eyes when I feel a tapping on my shoulder.

Wu-Ling is standing on a lower bed, her undershirt draping down to the knees. I reach over to tap her bare calves; then, follow her to her lower bunk, and Wu-Ling covers me with the sheet that her mother gave her to fight off the flies that swarm through the dust lighting up Urümqi at night until market time.

Wu-Ling puts her head against my chest. I close my eyes again, though this time, I find myself against my grandpa's belly stuck with the flattened petals of a scholar. I feel then her nails break off in my wrist, and when I awake, expect to see a line of blood strung down the side of my arm, but there are no breaks, and that's my excuse for disappearing before dawn for a walk across the campus to the washroom where I stay for an hour and after that, sleep with the other bookworms in the basement of the library before, in the early morning (never looking at Wu-Ling), follow a piece of nightlight cutting into the post between her and Ai-Li's bed.

But I'm also excited, a part of me coated with a layer of her pencil-thin breath. Then, over fried eggs and tomatoes, my shoulder sore from sleeping on a desk flooded with a damp draft, floating through the basement of the library: I give a speech to my parents; *do you remember how I used to sleep on a sheet covered with the sweat of the leaves grown out of heroes. Now, I've met a friend who shared with me a sheet thin enough to be a piece of glass: simple, huh?*

But their reaction won't be simple. Mom won't say a word. Her forehead would be a white sheet, and she would go into her separate bottle which would be well scrubbed; mom's very good with the cloth, but dad would look like he was sucking down a stack of sesame until coming to the part about comrade pig and stop talking to me for good. Then, I start considering that maybe he's right. Wu-Ling's a comrade pig, a girl preferring love with another girlfriend, so I have to make the speech about not wanting to complicate our lives. Then, there's the what-if game. What if Wu-Ling wants me to explain whether it's the slope of her belly, the contour of her hips--even the taste of her voice? I would have to leave, of course locking myself in my parents' apartment. What if Wu-Ling crosses then the common field patching over some nobodies, pausing to put her delicate palm against a well knotted beach chair before letting loose a voice (like a sparrow's perhaps) that, I'm surprised, can survive her diligent study of a British TV hit. And what if she starts pounding on a door that my family has purchased custom-made from a recently opened mall, until my father or maybe my mom chooses to undo a lock. And what if I end up facing Wu-Ling alone, her fist marked with short red lines stretching up the side of her hand?

I decide (to be honest, the decision's simple) never to speak with my friend again, and I haven't let a word in her direction until this speech contest when I will have to stand in front of her and speak on a subject that I haven't chosen. I try to picture Wu-Ling. Most likely, Wu-Ling won't show much. She'll keep the glass over her, while practicing her *Downton Abbey* accent, and may not see me even. At that, I feel a stab in the side of my belly creeping up into my chest and into my throat and nasal cavities, which doesn't matter; my number's up. I don't know what road to take but start up the wooden stairs that have been stuck as an afterthought to the

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wooden stage and walk over the foot of a dummy before standing in front of the Dean who has by now spit out enough empty shells to put together a pyramid. Then, I start in about the comic book and about a well knotted beach chair above the leaves nourished by waves of ancestors buried beneath the ground, figuring that once I start, my story will take care of itself.

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