

## February 2003 La Isla Formosa

The banner at the arrival gate of Chang Kai Shek Memorial Airport in Taipei declared: "Welcome to Taipei! Drug Trafficking is Punishable by Death in the People's Republic of China." The few Chinese voices I had heard on the last leg of the flight multiplied into a throng. Bodies were rushing in every direction, cutting in line, bumping into me. I still felt nauseous from landing and thought I might throw up - instead, I dropped my passport and customs papers. Sing-song Mandarin rang out over the sound system, welcoming new arrivals. I looked around for the queue, and realized there wasn't one. I joined the wave of people being herded to the appropriate counters, to have passports stamped and papers checked; the customs officer took his time looking at mine.

Next the crowd spilled out into the main luggage terminal, where everyone pushed and shoved until they could see the bags coming down the chute. The crowd was so thick around the baggage carousel that I decided to hang back until it thinned. My suitcases must have done several laps by the time I claimed them.

I pushed my overloaded cart towards the doors of the main lobby. My stomach grumbled and I thought about what I might be eating for dinner that night - noodles would be safe to settle the nausea, or rice, perhaps.

I tripped the automatic switch and the doors flew open to fluorescent lights and dozens – no - hundreds of people waving signs and yelling in their mother tongue. I blinked, momentarily blinded. I felt as though I were on stage, in the spotlight. One of the busiest traveling weekends of the year - the end of Chinese New Year - always brought a fresh crop of foreign English teachers to Taipei. And every taxi driver in the city was there to meet us.

"Nihao! Nihao! Laoshi!" (for they just assumed I was another teacher).

They waved their school signs in my face as I slowly moved down the aisle, looking for the one that read, "Jennifer American School."

Finally, I found the sign - it was being held by a diminutive man in a dark suit, hat and white gloves. He smiled a wide, toothless grin. "Nihao ma? How are you, miss? You need washroom? One hour's drive. It's there. (he pointed). I take your bags."

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My already overworked paranoia told me not to give up my bags (which currently contained everything I needed in life for one year), but I was too tired to care.

The taxi would take me directly to the school, to meet my new employers – who had also sponsored my work permit to enter the country. I needed to make a good impression: thirty-five was the cut-off age for teachers at this elite institution, and I was afraid I looked more like fifty after the 24-hour journey- I certainly felt like it.

I smelled the ladies' room before I entered it. Thinking one of the toilets must be backed up, I bypassed my nose and breathed through my mouth. That's when I saw another sign: "Please to not put paper in toilet. Use bin on floor." Some cheeky bugger had changed the 'on' to 'or' - a foreigner, no doubt. Funny, even with all my research, I did not know you couldn't flush toilet paper in Taiwan. Maybe Dubai would have been the better choice...

I combed through my head of tangled, squashed curls, reapplied deodorant, brushed my teeth and reapplied mascara and lip gloss. I had showered and changed into light khakis and a cotton shirt after my overnight stopover in Japan so you couldn't really tell - except for the dark circles under my eyes - that I had been travelling for more than 24 hours. I headed toward the exit doors, where the taxis were lining up to collect their clients. As the doors slid open, a wall of wet heat smashed into my face and sucked the air out of my lungs. Toothless taxi-man turned to look at me as I nestled into the dingy, lace-covered back seat and let out a big sigh of comfort. "You like Lee-Ann Rimes, yeah? I play for you. Close eyes now. Sleep."

And they said there was no country music in Taipei. I ignored the gnawing ache in my belly, and set my mind to embracing the adventure that surely lay ahead in this farthest of possible destinations.

*Are you really going to follow him to Asia?*

*You're going to teach English in Taiwan for a year. Sure it's a great idea. For someone with no kids.*

*Where are you digging to in that sandbox, honey? Watch out or you'll end up in China...*

A smoggy haze hung over the city, giving everything an orange pallor. The last thing I saw before sleep was gravestones climbing a misty hillside.