

Chinese Handcuffs

I must have been in about the fifth grade, maybe eleven years old, when my little rural grade school out in West Texas had a Halloween carnival. One of the junky prizes I won that night was a woven straw tube about five inches long. The red, green, and yellow bands of straw were threaded together in diamond-shaped, diagonal patterns. The toy puzzled me. I had no idea what I had pulled out of the carnival's "Fishing Pond." I threw it into the sack with the rest of the trinkets and cheap candy I'd won, forgetting about it until I saw an older kid waving one of the same things around on his finger.

"I got one of those," I said. "What is it?"

"Chinese handcuffs," he said. "See, you stick a finger from each hand into it, and when you try to pull them out you're trapped. Here, let me show you."

"Wait . . . how do you get out of it?" I asked, although the thing looked harmless. In fact, it looked plain boring.

"Oh, don't worry," he said. "It's just made out of straw."

I was skeptical. Something about this bothered me. "Let me see *you* do it," I said.

"Sure," he said, inserting a finger into each end of the hollow straw cylinder. Then he pulled his hands apart and, sure enough, the weave tightened around the two fingers. "Straw handcuffs . . . I can't get loose." He grinned as I stared at the woven strands clutching his two index fingers. Then he wiggled his hands and was free.

"Now you try it," he said. "Make sure your fingers are in all the way, so you can make it work."

It worked.