

General Comments:

This story has great tension, which evolves naturally from the premise: the boy wonder, heir to a stunt legacy, is goaded higher and higher by a strange inner voice.

Please don't be alarmed by the amount of editing. I edited as if I were preparing for publication and I made several categories of suggestions.

Formatting/style:

- Typically, publications request submissions to be double spaced, with the first lines of each paragraph indented.
- The convention for spaces between sentences is one, not two.
- Editors identify "talking head" syndrome as a lot of dialogue that is not broken up by action. I noted this and tried to suggest fixes for it throughout. The reason to watch out for it is that you want the reader to be able to visualize a scene as they're reading, and that's hard to do when you have disembodied voices going back and forth.

Things I wanted to know more about as a reader:

- How does Nepo's mother feel about him attempting his feat? You have a bit about her in the middle, but I wanted a little more. Since the story is from Nepo's point of view, you could do this simply by showing more of her reactions to him.
- Why is it so important to Nepo that he continue beating his own record?
- Why is he so driven that he has a voice inside his head urging him on? Does he want to prove something to his mother? Live up to his

grandfather's reputation? Did he ever meet his grandfather? Does the voice actually belong to his grandfather?

You don't need to spell out these answers for the reader, but some hints about them would help round out your characters.

Finally, I encourage you to take a look at the ending. As it is now, the ending doesn't quite feel as full as the rest of the story. I felt I was left dangling a bit. Again, you don't need to wrap anything up with a bow; I'm thinking more that you might want to include a vivid image at the end in addition to the dialogue.

Thanks for the opportunity to give feedback, and feel free to get in touch if you have questions: ackalman@gmail.com

Best,

Audrey

The Boy Wonder

By Kevin Sugar

Formatted: Centered

"If you add the fifth chair the crowds will go wild."

Nepo, the little boy wonder, stood looking at his collection of chairs. "Easy for you to say."

Comment [AK1]: Putting this right after an action by Nepo tells the reader Nepo is speaking. Then it doesn't matter so much that we don't yet know who the second voice belongs to.

"Funny! Look, what's going to separate you from everyone else?"

"Broken bones?"

"Cute!"

"I've never gone past three."

"Do it now!"

Nepo, ~~the little boy wonder~~, stopped arguing, ~~stopped thinking~~ and started building ~~his chair tower.~~ ~~Upon the base chair Nepo placed the second cha~~He inverted ~~the second chair on top of the first~~ so ~~that~~ the two chairs formed a box. ~~Nepo extended the length of his arm to slowly lift the third chair into place.~~ The second chair ~~must had to~~ hold the weight of the tower from the very base of the chair legs. ~~He slowly lifted the third chair into place~~ Gently, after he placed the third ~~chair~~, position~~ing ite~~d perfectly atop the outstretched legs of the second. ~~Then~~ Nepo ~~nonchalantly climbed down the tower~~ ~~just to~~ ~~just~~ within reach of the fourth chair. ~~There he and then he~~ stopped.

"I've never gone past three."

"With no guts, there can be no glory!"

"Right..."

~~Stretching out w~~With his free hand, the little boy wonder took ~~a~~hold of the final chair and hoisted it up onto his shoulder. ~~He scaled-climbed~~ back up to the top chair as ~~easily as~~ if he were ~~climbing-scaling~~ a ladder. ~~Nepo~~ ~~He~~ paused.

Comment [AK2]: It might be nice to add a brief description of what the chairs look like, again so the reader can visualize. Also, you might want to place him somewhere—like in his bedroom.

Comment [AK3]: Presenting dialogue in this way can be challenging for readers because 1) they don't know who is speaking and 2) there are no clues to help them visualize the scene. (Sometimes editors call this the "talking head" problem).
It took me about halfway through the story to realize that the italicized voice was actually (I think) a voice inside Nepo's head. If you want to stay subtle about it, you could simply remove the quotation marks from around the interior voice and have it remain italicized, which is the convention for interior voices. I think that would help.
I've also suggested some ways to break up the dialogue with scene/action to help keep the reader more engaged.

Comment [AK4]: I'm having trouble visualizing how he is building the tower while standing on it.

Concentrate, Nepo!

"You think."

"Hold it steady."

"I am."

Leaning into and over the third chair, Nepo methodically rotated the fourth chair ~~loosely to 180 degrees.~~ Then, ever so slowly, he placed ~~the fourth chair up~~ upon the seat of the third, inverted, and checked the corners to see if they were flush. With a smile of triumph stretching across his face, Nepo grabbed ~~ahold of~~ two of the four legs of the ~~fourth top chair and.~~ He lowered his head, arched his body, and brought his legs slowly up ~~and~~ into a relaxed handstand. He held it above the imagined crowd of kids screaming his name as he performed for them in his elementary school talent show.

