

The Journey Home

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The afternoon flight from Nashville to San Francisco on March 21st was departing in half an hour, but there were only six other people at the gate.

Two of them were L and Z, my friends, and one was W, my boyfriend. L's luggage, in addition to the protective clothing he was wearing, included a backpack and a plastic bag the size of a suitcase. He explained with a wry smile that he chose a plastic bag for his clothes to avoid the hassle of checking baggage at connecting airports.

W and Z had a project due over the next two days. Wearing goggles and masks, they were busy typing code.

The boarding process was brief. The flight had no more than ten passengers. Because of the outbreak, the same flight over the last two days had been cancelled. The cabin was almost empty. The stewardess's passionate safety demonstration seemed strange with almost no audience.

The Nashville sunset was unaffected by the abnormal atmosphere. The setting sun was bright and warm behind thin clouds. The skyline settled from a mix of pale pink, blue, and orange into a deep blue as we flew behind the coming of night. The warm orange became tinged with red and turned to a slender line in the distance as it was gradually submerged in the darkening sky.

This was a race against the virus. Our 47-hour journey home had only just begun.

Two weeks ago, I thought the suspension of classes would be a kind of vacation. However, the "until further notice" in the chancellor's email to students made me anxious; as an international student, I had nowhere to go.

Even though the school said it would let us know about new arrangements, I didn't get anything done the afternoon I got that email. I wondered if I should rent near campus or return to China. I tried to convince myself to settle down and study, but my anxious sense of uncertainty would not subside.

I decided to call my mother to see what she thought.

"My main concern is that it won't be safe for you to fly back. After all, you would stay in a closed environment for more than ten hours on the flight. If there is an infected person on the plane, you would be easily infected. Why don't we wait and see? Staying in school until the end of the semester doesn't affect you too much, and specific policies will come out."

Her words calmed me down, but no one could predict the future. No one could know whether I would be able to get home by the end of the semester.

That is what W was worried about. He insisted that I should go back to China with him as soon as possible. He believed that this would be our only chance to go back, that the skyrocketing number of cases of COVID-19 both in Nashville and nationwide would prevent it later.

Our disagreement on this matter led to the first tense conversation we'd had since we met.

"Even if I get infected on the way home, I can get the care I need. Isn't that better than staying here and living in uncertainty?" W said.

I admitted that he had a point, but I still answered, "But the incubation period of the virus is at least 14 days, and it hasn't even been a week since the first case appeared, during spring break..."

He looked straight at me and said, "After the incubation period, people will report more and more. When the numbers grow, will you dare to leave? Will flights be restricted? Will cities be closed?"

His stream of rhetorical questions showed that he had reached the limit of his restraint. After he finished his questions, he realized this and said no more.

Over the next few days, we avoided direct confrontation on this matter, although I sometimes heard him complain, "I'd like to go home now..."

W always takes me into account, but I was still hesitating. I tried to negotiate with my mother again, but she mentioned the problem of my student visa status. She was afraid that if I left school, I would be unable to get back to study in the fall.

My mother and W pulled me toward two extremes, tearing me apart. The other students made firm decisions quickly, no matter they choose to go or stay, while I was standing still. Every minute, every second, bursts of new information kept me in a maze. I was in a storm of information, but I couldn't find any piece that was really useful. I'd never thought that uncertainty could be so powerful—and I knew that the virus was approaching.

I couldn't reconcile the opposing arguments because they were based on assumptions about an uncertain future. They both hinged on the unknowable. I tried to tell myself that neither choice was perfect, but neither was terrible; all I had to do was make a decision.

My anxiety increased with the rapid sell-out of non-stop flights from the United States to China and the Chinese government's awareness of the seriousness of the increase in imported cases. My flight options were narrowed to indirect flights.

I began to worry that ticket prices would grow exorbitantly and that flights might be restricted. I called my mother again to persuade her to buy a ticket for March 28th. It would leave two weeks after Spring Break and did not interfere with my visa's "five-month" rule. Without an explicit reason to refuse, she offered a compromise.

"Let's just keep that as an option," she said. I felt like I was hearing this from myself, and it gave me an excuse to delay my decision again.

I was relieved for a day or two, but a wave of flight cancellations began in mid-March. This was the situation that W had foreseen. Finally, I decided to go home. I bought a ticket for a flight from San Francisco to Shanghai through Taipei.

