

GRANNIES IN BIKINIS

奶奶們的比基尼

Four grandmothers in their seventies decide to embark on the journey of a lifetime. Away from the domestic burdens of family life and the haunting fear of a breast cancer diagnosis, the four women are finally able to experience true freedom and reinforce their strong bonds of friendship.

On the first day of summer vacation, eleven-year-old Kai-ting finds her grandma sneaking out first thing in the morning. Is she running away from home? Afraid of being caught, Grandma grabs Kai-ting and the two of them immediately leave the house. Soon, they are joined by three other grandmothers on a trip to Taitung.

The four women are all in their seventies. There's one who always acts as the leader of their group, one who was just diagnosed with breast cancer, one who puts family first at the expense of her own needs, and one whose outwardly glamorous appearance belies a hollow inner life. Together with granddaughter Kai-ting, each woman sets out on a journey of her own. Along the way, the grandmothers start to speak up for themselves and learn to accept the losses that life brings. One of the women rekindles an old romance, and all four of them build an even stronger friendship together.

Narrated through the eyes of the granddaughter, *Grannies in Bikinis* explores issues such as female empowerment and body positivity. With its warmth and the protagonist's engaging voice, the novel is a coming-of-age story not just for children, but for grandmothers too. After all, it's never too late to keep growing as a person.

Peng Su-Hua 彭素華

Peng Su-Hua graduated from National Taitung University's Graduate Institute of Children's Literature and has won numerous children's book awards in Taiwan, including the Chiu Ko Young Adult Literature Award and the Taoyuan Children's Literature Award among others.



Category: Fiction

Publisher: Little Soldier

Date: 10/2021

Rights contact:

booksfromtaiwan.rights@gmail.com

Pages: 240

Length: 60,000 characters
(approx.40,000 words in English)

Age: 10+

Material: English sample

Rights sold: Korean (Woongjin Thinkbig)

Her fantasy novels such as *The Red-Eyed Giant* and *Meeting Mona Rudo* incorporate Indigenous culture and childhood experiences, while in her more recent works like *The Soul That Travels Through Time* and *Grannies in Bikinis* she has shifted her focus towards the care of elderly people.

GRANNIES IN BIKINIS

By Peng Su-Hua

Translated by Helen Wang

Preface

This is a story about four grandmothers who used to meet at the school gate when taking their grandchildren to and from school. But before I tell you their story, I must first apologize, because they speak a mixture of Mandarin and Taiwanese. I will try and explain as I go along, so that you won't have to keep chopping and changing languages, and wondering what on earth's going on. One year, in late June, for various reasons, they started planning a secret excursion, and on the first day of the summer holidays, the four grannies went missing!

Missing Person No. 1

Name: Liu Shu-yuan (nickname: Ten Yuan)

Gender: Female

Age: 70

Family situation: Widowed, with two daughters and a son, currently living with her son, daughter-in-law and grandson.

The Shu-yuan in Liu Shu-yuan's name sounded like "shi yuan" (ten yuan), hence her nickname. Like everyone else, I called Granny Ten Yuan.

Granny Ten Yuan was Hsu Shu-wei's grandma. Hsu Shu-wei was my brother's classmate. Every time Granny Ten Yuan saw me, she'd say "Kai-ting, you're so cute!" and pinch my cheeks. Why did she have to do that? Succulent plants have naturally fleshy leaves, and I wished there was a word like succulent for people with chubby cheeks. I hated it when she pinched my cheeks, and said, "As soft and plump as a steamed bun!" Had she seen her own face? It was as round and oily as a Changhua-style bah-uan! (it's a special kind of Taiwanese snack, like a wet, squidgy dumpling with a savory filling). But Granny Ten Yuan was all right really, as long as I could hide behind my granny before she could get her "monster paws" on me.

There was something unusual about Granny Ten Yuan. I'm not exaggerating when I say her whole face was usually covered in droplets of sweat, like a glass window on a rainy day. They started as little beads that swelled and swelled until they started to roll. They rolled from her forehead into her eyes, which made her blink a lot as she spoke. Sometimes she'd close one eye, then the other in rapid succession as though she was tapping a secret code.

