

Cheers,
Beers,
and
Eastern Promise

Gerry Abbey

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DEDICATED TO

My parents and
siblings,
the Fulbright Program,
the Wang family,
and the village of Nanao.

Thank you for showing
me the value of love, life,
and living each day
to the fullest.

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1 TAIWAN, A BULLFIGHT, AND AN ABBEY

The clouds, once again, were below me. I was riding my motorcycle along the coastal Su Hua Highway in Yilan County. Following along the sheer cliffs, I passed through a light mist and gazed off into the deep blue waves below. The Pacific was churning as a thin, white froth highlighted the movements of the crashing waves. Even from my distant perch, I could see them.

They reminded me of my turbulent year. It had been a gauntlet of life-changing experiences amidst an attempt to transform myself: from student to teacher, child to adult, and partier to professional. At twenty-three, I had no idea how impossible my goals were. At thirty-two, it's far easier to understand my frustration at my inability to change – maturing takes years, not months.

But this was 2005, two weeks into June, and I was savoring a magnificent day for cruising along on the first vehicle I'd ever

owned and the first motorcycle I'd ever ridden: an eleven-year-old silver Honda – she was beautiful. We knew each other well and once again she was carrying me home.

It was six in the morning and I was driving along Route 9 from Luodong to Nanao, traversing the winding coast of stone and sand as I had so many times before. Looking out again, I saw the rising sun over the endless ocean and continued climbing higher up the mountains. The deafening winds began howling ever louder, seeping through my helmet, beneath my hair, and into my ears. A thirst began to grow as my lips caught that sweet sea salt that permeated the air.

Ahead, lush valleys rose to barren peaks, misty clouds rested upon naked roads, and blue skies patiently waited beyond it all. Crossing over the last crest, I could see my path. I was going home.

It was the end of my year as a Fulbright scholar in Taiwan. Living on an island between the South China Sea and the Pacific Ocean, I'd found the most learning-saturated twelve months of my life. Thinking back, it was odd that I'd even ended up in Taiwan. Before the previous summer, I'd never had much interest in traveling to Asia. But then I ran with the bulls in Pamplona and everything changed. I remember it vividly:

We stood on the racecourse – Rodney and I. Rodney was my best friend from study abroad in Seville, Spain. We traveled Europe that summer and found countless adventures, but nothing close to this as we waited in a crowd that was so dense we could hardly move. The run was about to start.

Pamplona is an old city. This run has been taking place since at least the 13th or 14th century. And the streets are anything but straight. Over roughly half a mile there are three hard turns where the bulls will often crash into the walls, or

anything in the way of those walls, as they turn. But this is far better than the runs of years ago. In those days, the bulls would run wild throughout the city.

Hitting curves, hitting walls, hitting runners, these bulls become increasingly more disoriented, infuriated, and retributive. After the last curve, there's a short straightaway. Encouraging? Comforting? No. Ter-ri-fy-ing. It acts as a funnel into the stadium and getting caught by the rampaging bulls in this stretch holds the highest likelihood of getting gored, trampled, or both. But making it through this last obstacle guarantees safety, as long as you can make it over a six-foot wooden wall to exit the arena grounds. Sweet safety.

Except for the abhorrent opportunity the arena offers. Everyone that completes the run has the chance to be a real, live matador in front of a packed stadium. And why not take advantage of it? Surviving the run instills a certain madness and invulnerability, and a complete resistance to the idea that something could go wrong. As the masses pushed forward, I reflected on this. My drunken haze and lack of sleep from the night before had not yet worn off.

Tremors. We started to feel slight tremors as we stood there. Suffocated by people, it was an all-consuming crowd. I felt like I was packed in a herd of lemmings. There was screaming. Some yelling. The tremors intensified. We literally felt the earth shake from nine tons of stampeding bull, and it was hauntingly *addictive*. I was smiling ear to ear. This had the potential to be the most thrilling moment of my life, although it also had the slight potential to be the last moment of my life. Fifteen people have died since the 1920's during the run and over two hundred people have sustained major injuries.

I was scared. But the rush was enthralling.

We started moving. Faster. Certainly not running. A leisurely jog. Then we slowed. And slowed some more before coming to a full halt. Then we heard screaming, yelling. Some “ohs” and “ahs” from a distant crowd. The pace quickened, this time with panic. But then everything quieted once more. Fear appeased. And the pace slowed again before stopping.

This was how it went for what seemed like an eternity. In reality, it was only a few minutes. We continued. We passed a turn. We saw the entrance to the stadium. Many people entered, but we waited. Rodney and I, and many others, stood against the walls and waited.

Apprehensively, we inched closer to the open gateway. Then we saw it – the mad rush of people stampeding towards us. It looked like Armageddon. It felt like Armageddon. The tremors were shaking us to the core. It was an earthquake. A force of God, a force of nature, and it was being simulated by savage beasts with horns lowered and hooves driving. Nine tons of destructive force turning the corner, sliding into the walls, and then coming right at us.

