Return to Taiwan

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We went to Taiwan every two years, during summer break. Mom and Dad liked to keep their plans a secret, though. I wouldn’t know until Mom lugged up from the basement the two big brown suitcases that looked like they were made of mammoth fur but which claimed to be “100% synthetic fiber.” Then I knew her next words would be “Tomorrow we’ll return to Taiwan.” I would be so excited that I couldn’t sleep the whole night, and would instead stay up and pack. It was the one night they didn’t tell me to go to bed. Mom and Dad stayed up too.

“Not too much, now, *Xiao Bao*, Little Treasure, we’ll be bringing a whole bunch of goodies back.” I kept putting things in and out of the suitcase but in the end never took much with me, just a book, some pencil and paper, and a Rubik’s cube to perform in front of all my uncles and aunts, so they would clap and call me little genius from abroad, with your dad’s brains! Normally I didn’t care what I wore but I agonized over what clothes to bring, based on my made-up code of what looked more “Chinese”: red and yellow went in, anything that had an English word on it was out, except of course the cute pirate “I *Ai* [love] Taiwan” shirt bought in, where else, Taiwan.

The next morning all I would remember was the airport clerk giving us a puzzled glance and asking “Why is this suitcase so light?”, Mom saying conspiratorially, “We’re bringing stuff back,” then Mom taking off my shoes as she pushed me gently through the security door, Dad catching me on the other side before I fell asleep again. On the plane, I pushed up the armrests so that I could sleep across Mom and Dad’s laps on the fifteen-hour leg to Tokyo Narita. New Hollywood blockbusters that I’d wanted to watch played in front of us but I didn’t care, because the next day our whole family would be seated around a colossal glass bowl of red bean/ green bean/ grass jelly/ taro/ pineapple/ mango shaved ice, Third Uncle saying sternly, “If you don’t finish all that by yourself we won’t let you go back to America.” Of course, everybody helped, and at the end I licked syrup off my fingers as I listened to the never-ending drone of cicadas, feeling as cold and heavy as a refrigerator despite the sweltering hundred-degree heat coming from outside, until Second Uncle said, “Let’s go eat hot pot now!”

They always gave Mom and Dad lots of stuff: green tea from the high mountains, five spice dried tofu strips, dried seaweed, hot and sour soup base, instant noodles, Second Aunt’s famous chili sauce… “Fifty pounds is the limit,” Mom said, and Second Aunt responded, “Then I have to fill it.”

“We’re so glad you returned to Taiwan,” they all said, like it was where I belonged, like I had been born there too, not just my parents. They waved tearfully, and Liangliang asked, “When’s the next time you’ll return to Taiwan?” Because “going to Taiwan” didn’t have the same ring to it…

I returned to Taiwan again, unexpectedly, during the winter of sixth grade. Permanently.

Before I left, my class gave me a farewell party. Everyone else ate cake while I sloshed around orange juice in my paper cup. I think I drank half a gallon. Mrs. Dorsley made a speech about how sorry the whole class was for my loss, but I hardly heard her, and let my eyes defocus so I wouldn’t feel my classmates looking at me. She kept putting her hand over her heart as she talked, like she was dealing with an intense bout of heartburn. My classmates all wished me the best in my journey overseas, and with a flurry of binders opening, took out cards that Mrs. Dorsley had secretly told them to make when I wasn’t in the room.

The next day I sat in my room and tore books off the shelf one by one, flipped through them, strained to remember the last time Mom read Sesame Street to me or which birthday it was that Dad gave me the illustrated encyclopedia, and threw the books into an ever-expanding landfill-like pile in the center of my carpeted floor.

Fourth Uncle knocked on the door.

“It’s unlocked.”

He opened it slightly and peered in.

“You can take fifty pounds of stuff,” he said, paused, and added, “I can help if you want me to.”

I shook my head, and with a flick of my hand, toppled the row of books remaining on the second shelf, so they stabbed my hands in their haste to collapse spread-eagled on the floor.

“I’m not packing,” I said. Why did everyone have to paint nice pictures over what they saw? Why did they have to paint my parent’s faces over the stars? The old woman next door – my foster parent for one night, the night after the car crash – told me that my parents would always watch over me from “up there” – here she pointed to the approximately zero stars visible in the overcast night sky – as she tucked me into bed.

“You need to finish packing tonight,” Fourth Uncle said, “The flight’s tomorrow at eight.”

I wished that the carpet were quicksand. Then I could see whether Fourth Uncle would still respect my privacy so much as to only let his upper body into the room.

“Or I could change it to next week,” he said. Pause. “You probably want to stay here longer. It’s your home, after all.” Pause. “You probably won’t see it again in a long time.”

The door closed. Half a minute later I heard his voice on the phone. I looked at my calendar. December 16th. I rushed up so suddenly that my vision filled with static. Over the next week the world around me was going to slide into some blissful Christmas snowglobe scene. I would hate that. I wanted to go somewhere where kids went to school as usual and nothing more would happen, except their teachers would pass out readings on a holiday called “Christmas.”

I ran downstairs to tell Fourth Uncle.

I stopped packing and told uncle to put the books back on the shelf, because I didn’t want to take any of them. I wandered the house, my eyes scanning over everything but my brain registering nothing. I imagined returning in ten years, and standing in the center of my dusty room and spinning slowly, like some character from a movie remembering a past life as tinkling music-box melodies played in the background.