We got to San Francisco in the evening, and our next flight would take off at half past midnight. The only restaurant open in the airport served Japanese noodles. It was full of people, mostly Asian-looking, who took off their masks to eat and talk quietly.

W and I hadn't eaten anything on the last flight since we didn't dare take off our masks for too long. W said he would get us food. I lugged my suitcase to an empty spot, wiped down the table and chairs with alcohol swabs, and took off my mask. W came back with the order.

"Have you finished your coding project?" I asked.

"No." W's voice was low. He had taken off his mask.

"Are you stuck on anything?"

He looked tired. "I haven't even finish reading the project directions."

"After getting on the plane, get a good night's sleep," I said.

I knew that W likes to dig into whatever he doesn't understand. It would be torture for him to do the project on the bumpy plane—but he wouldn't complain.

The longest voyage was yet to come. It was 11:30 pm. We finished our dinner, put on new masks, and headed for the gate.

Airline personnel at the counter near the gate were getting passengers formal boarding passes and doing temperature checks. There weren't many seats left. After these formalities, the four of us chose to sit separately to give everyone room.

After we boarded, there was an empty seat between me and W. He spread across two seats to lie down. I was so tired that I leaned against the window and fell fast asleep.

The plane's engines were loud and woke me several times. I'd been struggling with the mask. I instinctively wanted to take it off, but my fear of the virus forced me to endure. After 10 hours of fitful sleep, I woke with a headache. The pain prevented any effort to think. Seeing me uncomfortable, W sat up to work on his project and let me lie down.

W did not rest well either. I detected the light of his computer screen while I was trying to sleep. I didn't get any food on the plane. Maybe W refused it for me to let me rest, or maybe the stewardess decided not to disturb me.

When I dragged myself off the plane, it was 5:30 am in Taipei.

The airport lights were so bright that I couldn't keep my eyes completely open. I was jostled by the crowd as I made my way to the security check for my transferring flight. Three men with cameras and a microphone stood at the other end of the conveyor belt. As I walked past, I instinctively looked away.

I knew who they were targeting: international students, as people who stood between two countries during the epidemic, tired and panicking. On one side, our home country's social media wanted to keep us away, for we could bring the virus back; on the other, the foreign land wasn't a home where we could stay. This was a difficult problem for us. We had been branded as people coming from a high-risk country.

The man with the microphone asked the three men behind me, "Would you mind telling us where you were before arriving here?"

"The United States," someone replied.

"Do you know that today is the last transferring flight day in Taipei?"

"Yes..."

I didn't listen to any more, drawn to a board with flight information. The flight status column was almost all in red alert, indicating that flights had been cancelled.

Our flight to Shanghai was in the afternoon, which meant that we had to stay at the airport for about 10 hours. I stared at the board and found that a noon flight was the latest one shown. We wouldn't be seeing our gate information for a while.

"Our flight hasn't been canceled, has it?" I asked my friends.

Z checked his phone. “Nope.”

I remained unsettled, but I hadn’t eaten on the plane, and I was hungry. The airport was deserted in the early morning, except for the few arriving passengers. We ate at a restaurant, filling our bellies after more than ten hours of starving.

L was taking an earlier flight, so he left us. W and Z were still struggling with their project, with only a day or so left before the deadline. W said he had finally gotten through the instructions. I, too, had work to do, online courses which I had fallen behind on over the last few days.

At noon, we got confirmation from the airline counter that our flight would be on schedule. We waited, and when the time came, we did our temperature checks, boarded the plane, and filled out our health declarations in our seats.

It was 6 pm when we finally got to Shanghai. The plane underwent a COVID-19 security check for about an hour. Then, at the arrival level, we had to stand in line to present our health declaration forms and have our temperatures checked by airport staff wrapped in protective clothing. We stood there for nearly an hour.

“Are you sure no one you know has COVID-19?” the agent asked, reviewing my form. He eventually put a yellow tag on my passport. It was 9 pm when it was all over.

It was time to say goodbye to W and Z, since we were heading to different cities. W needed to transfer to another airport, and I was going to the high-speed train station.

I thought W and I might have something ritualistic to say to each other in farewell, but we didn’t. The exhaustion of the last 20 hours had numbed me so much that I couldn’t feel sad.

I waved goodbye to W, and we were shunted in different directions. The staff took me to the quarantine area and collected my ticket information.

When I entered the temporarily designated quarantine area, there was hardly any room. There were several unused plastic chairs at the entrance, so I took three as a makeshift cot.

