

2022

## My Grandmother in Blue

Tenzin Kunga  
*Denison University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/exile>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Kunga, Tenzin (2022) "My Grandmother in Blue," *Exile*: Vol. 68: No. 1, Article 9.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/exile/vol68/iss1/9>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at Denison Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Exile by an authorized editor of Denison Digital Commons.

## My Grandmother in Blue

Tenzin Kunga

---

Summertime in my grandmother's company has always been doused in blue.

Specifically during the long, drawn-out sun showers of the evening, when she spits at me in response to the dusty skin on my exposed knees and sneers in retaliation to my attempts at conversation. The sun embraces her tiny body, making the thick overcoat she wears with the blue flowers dotted up the sleeve look like a sleek cloak.

She is royalty in that aspect, the queen of a barren kingdom. She sits on her throne, faced before her singular and rather useless royal subject: me.

In the mornings, my grandmother and I sit on the plastic blue chairs on her tiny porch. It is wooden and rickety, and the paint is chipped blood-red, but she favors it over everything else. She stares into cloudless skies and wonders aloud about the airplanes soaring through rolling clouds above her, *where are they going? Why are they moving so fast?*- the fragility of fruitless labor.

I laugh, sometimes, mainly because of the innocuous nature of it all, my grandmother's undiluted wonder. It angers her, sometimes, that I find her curiosity amusing.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to cross the line." I will apologize, first in colloquial Tibetan, always a force of habit.

"Sorry, Momo-la, I didn't mean to cross the line." I will correct myself, this time around in formal Tibetan dialect. She seethes and softens in the face of genuine sincerity, waves off my apology with a mutter.

My grandmother, sometimes, laughs too.

"Look," I'll insist, force my grandmother to look at pictures of her daughter from when she'd first arrived in the States, smile tired and clothes baggy, bony arms bearing a red-eyed, pudgy-faced child. "Tell me honestly, *Momo*, I was pretty, right? *Chocho* always says I was an ugly baby."

She'll scoff, eyes wrinkled around the edges, softened with thought as she peers forward at the grainy photo slapped onto a phone-screen wallpaper. Her hands are toughened when she rips the device out

of my hands, laughter falling out in choppy syllables like it's being yanked out of her as she squints at the people displayed.

"Tell your brother to stop saying stupid things," She'll muse at last, pushing my phone into my hands with another heaving chuckle. I will beam from beside her, thrilled at the unspoken approval.

The clouded blue of her singular blind eye feels like it blinks in life. And so I focus on this while I'm sitting in the sun with her, or being pummelled with the pellets of her judgment, or giving her stiff calves a massage: how the color makes her look thin and whole, how it brings out the fullness of her sagged cheeks. The wrinkles sunken into the skin underneath her eyelids deepen, and her blind eye soaks in the sky.

She is 87 now, and she is relentlessly agile.

"Sit," She will bark at me as I wake up and stumble into the living room. "You need to eat more, look at you- *gayeen thongthong ray?* What are you supposed to be? A stick? Sit, sit-" She'll hobble into the kitchen and whip up some *Thukpa*, Tibetan traditional soup, mixed in with broiled potatoes, lamb, spinach, radish, hand-braided dough, and a hint of MSG. The steel pot she uses is almost half her size, but it would be a joke if she let that even slightly deter her.

When it's too hot to sit outside, she bustles around the incense-coated altar room with purpose as she hums quick Tibetan prayers beneath her breath. She pushes frail fingers into my shoulders and I move obediently to the ground of the altar room, hands flat against soft wood as I feel my hair get lifted off my back. Multiple statues of different Buddhist deities stare solemnly at me from the glass that they've been placed safely behind, ancient Tibetan prayer beads hanging from their golden hands, necks, arms.

"Your hair is pitiful," She will remark, fingers struggling to thread through knotted strands, worn down by carelessness and chlorine. She will eventually spin my hair slowly into a tight bun atop my head, and always, she will solidify it with droplets of herbal oil.

"This is expensive," She will whisper to me with a mischievous eye, pleased by the glamour. She'll rub the remaining droplets of oil into my cheeks. "Take care of your body, this isn't nearly proper enough for the looks of a Tibetan girl like yourself." I'll nod and nod, lean back, doze off into her padded pants.

Her thick fleece overcoat, even through the brutal heat of a Minnesotan summer, is her only respected companion. When she is contemplative and therefore occupied, I pinch the thick fabric with concentrated intent.