

Hang Ups

Dangling about 30 feet above the ground, I looked down on the entire neighborhood park with its rolling hills, vibrant green grass, and multiple tall eucalyptus trees. Buckled tightly in my brand new Diamond Mountain climbing harness, I admired my handiwork.

My old blue-and-black braided climbing rope thrown over a branch held me aloft, while a slipknot I tied while hoisting myself up prevented my descent. After a few minutes, I decided to return to the ground, but realized my knot grew too tight for me to untie. I was stuck.

Ever since my dad taught me the Bowline in second grade, the intricacy of knots has fascinated me. I spent hours mastering the craft, reading every knot book and website I could get my hands on. All my knots usually came in handy. In 8th grade, I won a competition in the Boy Scouts with a square knot, beating the instructor who taught an alternative knot that took longer to tie. A couple years later, I rescued my brother's pickup out of the mud with the unbreakable loop of the Bow Line during one of our off-road adventures. I even returned a stranded rock climber's lifeline by tying a Sheep's Bend between a small piece of paracord and his climbing rope.

Ironically, on the day I got stuck in the tree, I spent all morning trying to finally conquer the biggest and baddest knot of them all: the Monkey's Fist. After at least 50 failed attempts at the step-by-step process, my trusty blue rope finally bore the complex, dense sphere of rope. With a heavy Monkey's Fist on the end of my rope, I could throw an end over any branch.

After hoisting myself into the treetops that day I dangled for several hours due to that hastily tied Slip Knot. When my dad finally returned from work and saw me, he lugged over an extension ladder, and laughed as he untied me from the tangle he inspired years earlier.

When I reflected on this adventure, I realized another irony in the situation: It took a complex knot like the Monkey's First to elevate me into the tree, but a simple Slip Knot stopped me from getting back down. Comparing these knots, I learned that the effort and persistence I invest in a challenge like tying a knot translates into a certain lasting power.

A Slip Knot is extremely easy to tie, but disappears with a quick pull on the rope. However, a Monkey's Fist takes hours to learn and minutes to tie, but is impossible to untie. In so many other parts of my life I have experienced this similar relationship: that the more I try, the more useful and permanent the reward.

I expect that my knot-tying adventures, and the related lessons, even the most embarrassing ones, will help me through any future hang ups I encounter from here on out.

A Small World

While grabbing lunch between games at a water polo tournament, I noticed one of my new teammates rarely looked me in the eye. Instead of taking the empty seat next to me, he opted to sit across the table. Even when I tried to start a conversation with him, he only looked down, and mumbled, "Oh, hey," and walked away. This type of cold-shoulder treatment wasn't new to me. I'm a big guy. In bare feet, I'm about 6 feet 7 inches tall, and I'm pushing 300 pounds. Yes, it can be a pain. I bump my head going through doorways, I don't fit in most mid-size cars, and I can barely squeeze into most classroom desks. But I understand that the world is made for average-sized people, and I like to think I'm above average. One thing, however, is hard for me to take: People who don't know me assume I'm mean.

Like my frosty water polo teammate. I understand why he was intimidated by me, especially since he was one of the smaller players. I would have felt the same way. When I meet people for the first time, I often draw conclusions or make assumptions. Almost all my life, I've had to deal with the expectations and judgments people make about me just because I'm often the largest kid in the room. Ever since I was a kid there has been pressure for me to perform athletically because of my size and strength.

When I went to grocery store, random people consistently asked me if I played football. When I told them, "No," the men always lectured me not only about why I should play football, but what I should be doing with my life, with my body, and with my potential. I normally just nodded and smiled, but it bothered me that they thought they knew what was best for me.

Not only did I never play football, but I defied many of the assumptions people made about me. How many people my size love nothing more than mixing up a chocolate batter, and decorating a three-layer cake? Beside my passion for baking, I also love working with little kids. For the last two summers, I volunteered at a camp where I taught kids how to surf. My nickname was Teddy Bear. And if I wanted to make my friends fall on the ground laughing, I reminded them of my dream to learn to play the violin.

In general, I ignore what people say to me or think about me when it comes to my size. Instead of reacting, I usually just give them a smile. On many levels, there are advantages to towering over most of the world. I always get the front seat since I don't fit in the back. No one even dares call "shotgun." I usually have the best seat in the house, whether it's a rock concert or a ball game, no matter where I sit. And if people are getting rowdy and making my friends uncomfortable, all I need to do is step in the middle and simply ask, "What's going on?" and they disperse.

Even the people who are intimidated at first by me eventually come around once they get to know me. Like the water polo player at the restaurant. Within about two weeks, we finally had a conversation and ended up finding we had a lot in common. In fact, he ended up as my best friend. For me, it is a small world after all, but I wouldn't have it any other way.

Noah's Snail

A frustrated groan leaves my lips as, yet again, the clumsy Oh Ha Ni is rejected by Baek Sung Jo, the smartest boy in her class. "Playful Kiss," as frustrating as it may be, is one of my favorite Korean dramas. I throw the *hangul*-filled notebook from my lap, papers wrinkling as they land on my carpet. I pull it back and scan over the notes I've taken so far: Korean vocabulary words, sentence structures, commonly used phrases. Similar to Ha Ni and her pursuit of the flawless and complex Sung Jo, I am tearing my hair out over teaching myself this language. I look at Ha Ni and empathize. The countless hours she puts in to try and get into the same college as Sung Jo, her effort to make it into the top fifty students in her class to impress him... the way he leads her on and rejects her as soon as she feels she has a chance, is exactly like my struggle with Korean. It makes me feel wonderful once I feel I finally understand a certain concept. But seconds later the hypothetical rug of the Korean language is tugged out from under my feet. Many people would have given up after two years of confusion, but I take a deep breath, pick the notebook up off the floor, and begin the next episode after flipping to a new page.

Similar to Ha Ni, I haven't won many awards and straight A's are impossible. Ha Ni wants Sung Jo, as I want to teach English in a country I connected to when I was five years old. I distinctly remember sitting on the colorful alphabet carpet in Kindergarten, admiring the South Korean flag my teacher kept on her desk. I still remember the song she taught us about the moon. Because of my kindergarten year, I developed an appreciation for Korean culture early on in my life, which has shaped my personality. Two years ago, I came to the conclusion that I wanted to make a similar impression on someone's life. After a bit of soul-searching and an internship teaching Spanish in elementary schools, I discovered exactly what I wanted to do. In this quaint little tourist town I live in, there are no tutors or courses available for this language. The only way was to teach myself. I got to work, watching all the shows I could and scribbling furiously in the notebook, teaching myself Korean. It is a slow process, but I persevere and push through. I will only consider myself a success when my plane lands at Incheon airport, just as Ha Ni will when Sung Jo sweeps her off her feet.

Being late to a college interview, Ha Ni is asked why the school should accept her. Her response summarizes me perfectly: "If you choose other impressive students with good grades and lots of awards, but those students don't study because they're lazy, or they just give up because it's raining, and you feel like it might be damaging to your school, then pick me. I'm slower than others, but I don't give up. I stick things through to the end. That's why my nickname is Noah's Snail. Please raise this one snail." It may take me a while to make sense of a particular phrase, but I will push myself until I finally accomplish my lifelong goal of teaching English in South Korea, the place I fell in love with twelve years ago. This process is central to my identity as a learner and a human being. Korean's hard, but giving up is even harder.