Me and my brother used to bet on the droplets, and count them as they rolled down. I won a lot of ice lollies that way. Actually, I saw her more often than him, and though I say so myself, he

wasn't nearly as observant as me. The most annoying thing was that Granny Ten Yuan always had a handkerchief in her hand, and at critical moments, when a droplet of sweat was just about to roll, she'd wipe her face. When that happened, we'd pound our chests in disappointment, and granny would say: "You two are *khi-siau!*" (that's Taiwanese for "crazy").

Then there was that time when me and my brother had been staring at her face so long that she suddenly pushed her nose in front of mine: "Why are you two looking at me like that? Is there some food stuck to my face or something?" Her movements were so big and so fast that the sweat from her face would spray on to me. I was too embarrassed to wipe it away, and would feel disgusting for ages.

Granny Ten Yuan was the leader. When she said something, the other three usually agreed.

It was Granny Ten Yuan's idea for them all to go missing. But I can't really blame her alone, because it all started when Granny Achu discovered "something bad" in her breast. The news shook the four of them, and stirred Granny Ten Yuan into action. It was her seventieth birthday that year, and she wasn't sure if she'd last another decade, so she decided to put her innermost thoughts into action.

Missing Person No.2

Name: Li Hsiu-chu, aka Achu

Gender: Female

Age: 68

Family situation: Husband Chao Kuo-hsiung, three sons and two daughters, currently living with her son, daughter-in-law and two grand-daughters.

About a month before the excursion, Granny Achu went for a routine mammogram at the clinic, and a 1 cm dark shadow on her right breast showed up.

She hadn't been for a check-up for decades, and wasn't intending to attend this one, but the woman at the clinic had been persistent and phoned her several times. Granny Achu was embarrassed, and reluctantly agreed to go, never expecting this bolt from the blue. The clinic told her she needed to go to the hospital for further tests, and possibly a biopsy to see if it was cancerous. As she had a family history of cancer, the doctor advised her to have a preventive excision, whether the tumor was malignant or not. In other words, the doctor suggested she have her breasts cut off.

After that, every time I saw Granny Achu, she was either crying or sighing:

"If I'd known, I would never have gone to the check-up!"

"Life would be so much better if I didn't know. But know that I know, life's awful, and it's all thanks to that woman at the clinic!"

I didn't think it was the woman at the clinic's fault, or that it was fair to blame her.

What happened next was even weirder. The other grannies tried to reassure Granny Achu. "If it's 'something bad', you can have it cut off, and still live a long time. For lots of people, that's

the end of the matter!" But Granny Achu wailed, "Is a woman who's had her breasts cut off still a woman? And I heard that chemotherapy is horrible. I should just die!" Then she started bawling.

I was so confused. If you weren't afraid of dying, why would you be scared of a treatment? And why would you be afraid of not having breasts?

Why would not having breasts mean not being a woman? I hated my breasts! You could see that unlike other girls, I had two small bumps on my chest. I didn't want anyone to notice them, so I hunched my shoulders on purpose. Some vile boys went and got me the nickname "Bubble Tea". And every time we lined up, the nasty teacher shouted at me: "Lin Kai-ting, shoulders back, chest out!" It was so embarrassing. Even worse, my breasts sometimes felt swollen and itchy, and scratching them didn't make any difference. I wished I didn't have breasts, or that I could turn into a boy.

But this story isn't about me. To cut a long story short, Granny Achu had become very bad-tempered. She kept complaining that she'd worked hard for her children, then helped them with their children, and now that she'd reached the age when she should be enjoying herself, if "something bad" did turn out to be cancer, she'd have spent her entire life doing things for other people.

The other grannies were shocked to hear this. Then Granny Ten Yuan said, "Every three years there's an intercalary moon (it's like an extra month in the traditional Chinese calendar), when good and bad swap places. And just in case it's really bad luck for any of us, I've got a plan."