It was 11 pm, time to get some rest. My train ticket was for the next morning at six. I estimated that the staff would call my name around four for a shuttle to the station.

The area was not quiet. Passengers chatted with people at neighboring tables, others already asleep in their own three-chair cots. The air conditioning was cold and kept me wide awake, so I pulled my only long-sleeved hoodie out.

I slept shallowly. The hard chair against my waist was uncomfortable. People were chatting nearby, and the staff kept shouting out names to take people to the shuttle bus.

Yes, everything was noisy, but people were speaking the language that I've spoken since I was a child, and staff in protective suits were working to maintain order. I knew that I wasn't far from home.

W woke me at 1 am. "Why are you here?" I asked, feeling lucky to see him again.

"I think everyone is gathered here. What matters is the time of their tickets," he explained, "Were there so many people when you came? I've been waiting in line for almost an hour." He shook his legs to relax his muscles.

"Nope. When staff led me here, I didn't need to wait in line," I replied. When I saw that he was not carrying any chairs, I offered him one of mine, and he sat down. "Do you want to lie down and sleep?" I moved my second chair toward him.

"Just a nap, not too long." He didn't want me to sleep with only one chair, but he seemed exhausted, as he had stayed up half the night with jet lag.

I sat in the remaining chair and reclined against my backpack, but I couldn't help secretly opening my eyes to see him. He was tall, and two chairs were not enough to support him. In order to balance his posture, he lay with his legs crossed. He usually sits like that when he is thinking. I smiled.

We were waiting for dawn. I opened my eyes often to check the time, hoping dawn would come more quickly than I thought. I tried to keep alert, fearing I would miss my name. It was hard, and we stayed like this until the staff shouted W's name at 3 am.

Even when given a second chance to say goodbye, we remained silent, maybe because he left so fast and we didn't have time to talk to each other. I didn't think about how I didn't know when we would see each other again.

At four, I finally caught the shuttle to the train station.

On board were people travelling from Shanghai to different cities. It was more comfortable on the bus because of the soft seats. Not long after we pulled onto the road, I fell asleep.

When I awoke, an hour had passed, and staff were confirming the name and ID number of every passenger. Then they ushered us into the station through a side entrance. After agents took our temperatures and recorded our whereabouts for the

last 14 days, I was led to a waiting area where people were gathered.

It was still dark at 5 am. My ticket was for the first train out of the station. The eyes of those in the waiting area soon turned toward our group, and it seemed that they had guessed that we came from the airport. As we approached, some of them immediately stepped away and began to whisper to each other. They looked at us with varying levels of disgust.

I understood why they did so. Once again, I was thrust into the middle of a paradox. All I could do was follow the rules and try to bring as little anxiety as possible to the people around me. In this epidemic, the virus not only makes people physically distant from each other, but also farther from understanding each other.

“These people are going to be on this train with us, aren’t they?” someone asked.

“Yes, but you can rest assured we will take care of them,” a staff member answered.

He spoke as fast as he could. “They won’t be in your compartment,” he added, perhaps to avoid follow-up questions.

I turned away. These words hurt.

Everyone in our group ended up in a separate compartment on the train, and the Neighborhood Committee took me to a hotel for 14-day self-quarantine. My mother stood outside the car and waved to me, but I was not allowed to open the car door. I gave her the “OK” sign from inside the car.

When I finally entered my hotel room, I was finally able to take off my mask. I looked at myself in the mirror. The mask had left red marks on my face. My skin was peeling after three days of not drinking enough water.

I washed my face and put on lotion. I wiped my suitcase down with disinfectant and took a shower.

W sent me a message to tell me that he’d finished his project. I was starting to miss him.

I received a notification about the other flight I had considered, the one on the 28th. It had been cancelled due to new flight restrictions. Indeed, I had been lucky to get a flight before all of this happened. Still, I couldn’t be confident that I had made the right choice; COVID-19 is itself unpredictable, and I couldn’t yet be sure whether my actions had protected or endangered me and the people around me. But in this time of no right answers, I knew that all that mattered was that I had done my best.

I had made it to my hometown, a small city in southern China. I couldn't say the weather was good, since the sun was obscured by thick clouds. But at least my lunch was seasoned with the special flavors of my city.

At the end of the journey home, I was simply hoping for fair weather and a good tomorrow, just like everyone else in the midst of this crisis.