“Run!”

Mesmerized, Rodney’s call to movement was much appreciated.

“Yeah! Run!” I screamed as I propelled my legs and pumped my arms as fast as they would go. I’ve never pushed so hard for so short a distance in all my life. I felt every tendon – taut. I felt every muscle – crunching, contracting. I felt every breath – lungs expanding and exhaling. I felt a rush like nothing I’ve ever experienced. Stride after stride we pushed as the tremors increased.

“Get through the gate! Get through the gate!” I was just behind Rodney, screaming like a lunatic. We were in the most dangerous spot, penetrating the entryway with the first pack of bulls twenty feet behind us and closing. I could feel their hot, steaming breath. I could smell it. And it smelled awful!

At least I thought I could. Two more steps. One more step.

“Jump outta the way!” I forced out before breaking through the entrance to the stadium and diving safely to the side next to Rodney just before the bulls burst forth and trampled the people that hadn’t cleared the way. It was chaos. It was pandemonium. Bulls, people, everywhere I looked. It was *exhilarating*.

Before I knew it, we were sprinting around, dodging bulls, running behind them, smacking them with rolled up newspapers, and sprinting away. It was cruel, it was unusual, it was stupid, and it was mean. But having just escaped a goring, we felt entitled to have a little fun with our hunters as they ran head down through masses flicking horns, flicking bodies. They were flicking bodies through the air like *rag dolls*.

It was time to jump over the fence. Our moment as matadors was complete. We were up, over, and behind the walls in an instant. Stepping outside of the stadium and into the sunlight, we found a world brimming with vitality. The sun had never been so bright. The air had never been so crisp, so refreshing. Life took us to a different stage that day like nothing we’d ever felt. We were giants standing on top of the world. We could do anything. Limits? What limits? We’d just outrun the bulls that were trying to kill us. We’d survived. And not only had we survived, we were unscathed. Air pumping through our lungs. Blood pumping through our veins. Adrenaline circulating through every inch of our bodies, every inch of our souls.

Our minds were on fire.

This was life. I'd never felt so good.
I'd never felt so damn alive.

And then we met some fellow travelers, two friends that had been backpacking all summer together. Though enthused about the running, they were far more matter-of-fact about it than those around us. Intrigued by this, we asked how they were so calm. Their answer opened us to a new world as they unleashed stories from their trip through Asia. My twenty-two year old self was sold. That was where I was going next.

As this is a memoir, it's important for you as a reader to know who is telling the story. It's me, Gerry Abbey, and it's my great pleasure to meet you. Now before delving into Taiwan too much, I want to give you some information about my background so that you can better understand my perspective as I share this complicated year of my life.

I was born in the Philadelphia area and I grew up in an Irish Catholic family going to church every Sunday. Being the youngest of five, I learned best through experience.

I love fun and I love drinking, which has gotten me into trouble on many occasions. I also love working; it's my justification for excessive fun. I've tirelessly blended the two throughout my life to achieve, to fail, and to start again.

I have dark hair, hazel eyes, and wear glasses. My favorite color is green. I love nature, beaches, and travel. I love my friends and family. I love my beautiful fiancé. And I love life.

Coffee. I really love coffee. Just thinking about it makes me smile. I can smell the aroma now as I write this. I drink it black so it is especially sharp.

I'm six feet tall, one hundred and eighty pounds, and athletic. I've been roughly the same size since I was in sixth grade. I matured early. My mind matured early too, which I credit to my siblings and to my stature at such a young age. People treated me differently. Those that knew my age joked about how old I looked, and those that didn't were often confused that I didn't know more.

That confusion compelled me to advance my education through any means possible. But in this pursuit, many questions went unanswered. I often heard "speak when spoken to" as I was hushed by my family. While my siblings might not agree that I actually was quiet, this made me feel quieted. And in this silence I thought about my place in life, what I wanted and where I wanted to go, and I used my siblings as reference points. I emulated their achievements and I wanted to see if my limits could stretch beyond theirs. What better way to be heard than to be bigger and better than them in everything that I could?

I used these lessons to move forward. I used them to choose sports, schools, and travels. My brothers Kevin and Dan were very good at soccer. I played with them growing up and eventually I also excelled at soccer. My sister was an avid reader and it helped her succeed in school. Her interest in reading, along with my parents', kindled my own. It helped me excel in school and choose a high school and a university that would challenge me. My brother Mike practiced for sports harder than most people I've ever known and it helped him get better. I practiced and studied harder than I thought

possible, and I got better.

Through this hard work, I won scholarships and awards, much in the same way my siblings had. I tried different sports and different classes. I worked hard at everything I tried. And I continued to grow along the way.