Missing Person No. 3

Name: Chen Su-ying (my granny)

Gender: Female

Age: 70

Family situation: Husband Lin Chih-ming, two sons and two daughters, lives with her older son, daughter-in-law, grandson and me.

My granny had a very small ego. On the one hand that meant she was good-natured; on the other hand, it meant she was weak and had no opinions. Her standard response was to say she'd heard about something. So when Granny Achu told them about the shadow on her breast, my granny came up with ten or more remedies: she'd heard that X took this medicine and got better; and that Y took that medicine and the tumor disappeared. The most outrageous remedy she'd heard was that you had to grind a centipede into a powder and eat it, so you could fight poison with poison. Oh God, just thinking about a 10 cm long centipede did my head in, never mind eating it!

There was another problem with my granny: she was an overly devout Buddhist. Of course, being religious isn't a bad thing, but she didn't just do the beads and recite sutras. Whenever I said anything she didn't like, she'd say, "Amitabha Buddha! Amitabha Buddha! Don't say bad things!" as though it was bad karma and I'd end up in hell.

Apart from that, my granny was really nice, and she was a good cook. So you can see how I became “succulent”! When she went to the trouble of making a delicious meal, the best way of saying thank you was to eat it all up.

I should also mention my grandad’s “contribution” to making me “succulent”.

He was the opposite of Granny: a domineering, headstrong man who never listened to anyone. He had a very loud voice, and his most common response was “That’s a load of hot air!” (it’s a bit ruder in Mandarin: “I heard you fart”). Once, when we were watching TV, he did a very loud fart, and I said “That’s a load of hot air!” He went ballistic and told me not to be rude. It was weird how he could be rude to people all day long, but couldn’t take it when I was rude back. What was I supposed to say? “That’s a beautiful song”?

There was something else he said that was even more annoying: “Farmers want fat pigs, not fat dogs. You should have been a boy!” He wasn’t talking about the size of my body, but about my brain. It was his way of complaining that I was more intelligent than my brother. As if girls couldn’t be smarter than boys! Why could only boys bring honor to the ancestors? Where did he think I’d come from? A crack in a rock?

Despite what Granny called his “Lei Gong attitude” (Lei Gong is the god of thunder), Grandad did love me. Every time he shouted at me, he’d regret it, but be too embarrassed to apologize, so he’d quietly buy me something nice to eat and put it on my desk. So, you see, he also contributed to my being “succulent”.

I often wondered why my grandparents got married in the first place. Did Grandad marry her because she was soft? Or did she turn soft after marrying him? Anyway, they were complete opposites.

The other grannies didn’t talk about their family life, but I insisted on talking about Grandad, the reason being that as the other grannies had gone away with their family’s blessing, strictly speaking, my granny was the only “missing person”. There was another granny, but she hadn’t told her family, so she wasn’t considered missing. I’ll tell you about her in a moment.

At the beginning, my granny wasn’t going to join in this plan, not because she didn’t want to, but because she didn’t want to be shouted at by Grandad. But Granny Ten Yuan kept whispering things in her ear, and eventually my granny did the bravest thing in her entire life — she ran away from home.

Actually, I really admire the way she did it.

A few days before she left, she washed the dishes after dinner as usual, and sat down with us to watch the serial on TV. She ummed and ahed for ages, then finally spat it out: “I’d like to go on a trip with my friends.”

We were all watching TV, and no one took her seriously.

“Where are you going, Granny? Can I go with you!” I asked.

“Why would you want to be with a group of old grannies?”

“I don’t mind, I just want to go!”

“Oh, pull the other one!”

Ten minutes later, there was a commercial break.

“What did you just say?” Dad asked, his eyes still glued to the screen.

“I said...”

But before she could finish speaking, Dad interrupted, “Wife! The adverts are on, could you get us some fruit?”

“I was saying...I want...”

Mum opened the fridge door. “Ma,” she said, “we’re low on fruit, could you buy some more tomorrow? Get some watermelon, it’s Kai-yen’s favorite!”

“OK,” said Granny.

The program started again, and Mum hurried back to the sofa, “That was a short break! I’ll go back and cut it later.”

