

Arrivals

by Kristi Lanier

It had been building for days as our departure date neared — that panic that headquarters itself in your gut and commandeers your adrenaline, shooting it relentlessly all the way to your fingertips. You can twist and turn and try to get comfortable, but it dogs you.

It reached its peak the morning before as we said our last see-you-laters to our cat and finally my parents, who faithfully waved from the other side of airport security until the terminal angled us out of view.

Sixteen hours in transit dulled the panic to a stomach-clenching nervousness, like an invisible internal hand squeezing my stomach and periodically giving it a nice hard twist.

I had no one to blame but myself. A bee had lodged itself in my bonnet sometime in college, I guess. I wanted to live overseas; my husband entertained an interest in doing the same. But life had its detours and neither of us had gotten there yet. When my job was phased out and his came to a crossroads, we said, “Let’s do it.” That’s when he realized I wasn’t talking about Paris, and I realized he was. We settled on Shanghai, the “Paris” of the East.

Now, I’m usually territorial during the deplaning jostle, being a bit of a wait-your-turn vigilante who derives perverse pleasure in waylaying those crafty few who cut and push and dart just to win a few spots further up in the exit line. But today I fiddled and puttered and adjusted my straps while cutters and pushers and darters went unapprehended. The back of the plane emptied, people flowed past, and I didn’t try to stop them. With straps calibrated, hair smoothed, pants zipper checked and rechecked, I finally had nothing left to do but suck in my breath, let it out and move into the aisle. There would be a finality in stepping through the plane’s door. A symbolic sealing of my fate. Time stops for no man — least of all for one holding up flight attendants ready to clock out.

Each time I find myself in an anxiety-riddled situation, I swear I’ll never do anything that causes it again. As we straggled toward customs, I renewed my vows. “I’ll settle down. I’ll content myself with travel magazines. Just please make this feeling go away.” But time dulls the intestine-grabbing misery and makes you forget. Doubtless, I’ll do it again.

For now, my whole being tingled with unpleasantness. My husband and I had no jobs and no housing. We had one Chinese phrasebook, the proceeds from the sale of my car, and one local contact — Willie, the nephew of a friend of a friend. He had kindly made a booking at a local Chinese hotel for our first night. But standing in line at passport control it felt like we still had another ocean to cross before we made it to that hotel. The plane ride was the easy part. I knew how to ride on a plane. What I didn’t know was how we would struggle our four large bags into a taxi — if Shanghai even had taxis large enough, the guidebook didn’t say — then plop out in some neighborhood, conspicuous as hippos, with those same four large bags and struggle into a hotel that may or may not be mature enough to cope with confused foreigners. All that, plus we had to successfully communicate our destination first.

In an email, Willie mentioned he might be able to meet us at the airport. I prayed he would be there.

Some people relish the unknown. I like it, too — when it involves surprise parties or a beautifully wrapped gift. But what I've always wished was that I could be one of those wild adventurers to whom "mistake" isn't a concept. You know, the kind who just plop themselves anywhere, the kind who are naturally confident in their ability to sort out whatever they're confronted with, the kind who let life happen and don't overthink everything. The kind who just don't seem to get so nervous. Me, I could never quite turn off the ever-logical voice of my father and supra-detailed nature of my mother inhabiting my head. "Does that make sense? Can you justify it? What about this? Did you think about that?" (Despite the occasional bouts of uptightness I inherited from them, my parents are two of my most favorite people in the world.)

At baggage claim, we watched bag after bag (except ours) join the happy ring-around-the-rosy on the carousel. When only a handful of us remained, I turned to a lone woman beside me. "Pretty slow, huh?" I said. "Yeah, everybody's got their bags, but me," she agreed, tilting her head toward a waiting group. Damn, I thought, deflating. She has a safety net. I had been reaching out, past reason, scrabbling for one of those convenient miracles where someone on the edge of disaster is saved by serendipity.

What, was this woman at baggage claim suddenly going to offer me a job and I wouldn't have to wonder what would happen tomorrow, the next day, the next month in this unknown city? We chatted a bit more. She was in Shanghai on business. I eagerly told her how we were planning a long-term stay and weren't quite sure what would happen. "How exciting," she said. A kind response. "Ah, there it is!" the woman cried out, rushing to the belt and grabbing her case. She set it on the ground and pulled up the handle with a satisfied snap. She turned. "Good luck, have a great time!" And walked away.

My husband was a few paces to the left, leaning on a luggage cart, lost in his own contemplations. The conveyor belt click, click, clicked. I watched the same green bag make another circuit and looked back at him. Still lost.

Finally, one black duffel and then another tumbled out and my stomach unclenched for a moment. When the last backpack squirted onto the belt I wanted to grab it and shake it, like a terrified mother. "Don't you ever, EVER run off on me like that again!" Our lives for the next year were packed in those bags.

There was nothing left to do now but leave. We wheeled the cart toward the frosted glass of the exit, my husband pushing, me with a hand atop the load for balance. The exit opened upon a flock of Chinese jostling like ostriches behind a barrier, name placards poking above the pressing bodies like the birds' long, thin necks. We walked slowly, searching for our names, hoping Willy would be there, but never speaking of it. We didn't want to have to openly acknowledge our disappointment if we didn't find him, maintaining a veneer of toughness even with each other.

The exit queue deposited us in the middle of the arrival terminal corridor, amid a jumble of reunion. Again, without words, we both paused, ostensibly to readjust the load on the cart and get our bearings. Perhaps Willie would find us. "Well, let's go," I said, finally. We started slowly toward the doors, swatting at disorienting taxi touts. "Taxi? Taxi? Where you go? Taxi?" they buzzed. Then, suddenly, there was an official taxi line and someone ushered us with a wave to a van. The driver took my scrap of paper with the hotel's name and the address in pinyin. "Wuding Lu, Taixing Lu!" There was discussion, but not with us. The trunk slammed and doors slid shut and then we were driven away. An hour later, we plopped out just as conspicuous as I'd feared. A figure materialized and helped us struggle our bags inside. Another 10 minutes later we were in a room.

I sat down on the edge of the bed, the mattress as hard as a park bench, and looked around the tiny room. I stretched my leg out from the end of the bed and touched the wall with my foot. This could be my home for a while, I thought. I got up and peered down at the street. A group of fierce-looking locals clustered around a small table, playing cards. Next to them, a ragged bike repair shop lit by a single fluorescent bulb was still taking customers at 10 pm. The proprietor hunched over a bike, looking thin and hard. Across the street, a convenience store lit up the entire corner giving it a harsh glow.

From my fourth-floor perch, everything looked mean and hungry. The phone rang. My husband looked at me. "Should I answer it?" he asked. "Yeah, I guess," I said. "Hello? Oh, hi!" It was Willie, checking to see if we'd made it okay. He had an extra room at his place he was looking to rent out, he said. He'd pick us up tomorrow morning to have a look and show us around the city. "Thanks, great, see you tomorrow" and my husband hung up the phone.

I looked down at the street again. The card players around the table were laughing and talking, a woman stood in front of the bike shop cradling a baby, a couple emerged from the convenience store holding hands. In my tiny room, I drew the curtains closed and finally, stopped thinking.