"Hold still!"

"Mmm."

~~Then~~ Nepo moved his body back down the exact path he ~~took had taken~~ up into the handstand, landing like a feather ~~onto his the~~ toes, ~~of first~~ one foot and then the other. ~~Then h~~ He leaned ~~just enough~~ over the center of gravity ~~just enough~~ to begin his descent. ~~Dropping each chair onto the floor softened by pillows, Nepo soon stood amongst his chairs and pillows.~~ His heart was racing.

"I did it!" ~~Nepo dropped each chair onto the floor softened by pillows and stood among them.~~

"Of course you did it. I know you better than you know yourself. For the show, add the fifth chair."

Comment [AK5]: I'm not sure how to read this—is it supposed to be sarcastic, like, "ya think?" It's a little confusing.

Comment [AK6]: Too many "thens" are distracting and you don't need them.

Comment [AK7]: Trying to add more action among the dialogue to help the reader get a better sense of the scene.

“Slave driver.”

“~~Hmm!~~—~~You haven’t even begun to reach your full potential.~~”

“Good grief.” ~~Neпо’s heart was racing.~~

~~His mother’s voice reached him from downstairs.~~ “Neпо, we’re going to be late!”

“Okay, Mom, ~~I’m I was~~ just warming up.—Are the chairs in the car?”

“Yes ~~Son~~.—Now, let’s go.”

“~~Bring the sixth chair.~~”

Neпо’s ~~Mmom~~ walked up the ~~stairwell stairs~~ to her son’s room, ~~where Neпо was~~ ~~just opening~~ his door with two wooden chairs slung over his shoulder.—“Hey, Mom.”

“~~Neпо~~, I already put five chairs into the station wagon.” ~~Neпо’s mom shook her head as she contemplated the chairs.~~

“Can we fit these two, Mom?”

“Of course we can ~~Son~~, but that’s a lot of chairs ~~Son~~.”

“~~Mom~~, I just want them there for effect.—You know, ~~the possibility.~~—Just in case.”

“—“The possibility?—You’re truly a showman.”

“Oh, ~~Mom~~, never mind.—Just help me with these chairs, please.”

“~~That-a-boy!~~

~~The tAs the two descended the stairs, well Neпо’s mother asked,~~ “How do you feel ~~Son?~~” ~~Neпо’s mother asked.~~

“Excited.—Did you remember the ~~pole?~~—I mean, I can climb down each time but it’s so much better when you can just hand them to me.”

“I have it in the car, ~~h-Honey.~~”

Comment [AK8]: For realistic dialogue, leave out the character names. Most people don’t address people they are talking to by name (or do it very occasionally).

Comment [AK9]: Using simple past tense instead of past progressive will make the prose stronger.

Comment [AK10]: I don’t remember the pole making an appearance after this.

~~"I feel great Mom,~~ My practice went well and I balanced on ~~4-four~~ chairs. ~~—~~ I was only going to do three for the show which of course was my max until, you know, I balanced the final chair."

Comment [AK11]: Removed this because it sounds odd that he is responding to a question he already answered a couple sentences ago.

~~—~~ "Four chairs? ~~Y~~Nepe, you balanced ~~atop-on-top-of~~ four chairs? ~~—~~ Your grandfather would be proud." ~~—~~ Nepe had been born into a family of tightrope walkers and stunt performers.

Nepe's mom opened the back of the station wagon. "Do you want burritos or Chinese food tonight ~~Son?~~"

"Something light, ~~tonight Mom,~~ ~~y~~ou know ~~—~~ the show."

~~Mother and Son~~ Nepe and his mother arrived at the school and unloaded the chairs from the back of the wagon. ~~—~~ "How many chairs do you want me to bring in ~~Nepe?~~"

"Bring them all, ~~Nepo.~~"

"Better bring them all ~~Mom.~~"

"But that's seven chairs! ~~Nepe.~~ ~~—~~ Didn't you just tell me that four was your new max? ~~—~~"

"Yeah I know, Mom, but you never know. ~~—~~ Just be ready with them all ~~okay,~~ just in case."

"What ever you say, ~~Son.~~ ~~—~~ His mother never asked how many chairs Nepe would be climbing, something they'd agreed on when he was just starting out. "Let's see if there ~~'is~~ a trolley-dolly available so we can'to bring them in all at once. ~~Oh,~~ there's one." She looked around the parking lot.

~~She never asked Nepo how many chairs he'll be climbing, she never does.~~
~~Something they agreed on when he was just starting out. His mom, being an elite~~
~~trapeze artist in her own right understood the need for focus. Nepo was born into a~~
~~family of tightrope walkers and stunt performers.~~ Margerie Truedoe Solidad, an
elite trapeze artist in her own right, was proud of her young son's passion to
perform. His obsession with balancing is was a gift from his great-grandfather, the
Great Truedoe, the only man to ever stand atop ten10 chairs and. T the only
performer of his age to balance 10 ten chairs atop on one another. O, only he never
performed the feat in front of a live audience, for he was tragically afraid of large
crowds.