But I wanted more. I wanted more experience. I wanted more learning. And I saw travel as the door to both. Growing up my parents had taken us on trips around the U.S.: to the Jersey Shore, South Carolina and Florida, and to cities like New Orleans, New York, and Boston. Everywhere we went was new and different. And awesome! Every place was amazing! Even New York City when I was four and threw up in front of McDonalds was a mind-blowing (albeit stomach emptying) experience. Each time we traveled somewhere it made me want to see more. Each time my siblings traveled somewhere without me, it made me wish I was going. It made me jealous. It made me note down where they'd gone and begin plotting how I would get there.

As I got older, my interests may have changed from sports and winning to travel and learning, but my competitive drive endured. Dan and Mike took spring breaks to Florida. Maureen and Dan took trips to Spain. Kevin studied abroad in Germany and New Zealand. They all traveled a great deal.

I traveled with my parents to New Zealand. I traveled alone for the first time to Italy. I moved to Spain to study abroad and I backpacked Europe afterwards, which resulted in endless adventures, broad personal growth, and lasting friendships that changed my life's trajectory. Running with the bulls was the biggest thrill of my young life and it made me want more of everything. Thankfully, those friends that Rodney and I met in Pamplona had told me where to find it.

2 A NEW WORLD

I landed in Taiwan on August 1, 2004 after a thirteen-hour flight from San Francisco. I exited the plane and entered hallways with checkered white and black flooring that directed me forward to customs, where I confronted the uniformed officers wielding stamps and pens.

Passport. Open. Slide. Check. Click. Stamp. Passport. Onward.

As I arrived at baggage claim, I saw the circulating slides bump into motion, methodically advancing bags and briefcases, boxes and surfboards, golf clubs and gifts. I stood there waiting expectantly. And I kept waiting as my bags arrived last through a side door twenty minutes after everything else.

I gathered my belongings and continued further into the airport, eventually finding the stoic figures behind the glass windows at the currency booths. I stood in line until my turn arrived. Foreign money. Slide. Count. Stash. Exchange. Count.

Sign. Slide. Transaction. Over. I carried my misguided feet forward into the blurry maze of traveling aliens and I looked out to find a broad expanse of illiterate muteness.

There were signs everywhere but none that I could read or even hope to decipher. These multi-lined symbols unhinged my familiar world.

I stepped aside after having made it to the exit. Six feet tall and a shoulder above the masses, white-skin complimented by a Dave Matthew’s Band tie-dyed shirt, ragged J. Crew jeans with a backwards Flyers hat, scraggly brown hair and thin glasses – I stood out, and I felt suddenly alone. I was illiterate and mute in this new world. It was a culture *shock*, especially at five in the morning.

I was confused and uncomfortable upon arrival. My clothes clung to me in an unnatural way and I felt a layer of sweat upon my skin – the smooth layer of ick that coats your body after hours of restless sleep, no shower, and ongoing travel. Beyond my temporarily questionable hygiene and sleepy haze, I saw a sign with my name and approached it. “Hello, I am Gerald Abbey.”

“Follow me,” the person said.

In the street, the sun softly beamed a radiant heat that was curiously strong for the early hour. It begged me to wonder what it would be like at noon. I followed the woman who’d held the sign, and I was accompanied by another Fulbrighter who’d been on my plane. We tossed our bags in a van and quickly left for the hotel.

Gently rolling hills of grass interspersed around squarely blocked buildings as we passed through countryside and into the city. Within a forty-five minute ride, Taiwan offered a contrasted view with that of the Northeast United States. Driving on an eight-lane highway, our four lanes ran northward towards Taipei. The cars around us were smaller than those in the U.S. There were compacts, sedans, and SUVs, but no Hummers or Suburbans. Airport buses passed us by, along with produce trucks, chicken trucks, and 18-wheelers. In the distance, I could see a patch of ocean, revealing the South China Sea.

Rows of mountains came up on the right and followed us for miles before Taipei began to appear through a sunny haze in the valley. Quickly, the scenery shifted from countryside to city as more and more cement-toned buildings appeared to the left and to the right. Some buildings rose several stories, but others reached twelve and thirteen. Most seemed to be apartment complexes accompanied by ground level businesses.

Restaurants were everywhere. There were other stores too. Repair shops. Markets. 7-11s. So many 7-11s. And other stores. Family Marts? And Circle K. And 1-2-3s. They all looked like 7-11s. *Was Taiwan a convenience store heaven?* I remember wondering.

Some gas stations were dotted throughout, though not accompanied by these ubiquitous convenience stores. Winding through the streets, everywhere seemed crowded; cars moved in every direction. Even more scooters moved in even more directions, including the wrong ones: riding into head-on traffic, along sidewalks, and through crosswalks at red lights.