Granny silently got up and went into the kitchen. She came out with a plate of dragon fruit, placed it on the living room table, and went back to her room.

“Aaagh...” On the TV a woman was hit by a car and tossed into the air. She spun round a couple of times in the air and landed in the middle of the road.

“Serves her right,” said Grandad, slapping his thigh, “she’s a bad’un, stealing from others.”

“Well, you would say that!” said Mum, her eyes burning with rage.

“Stop arguing!” said my brother.

It had never occurred to me before, but that day I felt bad for Granny.

The next day, while we were eating, Granny said it again.

Grandad had a piece of chicken in his chopsticks. His hand stopped in mid-air. “You want to go away for a few days? How will we manage here? Who’ll do the school run?”

“After the summer holiday, I’ll be in sixth grade. I won’t need to be picked up any more!” said my brother.

“Yes, you will! There are a lot of bad people around these days...” said Mum.

Before Mum could finish speaking, my brother cut in, “Oh, come on! There’ll be loads of us all coming out of school at the same time. No one’s going to do anything to us! I’m not a little kid anymore. I don’t need picking up from school.”

“We’re not going until the school holidays,” said Granny.

“Mum, the arthritis in your knees is playing up again, it’ll hurt when you walk. Why don’t you wait till I take my leave, then we can go somewhere together?” said Dad.

“Since I had the hyaluronic acid injections, it doesn’t hurt when I walk anymore! And we won’t be going on long walks, so it won’t be a problem!”

“A group of *tsa-boo-lang* (women) who don’t know *siann-mih* (anything) going on a trip? You think it’s that easy?” Grandad’s piece of chicken was still hovering in the air.

“But Ten Yuan says...” said Granny.

“That’s a load of hot air! You spend too much time with that woman.” The piece of chicken landed on the table, rolled over a couple of times then fell on the floor. As I watched that crispy fried chicken, I couldn’t help thinking of the TV serial the night before. The chicken hadn’t stolen anything, yet had still come a cropper just like the bad woman.

Granny didn't mention it again, but I was smart enough to know that wasn't the end of the matter.

Missing Person No. 4

Name: Chuang Shu-nu (my brother's classmate Chang Ya-chu's grandma)

Gender: Female

Age: 67

Family situation: Husband Chang Te-sheng, one son, one daughter, lives with her son, daughter-in-law and granddaughter.

Granny Shu-nu is the one I mentioned earlier. She was sort of missing, but not missing. Because she turned up at the last minute.

Granny Shu-nu lived in the next compound to ours. Her husband worked in mainland China, and she lived with her son and daughter-in-law, but they didn't get on very well. According to my granny, the two women lived under the same roof and barely said a word to each other all day.

When Granny Shu-nu went to school to pick up her grand-daughter, she was really looking for someone to talk to. Sometimes she and Ya-chu's mum would both turn up at the school gate. They'd both say, "Oh, you've come too!" then look around for their own friends. When Ya-chu's mum looked around, Granny Shu-nu would roll her eyes. Sometimes neither of them would appear, and Ya-chu would cheer "Hooray" and we'd have fun going home together.

Granny Shu-nu was always moaning to my granny that her son and daughter-in-law didn't look after her properly, and that they wouldn't miss her if she disappeared. So, I can't say for sure whether Granny Shu-nu was actually missing or not. I suppose if you're wondering where someone is and you can't find them, then you can say they're missing?

How to describe Granny Shu-nu? Well, you couldn't say she was beautiful, but then you couldn't say she was ugly. What do I mean? Perhaps it's best to say that her face kept changing! Her eyebrows were different every day – they could be thick, thin, arched, or look as though they were flying. They weren't always the same color either, that seemed to change every day, like clothes. Then there was her hair, I'd seen it dyed black, and light brown. One time her scalp reacted to a bad product, and she couldn't dye her hair for a while, and it was white at the top and black at the bottom. One day when we were watching a puppet show on TV with Grandad, Granny suddenly pointed to the screen and said, "Shu-nu's just like the Black and White Long-kun!" (Long-kun means gentleman, and the Black and White Long-kun is a famous character whose clothes, hair and face are half-black half-white.)