From back stage, Nepo heard The elementary school auditorium grew louder
as students and families began to arrive. ~~Nepo was back stage getting ready.~~

Nepo, you brought all seven chairs. Good!

"Good? More like stupid."

"If you do what you should do, you'll knock them dead. Nepo, knock them dead!"

"Uh, a dead audience? Won't get much applause"

"You know what I mean."

"Well, I'm only doing four and no more!"

"You'll do what I tell you to do."

"I don't always."

"Aren't you the first act?"

"Yes, when the curtains open it will be show time."

"They won't know what hit them."

“Hopefully not one of my chairs.”

~~The curtain lifted and the emcee announced.~~ “Neopolitan Truedoe V, the boy who can ~~balance.~~”

Nepo held the fourth chair just above the third as he searched for that center of gravity upon which he would lock the world together, ~~setting the chair in place.~~ His nerves reached out and felt for ~~that perfect~~ that balance. Suddenly, like a ~~warm~~ elixir flowing through his body, like a fire burning from within, Nepo ~~knew he was~~ ~~there~~ felt the certainty of knowing he was at ~~in~~ the center of ~~the his~~ universe ~~within~~ ~~which he operated.~~ He balanced on the fourth chair and ~~then he~~ closed his eyes.

“One more!”

Nepo’s heartbeat increased at the prospect of a fifth chair. “I’m not ready.”

“Yes Nepo, the fifth chair.”

“I’ve never gone past four.”

“Do it!”

Nepo pointed down to the fifth chair. ~~The crowd of adults and children held their collective breath,~~ ~~unbelieving.~~ His mother stared at her son ~~deeply~~, but Nepo just pointed again ~~yelling and yelled~~, “Chair!”

~~Unsure of what to do~~ ~~Apprehensively~~, she handed the chair up to the limit of her reach. ~~Nepo took a hold of~~ ~~grabbed~~ the chair, simultaneously rising from where he sat. ~~He held the fifth chair in place.~~ ~~A hush came over the audience of hundreds~~

Comment [AK12]: I added a section break because there is a time shift here, from the announcement to the middle of his act.

that had gathered to watch something ~~not never before~~ performed ~~before~~ in this auditorium and ~~certainly~~ not by a ~~young~~ boy of ~~10~~ten.

You know what you are doing!

"Do I?"

"It's the same as the first."

"Except that it ~~is not~~'t.—I'm scared."

"There is a sixth.—It's there, Nepo, there in front of you."

"You mean below me."

"Add the sixth!"

An instant later Nepo, ~~the boy wonder, then~~ gently placed the fifth chair, above ~~all~~ the rest and it too stuck, perfectly in balance.—Then, as if in a trance, Nepo drew in his breath ~~and, w~~With the resolute attention of a soldier, he pointed to the sixth chair, ~~yelling down to his mother,~~ "Chair!"

Margerie, under~~standing the moment~~his need for focus, ~~She~~ pulled one of the ~~awaiting~~remaining chairs over to stand on.—~~S, and~~he lifted the sixth chair up to her little boy who ~~was awaiting~~accepted it like a crown.—~~Nepo accepted the sixth chair.~~Inch by tiny inch the boy wonder leveled the sixth chair perfectly in balance with the tower.—Without looking down, Nepo placed his right hand ~~onto~~ the back of the sixth chair and his left hand ~~onto~~ the seat ~~of it.~~—He slowly pushed his body up, into his signature handstand.—~~From his upside-down vantage point, he F~~inally ~~seeing~~saw the crowd of people below.—He released his right hand, balancing completely on his left hand.

"Oh my gosh."

Comment [AK13]: I don't think he needs to yell again—I think she would know exactly what he wants.

"Hold steady."

"I can't!"

"Hold steady, Nepo.—You're going to fall!"

"Nothing can stop that now."

The crowd below began to scream.

"Nepo!"

"You pushed me too far ..."

Comment [AK14]: There is so much tension in this story! I feel like the ending needs to have a bit more substance to balance out (no pun intended) the emotional weight of the rest. I like stories that end with a strong visual image, and this one is perfect to set that up. Nothing vague or too long—just a few sentences that really burns the picture of Nepo into the reader's mind. Some options:

- From Nepo's point of view, what it looks and feels like as he is about to lose his balance

- Something from his mother's POV ("From a few feet away, Nepo's mother watched as her son's slim body seemed to vibrate, then tilted to one side, and finally...")

- Something from the crowd's POV