

HOW TO SAY IT SPEECH

To be delivered Wednesday, April 27, 2016

Couch Transportation

Disclaimer: Certain parts of this narrative may have been embellished for effect, but the general story is true.

Mr./Madame Toastmaster, fellow Toastmasters, and esteemed guests:

It was summer in Durham, North Carolina. Summer, when the average high temperature is at least a sweltering 90 degrees, so that even at night it doesn't cool off. It's so hot that when you walk outside from the air conditioning, you can feel sweat start to run down your skin like condensation on a cold can of Coke.

It was also the summer after my sophomore year of college. I was at campus taking classes but was otherwise halfway done with my time at the university. At this point, I knew enough to look like I had it together, but naive enough to believe that was true. My friends and I were young and invincible – nothing could hurt us.

I happened to be storing a couch at an old family friend's house, which was about a 20 minute drive from campus. For some reason, I decided it was time to bring the couch to my apartment, and one of my friends just happened to be borrowing a relative's pickup truck that weekend. So, not having anything else important to do, about five of us decided to go and grab the sofa and haul it back to my place.

My friend's relative's pickup truck reminded me of my grandma's old cast iron skillet – built tough enough to handle anything but bearing the scars of years of service. It had a diesel engine that reeked of oil, and it sounded like a tin can being kicked down the street when it accelerated. I don't recall how many gears it had but I doubt that worn down shifter lever had more than four speeds plus reverse. But despite its outward appearance, it was definitely enough to get the job done.

At least, that's what my friends and I thought, as two of us climbed in the cab and three hopped into the bed in the back. The sun was just starting to edge along the horizon that evening, and we set out in a bit of a hurry because we wanted to at least load up the couch before it got dark. We had the windows down in the cab, and the wind that whistled all around us as we flew down the road brought welcome relief from the unrelenting evening heat. But somehow in the excitement of the ride over, we failed to recognize that the truck had a gigantic toolbox mounted in the bed just behind the cab – probably for the frequent repairs this truck required.

We thankfully made it without incident to my family friend's house. I was worried that my friends might laugh at me when they saw the old sofa – it was not a sight for sore eyes, or a sore bottom, for that matter. I'd bought it second-hand from somebody else earlier that year and by some measure it made my friend's old truck look deluxe. It had a musty smell like a neglected book shelf, the springs squeaked like a door hinge, and the fabric had more food crumbs and drink stains than a movie theater floor. Fortunately, my friends didn't laugh. We had more important matters to be concerned about now.

You see, couches come in a variety of shapes and sizes. Some are long and cushy, others are short and thin, and still others are made for special living room layouts. This sofa wasn't actually out-of-the-ordinary, except for the fact that it had a mysterious quality of being much shorter in one's imagination than in reality. I had thought for *sure* that it would fit in my friend's truck. Well, we were not in luck today. The combination of my ill-informed imagination and that old truck's toolbox had the unfortunate result that the couch could only fit in the back if we left the tailgate down and hung it out the back. So that's how we put it, perched precariously off the edge of the bed.

Then things got even more hairy. Remember how three of us (illegally) rode in the truck bed on the way to pick up the couch? Now there was a couch where we had just been sitting. But no fear, we thought – what better way to get home than to just sit on the couch? Brilliant, I know. Oh, and I forgot to mention that we didn't have any rope to tie down the couch – we just threw it in and crossed our fingers! I started hoping that the suspension on that truck worked better than the springs of my couch.

So there I was. Two friends and I were hunkered down on that old couch, hanging on for dear life as we careened down the road back toward the university. Boy, was I glad that truck didn't have a fifth gear- I didn't want to go any faster than we were moving already! Whenever we came to a stop sign, the three of us would rotate so the same person wouldn't have to ride on the end of the couch that was hanging off the back of the truck the whole time. As if that wasn't crazy enough, one time we pulled up at a stop light right next to a police car! We all slinked down as far as we could into that smelly old couch, hoping not to be seen. Somehow we got away undetected, and I'm pretty sure that even with the wind roaring as we drove I could hear the sighs of relief of the others in the vehicle along with mine.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternal journey, we reached the last road that headed toward our campus. By this time I had started to relax a little and enjoy the ride, and it certainly helped that I just rotated into the position on the couch closest to the cab. As I looked up, I saw the bright starry sky above me as the shadowy figures of leafy oak trees whipped by at what felt like an arm's reach away. Somehow, in the midst of all the action, I found a moment of serenity, with just me, the Carolina heat, an old truck, a dirty couch, and the heavenly host above. Suddenly I wasn't so big and smart and invincible anymore – I was vulnerable, fragile, and small. But who I was didn't seem to matter anymore, because I knew where and to whom I belonged.

Believe it or not, we made it back to campus in one piece and delivered the couch without incident. But I still look back on that experience with fondness and awe, because it wasn't so much the sofa that got transported – it was me.

Mr./Madame Toastmaster.