And there were bicycles. Hundreds of bicycles that moved without a care in the world as they recklessly careened into

traffic, oblivious to all that moved around them. It was very odd. Forward we pushed through this controlled chaos of motion.

We passed bright vertical signs everywhere. These horizontal reminders of my foreignness layered upon one another to further illuminate the already bright morning. Everything had a sign and another sign, and every one of them further highlighted how illiterate I was.

The ride continued and my attention wandered with it. I next noticed that none of the sidewalks were even. They were misaligned from storefront to storefront. *How did people not fall on their face every other step?* I wondered. I watched for it; perhaps they did. But I didn't see anyone do it as I took in my first sights of Taipei.

We continued and eventually arrived at our destination, which was just past a large coliseum-looking place. I later learned it was the Chiang Kai Shek Memorial. Our hotel was quietly unassuming as it nestled between unadorned buildings on a side street. Upon approach, the glass entry doors parted to the side and cool, fresh air blasted out, inviting us inside. Still not fully aware of day, time, or place, we checked-in and boarded the elevator to our rooms. Our new lives had begun.

While decompressing from the trip over those first few days, I thought about the change I'd made and the change that was coming. This was the beginning of my professional life after sixteen years of formal schooling. I would still be involved in education, but I would now be the teacher with my students before me.

College and student life as I knew it were over. Partying until five, six, or seven in the morning was over, and I was ready

to put that behind me. I no longer wanted to party like it was the end of fun. I'd done enough of that in preparation for this moment, the unveiling of the professional me. At twenty-three, I was ready for this next step, the one that would carry me into the rest of my life.

I'd actually arrived in Taiwan – what had been a dream was now a reality. After three days in Taipei, we moved from our comfortable hotel rooms to our prearranged apartments in Yilan County, sixty kilometers to the southeast. We twelve Americans were split between three apartments – two in Luodong and one in Yilan City. I was housed in a duplex: two floors, two bathrooms, five bedrooms, and a front and back deck. It was the height of luxury compared to my college accommodations, which had been very dingy and unkempt.

Over that first month in Yilan, we attended a full-time orientation that consisted of TEFOL (Teaching English as a Foreign or Other Language) classes, basic Chinese lessons, and regular field trips for acclimatizing us to our new home. We took scooter lessons, visited the police station to obtain our ARCs (Alien Residence Cards), and went to the bank to sign papers and open accounts. We even went shopping once for furniture and general home goods. It was a peaceful, easy introduction to what was to be my home for the next eleven months.

In my free time, I thought about what I hoped to gain from my time in Taiwan. I've always made goals at the start of new experiences; it helps me maintain the forward trajectory toward my life goals to never stop learning and to never stop evolving.

Running and general health came first. College had been a life of inconsistency with eating, drinking, and sleeping and I needed to find consistency in this post-collegiate life. So I started running on day one, which also turned out

to be a great way to explore. The weeks passed and I felt healthier and healthier and happier and happier with my new surroundings. And I felt far better than I had when I graduated.

College was over but professional life was just beginning. I had very high expectations for myself to become an exceptional teacher. I'd had a great experience with my student teaching and I wanted to continue it. Even though I wasn't going to be teaching literature and writing, I was going to be teaching. I'd spent the previous four years learning and practicing how to teach. This was my opportunity to gain teaching experience and to learn the ins and outs of TEFOL. I wanted to hone my classroom control, my public speaking, and my lesson preparation into fine-tuned skills that I could use to advance my career upon returning to the U.S.

I needed and wanted to read much, much more. Having trained as a literature teacher, I read constantly but never felt caught up with my peers, who seemed to have consumed every young adult literature book ever written.

I started writing more as I described my daily life and documented these goals so that I could clearly define my experience: what I wanted out of it and how I would reach those expectations. I'd always wanted to write a book. This year abroad was an opportunity to start moving towards that goal.

I wanted to learn Chinese. Though I've always been linguistically challenged when it comes to learning languages, I knew that immersion could make it possible for me to at least grasp a basic level of the language.

I wanted to form lasting friendships. I'd studied abroad in Spain and had enjoyed an amazing time, but I had no real ties to Seville. I'd had a very secular experience as I bonded with other Americans and English-speaking Europeans. I'd even lost touch

with Maria, my señora, in only a year's time. In Taiwan, I wanted to develop lasting ties as I forged new friendships of all sorts, one of which I'd already started on.

Alice, one of my four roommates, quickly became my first close friend. On the surface, we were very different. She was a first generation Asian American and came from an Ivy League school. I was a suburbanite raised by a plumber and a secretary of Irish descent and had gone to Jesuit institutions for high school and college. But the more we talked, the more the differences faded to similarities.

I had a grisly beard and drank too much; she had long dark hair and read endlessly, but we both shared a love of ideas. We were both night owls, content to see the sunrise before sleep rather than after.