Granny Shu-nu's face reminded me of a glove puppet's head! She was almost seventy, but had incredibly smooth skin – a mosquito would slip off before it had chance to bite. But, sometimes it was a stiff and wooden as a glove puppet's head. To be honest, it was a bit scary, because she always had the same expression whether she was happy or not. Or rather she didn't have any expression. The worst thing was that her features seemed to move mechanically. When

she smiled, the corners of her eyes went up, which pulled the corners of her mouth up too. It was horrible.

She once bragged to my granny that she'd had Botox. When my granny reacted with sympathy, "Oh, you poor thing, you've poisoned your face," Granny Shu-nu rolled her eyes in rage. "You're so ignorant! It costs five thousand per treatment!" Granny Shu-nu put her hand up and shook her five fingers. But my granny didn't think it was worth it: "Five thousand? You'd be better off buying ten chickens."

Perhaps it was because her face was so tight that Granny Shu-nu couldn't express her emotions on her face. Her eyes darted about a lot, and she often put her fingers to her temples when she talked because she was worried about crow's feet. She only pressed three fingers on her temples, which meant her little finger was always raised. She painted her nails scarlet, so you could basically read her emotions by following the red dots.

Now, I'll tell you what Granny Shu-nu was like as a person.

Whenever Granny Ten Yuan talked about Granny Shu-nu, she used a lot of Taiwanese expressions, like "she's got a chicken's guts and a bird's stomach", and "she's an old pear pretending to be an apple". I didn't really understand what she meant, but I could tell that they irritated each other, because when a group of grannies were gossiping, those two barely spoke to each other. And when they did, you'd hear them spitting, and could almost smell gunpowder in the air.

It wasn't just Granny Ten Yuan who didn't like Granny Shu-nu, I didn't like Granny Shu-nu either. Every time she saw me, she'd either say I'd put on weight "again", or ask me about my school grades – what I scored in a test, if I was top of the class, etc. If I said "Yes, I'm top of the class", she'd raise her eyebrows and suck her teeth, then squeeze out a comment as if she was squeezing toothpaste from the tube: "Well done, Kai-ting! As long as you're doing well, it's okay to be fat!"

It didn't make sense. There was no correlation between school grades and how fat or thin you were. She was basically saying that ugly girls have to study hard, but it was OK for pretty girls to be stupid. I longed to hurl some of my flesh at her, or say Grandad would have said, but I've been brought up to be polite and well-mannered, and I didn't want to cause trouble.

If you're wondering how she came to be part of the Granny Plan, well, that was my granny's fault.

Granny Shu-nu thought that my granny was her best friend. She was always cornering my granny and complaining that other people were jealous that she was rich, or that her son and daughter-in-law didn't listen to her, or that other people weren't up to scratch. Actually, they weren't best friends, it was more the case that my granny listened to her and nodded attentively, and every now and then added an "Uh-huh", or "Ah-hah", or "Really?", or "Indeed". So, naturally Granny Shu-nu thought that my granny understood her better than anyone else.

I once asked my granny if she was really good friends with Granny Shu-nu, and she said, “Aiya! It doesn’t matter what kind of friends we are – when someone is talking, it’s rude not to listen!”

That was my granny all over!

And that’s how it happened. The other grannies had been planning it secretly. They never imagined that Granny Shu-nu might find out. But she was smart, and noticed that they went tense and quickly changed the subject whenever she went near. She began to suspect that something was going on, and managed to wrangle it out of my granny.

You know, my granny couldn’t hide anything – she was like a sheet of white paper – and if anyone pushed her, even a little, she’d spill the beans. And so, Granny Shu-nu became a member of the group, which drove Granny Ten Yuan crazy. My granny was constantly saying “I’m sorry!” and explaining “We’re all friends, and when she asked me, I couldn’t not tell her!”

But Granny Shu-nu didn’t tell anyone she was going to join the group. She just appeared at the last minute.