

My Life in a Suitcase

By Jessa Iles

I was twenty-one when I left my country to work abroad. I brought a fancy zebra-striped suitcase as heavy as stones. It was chubby when full of my stuff, as if I was staying out of the country for the rest of my life. The day before my flight, it was raining and I fantasized about being a traveler, for in a short narrow hallway of our house, I dragged my suitcase behind me and practiced how to use its handle. I waddled along the hallway in between the kitchen and living room holding all my luggage as I carried it up through the two steps to my bedroom. While I was busy as a bee, my mother reminded me of bringing a winter jacket and explained that the country has a winter season. I was young and didn't know what else to prepare. I only cared about my new suitcase with lots of pockets: it looked strong, it smelled like happiness, and it sounded like joy. I was totally fascinated.

Even though I was jumping for joy to leave, my heart was also mourning, for I would be bringing past family memories all together in a suitcase. As I kept adding things inside my suitcase, I realized I was also putting the clothes that my sister and I shared and noticed the blanket that my mother sewed for me. At the time my family was ready, my father and brothers alternately carried the suitcase to the van and to the airport. All of them touched my very own suitcase and left their handprints on it. My suitcase was thankful, for it was surrounded with supportive people and was ready to embrace the changes this fast-moving world would throw its way.

Finally, in a crowded area of Davao International Airport, I rushed into the bathroom adjacent to the departure area and surprisingly cried. My thoughts of missing my hometown and family was a storm, unexpected. I fixed my hair and wiped my tears and said that I needed to do this. I had to leave and work for my family, who back then never had experienced a better life. The difficult condition sent me to work far away carrying hope and determination to fulfill the dreams I had for them. I told myself I can do it. I am a Filipino.

Thrall acknowledges, “Filipinos are determined to work abroad” (18). I was determined that I could make my family live a better life and help develop my country. Thrall argues that Filipinos get paid very low in the Philippines and the money they send home from working abroad helps the country's economy (18).

On the journey over to Taiwan, I began to wonder what it would be like. I wondered how people would treat me. I would feel strange to live and work in the house of my employer. I suddenly saw the seatbelt sign blinking and heard the pilot's loud voice reminding us to fasten our seatbelts while experiencing turbulence. His voice was like music to my ears; I wondered if pilots are also DJs. I joked to myself and laughed in the sea of sadness.

When I arrived and looked through the window, I saw this beautiful foreign country. My sadness was replaced with excitement. It was the cleanest, colorful, and the most immense airport I had ever seen. People were busy moving in different directions as I was struggling to hold all of my stuff. Immediately, I saw an agent in a white jag shirt smiling, holding a small white poster with my name on it, and he was waving his hand at me. He took me to a bus full of workers from Vietnam, China, Indonesia, Thailand and other neighboring countries of Taiwan. I

heard different languages spoken when I was entering but never understood them. I thought nobody knew English, for none of them ever spoke a word nor looked at me after I said hi to everyone. After a long hour, the bus dropped me off in Taipei, and the agent guided me to the restaurant of my employer. I noticed my suitcase was getting tired of the travel, or maybe it was I who couldn't bear the hours of this unending journey.

As soon as I met my lady employer, she quickly took my things away and asked me to start working. My suitcase was taken and thrown away on the floor by her violent hands. I never thought I will be working fifteen hours a day with no rest days and communicating with sign language, for none of the others spoke English. I saw her yelling and throwing plates at the cooks for missing orders and being verbally abusive to the work staff. Jung explains, “Taiwanese eatery owners have poor management, personnel problems, and inexperience dealing with their employees due to inept business skills and decision-making” (17).

My employers never cared even the days I was sick working long hours. A day of rest that I requested was never given. I spent my nights laying my head on my suitcase, wishing for the pain to vanish. After a long ten months of sacrifices being treated like other employees, I packed my things and was ready to go home. As I closed the empty cabinets in my room, I stared at my suitcase. The dirty looking suitcase had had enough: the life it represented—my life’s journey filled with opportunities, hardships, heartaches and sometimes incredible cruelty—was ready to end its suffering and to go to a much nicer place to rest and rebuild strength.

At last, when the plane landed and the seatbelt light turned off, I took my suitcase with a smile on my face, bringing hope back to the people who cared for me. I came back and arrived to

a very homely airport where I recognized the voices I heard and enjoyed the honking of cars, jeepneys, and trucks outside the building. Opposite to me, I saw six excited people waiting outside the building. My mom ran towards me and gave me lots of love.

My family offered to help carry my things. My sister noticed the handle of my suitcase was broken. Dad said not to worry for I was home now, safe and sound. My mother told me while she was holding my hands that, in time, this broken suitcase would be replaced with a new one and it would begin traveling to its next journey without getting hurt, for she would buy me a sturdy one.

“New hope, new plans!” my Dad added with his loving smile and a sweet tap of his hand on my back.

Works Cited

Jung, John. "The Sour Side of Chinese Restaurants." *Chinese American Forum* 29.1

(2013): 17-22. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 7 Nov. 2013.

Thrall, Teresa Hudson. "Visas Nearing Cap." *H&HN: Hospitals & Health Networks* 80.9

(2006): 18-20. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 6 Nov. 2013.