We played cards. We talked about our aspirations. We let the evening hours burn away beneath the flow of our broad-reaching conversations that covered everything from our collegiate experiences to past and present relationships and on to the broader topics that floated in and out of our minds on a daily basis.

And most important of all these goals, I wanted to be happy and to enjoy what I was doing. If that was missing, I would know that I needed to work harder to feel fulfilled. After a month in Yilan, I was very happy. I liked my duplex and had made some friends. I'd found time for my health, my reading, and my writing. I was off to a good start professionally, feeling comfortable the day before our school picks were due and orientation ended.

But then a typhoon gave us an unexpected day off – an unexpected day for reflection. I read and wrote as the winds beat against our doors and windows. As I did this, I thought

about my happiness in Yilan and realized it was actually contentedness.

Adversity is what motivates me. I enjoy facing challenges and working to overcome them. When I thought about this, I realized Yilan would have been too easy. I needed to push my limits, especially if I wanted to learn Chinese. I reminded myself that I'd picked Taiwan to get away from everything familiar so that I could embrace the unfamiliar and the learning that would come with it. There was too much familiarity in Yilan City or Luodong.

The next day, we returned to orientation. I forgot the local schools I'd originally felt drawn to and instead wrote one word down on my selection paper: Nanao. And that one word changed everything.

3 VILLAGE LIFE BEGINS

It was a balmy, late-August Thursday morning as I rode the train fifty kilometers south to Nanao, the indigenous town of six hundred that I would soon join. When I arrived, I stepped onto the platform and inhaled the scent of the nearby ocean as the heated breath of this panting hamlet exhaled around me. I stood there within the rectangular, cement-block station and looked out. Around me, farmers worked in the paddies, clerks stood in the stores, shoppers walked on the streets, and children juttred through the cracks of this pervasive commotion. I could see one main street, a few municipal buildings, one or two Christian Churches, a teacher's dorm, and a plethora of one-story cement homes with some scatterings of aluminum shacks. Modern cars drove through the streets past illuminated signs that advertised convenience stores and restaurants. People wore Western dress: jeans, t-shirts, dress shirts, blouses, skirts, and suits. They wore sandals, sneakers, heels, and dress shoes. At first glance, it was a very normal rural town.

As I took in my surroundings, I noticed that the air held a uniquely concentrated density, the weight of humidity combined with pollution. I breathed in and the raw thickness of it clung to my lungs like dryer sheets to a shirt – something new, something fresh, but also something processed, a mix of nature and modernization. Rising mountains stood covered in greenery that contrasted the sooty exhaust of the coughing scooters.

The deepest breaths here were the most exhausting; they never seemed completely gone. I could feel my lungs refreshing, and then burning, but I held on and I looked out as I took in those mountains entering that cloudless sky. I looked at the ocean and its many shades of turquoise: light turquoise, deep misty turquoise, rich, clear turquoise. Turquoise was everywhere with blues and greens that made the magnificence of imagination turn into reality. I let go and breathed out. I felt the air escape. It left like a serpent slithering to and fro as it exited.

Just then, the background of cluttered commotion began to separate and enter my tranquil world. A truck passed and beeped. Toot. Toot. A yell broke in. “Ay!” A bicycle horn beeped. Ding-ding, ding-ding. Barking! A throaty, snarling dog unleashed a torrent of aggression from behind a fence after a clangoring car passed by. There was something caught on the tire. It looked like an orange street cone that had entangled in the wheel well. Honk, honk.

This racket continued to consume everything, everywhere. The morning had broken. A studious-looking child in uniform passed a well-aged street vendor. They greeted each other with a wave, a smile, and a passing nod. The wild grasses lining the flood canals rustled beyond the train station as they guided the way to the Pacific. The wind increased. The low clouds passed

by at an easy pace, but only for a moment as the gusts intensified and rushed them by.

I walked through the underpass and exited at the front of the station. Along the two-lane street, green leaves and cut grasses mixed with tumbling newspapers and dancing wrappers as they swept in and out of the rows of scooters and motorcycles that carried the commuters back and forth from their homes. Straight ahead, I gazed at the bold white statue of a local god, guarding the town and welcoming visitors. Surrounding this was a roundabout with cars and scooters continually flowing through.

A heavy wind came across the valley and brought the smell of the morning foods. I didn't recognize them at the time but they were foods I later tried and loved: the *dan bing*, a fried egg on a scallion pancake that can be folded around assorted meats or a slice of American cheese; the *bao zi*, a doughy bun about the size of a fist and stuffed with a veggie or pork mix; the *shui jiao*, those omnipresent and always delicious dumplings, usually veggie or pork, though the combinations are endless. With such a plethora of stands and restaurants, the aromas reticently stoked the fires of my appetite on this and many other mornings.

Turning as my stomach grumbled, I saw that the Fulbright liason had arrived. Her name was Gemma. She was short with a spry body that appeared ready to pounce. Quite a few years older than me, she was a seasoned math teacher and spoke well-practiced English. We greeted each other as I stepped into her Ford SUV and we were quickly on our way to Biho, one of my new schools. As we arrived, Gemma introduced me to Darcy, my co-teacher, who politely welcomed me. Darcy was around five feet tall, had shoulder-length, orange-ish colored

hair, and wore large, bright red-framed glasses. She told me that she'd been teaching for many years, and knew the schools and villages well, which was comforting because I knew next to nothing about my new world.

While Gemma and Darcy seemed nice, this placement was odd. Every other Fulbright teacher was paired directly with their co-teacher for meetings, teaching, school tours, initial introductions – everything. For some reason, I had a handler in Gemma. It didn't make much sense at the time, but I went with it. I was new, she seemed nice, and I wanted to be flexible. I'd found a wholly new existence in a foreign land and it started out like a dream-come-true. Besides, the plans seemed natural enough to everyone else.

After meeting Darcy, Gemma and I visited Wutah elementary school. As we drove there, she explained that this was another of the schools where I'd be teaching and that I'd be able to meet some of my coworkers that morning. We arrived and she guided me to the principal's office. After brief introductions, they left me alone, explaining that they had to attend to some school matters. I sat content in my surroundings after the busy start to my day.

The office had large leather couches set before a bulwarked oaken desk. Before me, tea and sliced fruit sat on a large, wooden coffee table. I poured some tea and sat back. Above me, the ceiling fan circulated the stagnant office air. I sat and I waited as the minutes ticked by. Many, many minutes ticked by. A half hour passed and I was still sitting by myself. All around me, there was movement, but the office remained still as the fan continued to churn. Extending down from the ceiling, it rattled as it swung. Bored and alone, I sipped my tea and watched the turning blades. The chains clanged,

the arm creaked, and the blades spun to slice the humid air as best they could. Outside, a lawnmower cut through the ever-blossoming grass with a consistent, yet violent, drone. I continued to sit. Though still, I felt sweat beading under my dress shirt. It was warm. I did my best to ignore it. This was my new home and I figured I'd better get used to it.

The buzz of insects intermixed with the fan and the mower. Teachers increasingly passed the open doorway as I sat and listened and wondered if there was anything else I should be doing. Chinese floated through the air, teachers occasionally poked their heads in with a smile and a nod, and I sat in my melodic silence.

"Gerry!" Gemma had returned with a shrill greeting. So attentive to the sounds, so tired from a lack of sleep caused by my excitement for this first day, I hadn't noticed her come in.

"Hi, Gemma, what are we doing here?" I'd grown slightly impatient after sitting for most of an hour.

"I already told you!" she said. Gemma's English was exceptional but something about it struck me as strange. It was hard to make out. She didn't speak like a forty-five year old woman. Certainly, she didn't look like one. She had a girlish air about her. Normally, this would be good but her demeanor was far too young to fit. Her mannerisms and her tone cast the impression of a very young and scattered girl.

"What did you tell me, Gemma?"

"We are here to conduct an interview!" Most of the sentence was said in a normal tone, but then she hit the word 'interview' in a new octave, like it was the most exciting word ever invented. Her words carried excitement but also portrayed judgment as though I should have known about this interview

and I was foolish for having not.

“An interview?”

“Of course!”

I didn’t understand. She had told me we were visiting Wutah and would meet some of my coworkers. Why would she say *of course*? “Of course” insinuated that I had prior knowledge of this event. I most certainly did not have prior knowledge of this event. It made no sense. “Who are we interviewing?”

“Gerry! An English teacher!” she gasped with excitement, before bracing a hand on my knee and folding herself onto the seat beside me a little too close for comfort. Her eyes examined mine.

I looked back through my confusion. Those chocolate irises glistened with sympathy as they honed in on my thoughts. “Can you sit-in and ask her some questions, Gerry?”

“Of course.” What else could I say on my first visit, no? I was new. *I need to show flexibility* I told myself. “What types of questions should I ask?”

“Oh, anything is fine,” she said.

I was twenty-three years old, I’d never interviewed anyone, and I had no idea what I was doing. “Anything?”

“Anything!” The word came out with a hiccup at the end of it. Not a real hiccup, but one of adding too much air to the last syllable of the last word.

Looks like I was going to learn on the fly. “Sounds good. When will we ... start?” she was already trailing away and out the door, having immediately pushed off my leg before my last words came out. *What was she doing?* I thought. I had no idea.

As the silence returned, I sat back and felt the tension ease away. I hadn't even known I was tense. A few moments passed and once again the cycling fan laced in with the clanging chains and mixed with the rumbling mower and the buzzing insects.

After a few more minutes, Gemma returned with another teacher. "Okay, Gerry. This is Pheona," she said while leading a plain looking, twenty-something woman into the room.

I stood up and extended my hand. "Hi, Pheona. I'm Gerry. Nice to meet you." My shake awaited as Pheona wore a look of shock and a smile of embarrassment. Was I embarrassing her? Or was she just as shocked as I was?

"Hello. My. name. is. Phe-o-na. Nice. to. meet. you," she stammered robotically before smiling behind one hand that covered her mouth while the other hand extended to shake mine. From what I saw behind her top hand, a friendly, nervous smile had appeared. She'd had no idea that I would be interviewing her either.

"Well," Gemma dragged the L's and doubled the word in size. "How about we sit?" We both nodded in agreement.

"Okay, Gerry. How about you begin?" the words came out fluently but had that strange roll to them, as though she was bouncing on a trampoline as they were said. There was no consistency in her tone except for that of inconsistency.

“Sure,” I replied before turning towards Pheona. “Where are you from?”

“Luodong. Oh, sorry,” she paused. She smiled. Well, it seemed a smile disguised again by her hand. I could see it in her eyes and cheeks but that hand blocked anything more. “I am from Luodong.” She was starting to loosen up it seemed.

“Luodong? I like it very much there. How do you like living there?”

Her deep-set eyes widened and revealed a world of confusion. Her clasped hands twisted between her knees and she looked down, again showing a grin of embarrassment this time without the hand as a blocker.

My eyebrows ruffled with my own confusion as I looked on in wonder. Five seconds went by before five more. Ten seconds of silence in an interview is an eternity. I didn’t know what to do but Gemma interjected to ease the silence. “Gerry! That is too general!” she said while slapping my knee in chastisement. “You have to ask better questions!”

I had asked how she liked where she lived. What were “better questions”? I felt bad. Should I have felt bad?

As Gemma finished saying this and removed her hand from my knee, the principal entered. Brief introductions were exchanged and we sat around the coffee table once again. With freshly poured hot tea, Gemma began recounting the interview in a mix of Chinese and English. Everyone smiled. Everyone looked at me. The faces held a mix of amusement and

sympathy. It was a queer look, and they clung to it. After an uncomfortably long silence with all eyes fixed upon me, the interview began again but this time in Chinese.

Gemma patted my thigh and looked away. Words flowed and more tea poured. The longer the conversation continued, the more I lost interest; I couldn't understand anything. It was an interview in Chinese for an English teaching position. The gentle rattle of the fan again arose as the mower chomped and the insects buzzed. Chinese joined this symphony of constants and all the noise created a silence that fell as a curtain over everything. These contrasting but continuous sounds created a peaceful harmony in this early morning hour of an already sweltering day. I sat back, feigned attention, and felt the sweat continue to trickle down my back. Only hours into my Nanao life and I was already lost.

Eventually the interview ended, we left the school, and Gemma dropped me at the train station with instructions to return the same time the following morning, which I did. She again met me at the station and brought me to Biho, where I quietly worked on lesson plans as the other teachers bustled about, finishing their final preparations before the students arrived to commence the year.

At lunchtime, Gemma and the rest of the faculty invited me to join them for a meal before I returned to Yilan for my last weekend. On Monday, the same day classes started, I was slated to move into the teacher's dorm. While I was looking forward to having one last weekend with everyone in Yilan, I had hoped to be moved-in and settled before my first official day in the professional world, but my room was not ready.

We dined at a seafood restaurant near the station and had some translated exchanges through Gemma. The meal

continued past one hour and onto the next as fresh platters of food continually arrived throughout. Just when I thought I could eat no more, the fruit arrived, signifying the end of lunch right in time for my train. As we got up to leave, Gemma received a phone call that excited her so much she grabbed hold of my wrist. “Gerry, would you like to move into your dorm today?”

“Yes, is that possible?”

She ignored my question and shouted, “Okay, let’s go!”

“What? It’s ready? How?”

“It’s ready! I’ll drive you now, but we must go quickly. I have a night class and need to be there by six. Hurry!” she emphatically said while pulling my arm and leading me towards her car with no further explanation. Plans had changed suddenly and within three hours, I was standing in a carport with my belongings at my feet and looking at the gate to my new home. I inserted my key in the lock, turned it, and stepped forward.

Beyond the stainless-steel gate, I found a beautiful blue-tile four-story building with a courtyard and a second carport for scooters. Ahead, the building stood with open hallways connecting at an L angle. There were stairwells to the left and right, and a main staircase at the center. With my bags in tow, I approached the central stairs.

To my right I saw wide windows and a multipurpose room with tables, some fitness equipment, and a karaoke machine. Beyond that, I noticed a communal kitchen. Ahead of me I saw a lounge with some couches, refrigerators, a water station, and a TV. As I climbed the stairs, I realized that these lounges were at the center of every floor.

My room was 206. I moved to the right side of the building and found it three doors down from the laundry room. Like the downstairs entry to the courtyard, there was a large, metal-framed and barred door securing my room. Behind it, was a normal, pale blue wooden door with a brass knob and lock. I opened the two doors, removed my shoes, and entered my room for the first time.

It was disgusting – no wonder they'd wanted me to wait until Monday to move in. The four foot by four foot bathroom to my left had dirt and scum coating most of it. The floors of the bedroom stretched fifteen feet before me and were also covered in dust and dirt. As I walked forward, I found my bed against the wall just beyond the bathroom with a desk and chair between the end of it and the outside wall. Beyond the dirt, the previous inhabitant had left quite a few papers and belongings, one of which happened to be an expensive bottle of whiskey that sat upon the built-in shelves above the bed. At least my dirt-covered room came with a consolation prize.

Having surveyed my new home, I found that the bathroom was the worst of it and decided that the bedroom was fine enough for the time being. I took out my sheets and made the bed before sitting to think and plan. It was going to take hours to clean, let alone unpack, and there was a party in Luodong that night. Having slept little once again due to hours of conversation and cards with Alice, my foremost concern was sleep. I lay down to nap and instantly fell into a deep sleep. Two hours later I awoke refreshed and hurried to get ready for the last train to Luodong.

At nine o'clock that Friday night, I was ready to go. I walked to my door, opened it, and almost walked into the outer one, having forgotten it was there. I stepped back and reached to

open it but couldn't. There was no handle – just a button and a latch. I tried pushing the button. I tried moving the latch. No go. I tried again, and again, and again. I tried them together and separately. No go.

It didn't make any sense. I pushed the door. I gave it slight jerks back and forth, hoping it was simply stuck. I gave it more force and still it didn't budge. I had no idea what was going on except that I was getting exceptionally flustered and angry because I couldn't open my own door from the inside, no less. I took a step back. I took a deep breath, and I told myself that it was only a door and that I could open it. With a more relaxed attitude and clearer train of thought, I again approached it.

I tried, I failed, and I tried again. I gently moved the latch while pushing the door inwards to depressurize the lock. I reversed the force and still nothing. I wondered if there was something culturally different at play here, but it was just a door. Cultural difference played no part in this door. Still, in my frustration, I started to think that I couldn't understand how to open it because I wasn't from here; this door was only winning because I couldn't understand some basic concept that I hadn't been taught. Regardless, I still had no idea what was wrong with the door.

Time was ticking, my train was approaching, and I'd tried everything possible so I began contemplating alternative ways to get out. My first thought was the deck beyond the sliding glass doors at the end of my room. Jumping off the deck sounded like a great idea, so I checked and found that I didn't have a chance. It was completely caged-in with a metal framework, making it impossible to get in or out. At this point, my frustration was reaching a boiling point as I inwardly felt the imminent arrival of my train.

This is when I thought about the hammer I'd seen in the closet: I could break the door open. I could destroy the lock on my door with sheer force and anger. I paused. Then I thought about my neighbors and imagined what their reactions would be to me, the barbaric Westerner that destroyed his door within hours of moving in. Certainly, that would not be a good first impression.

I continued trying to work out an exit strategy. I thought about yelling for help, which would be about as good as breaking the door down. What kind of fool can't open his own door?

My patience was fleeting, my options were out, and the train would be at the station any minute. I grabbed a metal hanger and poked it around the locking joint. There was space enough for me to reach through to attempt prying the lock so that I could spring the door open. I tried with the hanger and several other tools all to no avail. It was hopeless. I leaned on the door in defeat.

As I did so, it clicked and opened. Freedom was mine as the door simply opened from the weight of me leaning on it. I pushed it fully ajar before gathering my few needed belongings and sprinting to the train station. After a frustration laden fifteen minutes, the door had opened with no explanation. It didn't matter though because it was open and I was on my way to catch the train.

Then I encountered the gate of the courtyard and my progress was again impeded. It was the same type of door. It was the same type of problem. The latch and button did not respond to my commands. I pushed and prodded that door the same as the one in my room. I worked with it. I tried to reason with it. I asked if it could just open for me. I asked God to strike

it down for being so mean to me. It was only a door but the frustration it threw in my face was unbearable.

After a full minute of fiddling with this second door it opened in the same way as the first – inexplicably. I jumped out, slammed it shut behind me, and sprinted to my awaiting train, arriving just in time to jump on as it pulled away from the station.

My trouble with the doors that first evening faded. Occasionally, I had to shake the courtyard door as I opened it, but that was all. The door to my room, on the other hand, I never closed again. The fear of being locked inside was too great.