I read my classmates’ cards on the plane. I was too big to sleep across Fourth Uncle’s lap, and the fat guy on the right crowded into my seat. I dreaded to think what would happen to him in Taiwan. Maybe he would have to book two seats on the way back.

My classmates told me “sorry for your loss,” except they did it in fifty words instead of four. They told me how much they would miss me, “You’re really smart and nice. I’d wish I’d gotten to know you better.” And one of them said, “Thanks for the time you pointed out the mistake on my math homework.” Ms. Berger, the English teacher, would have liked that. “Details sell,” she always said. As I looked through them, though, I realized I didn’t have many friends. I sat in the corner and quietly aced my math and science exams. Maybe that was best, so I would have no regrets about starting over.

I missed Robert, though. He wrote, in scrawly pen,

*~~I’m sorry that~~ ~~I hope that~~ Do they have Internet in Taiwan? Play Starcraft with me sometime*.

My uncles and aunts were all waiting for me at the baggage claim. I didn’t see them until Fourth Uncle suddenly turned me around by the shoulders and said, “Eh? Who are they?” and there was Second Uncle with Liangliang and Mingming, her hair cut in a straight line above her eyes and hugging her head like a mushroom; Third Uncle; Chenchen picking his nose until Third Aunt behind him pulled his hand to his side; and Second Aunt hovering behind Grandma’s wheelchair. They looked like they were posing for a family reunion portrait.

They didn’t cheer and say “look who’s returned to Taiwan!” like they usually did. Third Aunt just said, “He’s here.” The corner of Mingming’s mouth turned upward but then fell back, as if I were a fragile vase she would break by smiling. If only they would treat me the same way they did every time I came back, everyone rushing up to me at the same time and clapping me on the back, with Second Uncle hoisting me up into the air and saying “Look how he’s grown!”, maybe then I wouldn’t have cried. Instead they walked up to me one to one and gave me prolonged hugs like they were trying to give me strength through their hands. Second Uncle and Third Aunt began crying. Grandma smiled serenely, her wrinkles folding up her face, too feeble to do anything except take my right hand in both of hers and shake it up and down.

In the van Second Uncle turned around from the front passenger seat and told me, “Anything you want, tell us.”

“I wish this were,” I bit my lip. I didn’t want to cry anymore. I didn’t want them to think I was a baby. “Like my other trips to Taiwan.”

“What do we usually do?” Second Uncle asked the others.

“Ice,” Liangliang said.

“Ice it is,” he said, and addressed Second Aunt, “Turn right at Ronghua Road. Summer Winds Ice Shop, where we always go. I’ll call the others.”

My watch beeped, reminding me it was 3AM, Eastern Time. I looked out the window. It was drizzling and just cool enough to make it hard to decide whether to wear long sleeves or not. This was December, after all, not July. I stared out the window until Mingming poked me in the side.

“What?”

She had one hand forwards, in a fist.

“Oh. Scissors, rock, cloth…” She won and flicked both hands upwards. “You have to move your head,” she said, “You lose.”

“Oh, it’s *that* version,” I said. Mingming and her thousand variations of rock-paper-scissors. Liangliang joined us and we switched to that version that involved stacking up our hands and getting slapped.

We were the only customers in the ice shop. The manager must have been happy, when Second Uncle approached the counter with the nine of us in tow. “Your biggest tub of Eight Treasure Ice,” he said.

The manager scooped out ice from a big metal fridge into the machine so hastily that a few cubes tumbled onto the floor. Second Uncle leaned on the glass counter and boasted, “Xiao Bao here just came from America and you know the first thing he said to us? He said, I want to go to Mr. Wang’s ice shop. Think of it! Of all the yummy eats in Taiwan he misses your ice the most!”

“I didn’t say that,” I whispered to Mingming.

“Shhh,” she said. She made a scissors with her fingers and cut at my hand.

“Okay, sit down, sit down,” Second Aunt said, dragging a metal stool across the gritty tiled floor to make room for Grandma’s wheelchair.

Second Uncle sat down last, at the end of the table. He clasped his hands in front of him. “We’re missing First Uncle and Aunt,” he said solemnly, “But they’ll be here in spirit. And they’ll be happy, if they see us happy. See, how brave Xiao Bao is? All smiles and laughter.” He turned to me. “How much more have you packed into that brain of yours?” He reached backwards to pull out a paper menu from the counter and put it in front of me. “Show us how many words you can read now.”

I looked down the list. They all ended in *bing*, ice, I knew that. But what were the words besides them? I ran down the list of ingredients, red bean, green bean, grass jelly – the black kind, and the white kind,… If my aunts and uncles and cousins weren’t turning to look at me and I had a minute maybe I could use process of elimination and match them all up.

“Aiya, don’t test him,” Second Aunt said.

“It’s okay, I know,” I said, “This one, it’s pear isn’t it?”

“Pineapple, it’s pineapple,” Mingming said.

Heat flushed up my face; I tried to bite my lip but my mouth shuddered and let out a strangled gasp, and pretty soon I was crying.

“Apologize to him,” Second Aunt said sternly and Mingming said, “Sorry sorry,” Second Uncle said, “It’s okay, I teach you all the words when we get back,” but just as one sob subsided another forced its way up my throat, like a chemical reaction gone haywire. But Mingming in second grade knew all these words already, probably learned them from a picture book in kindergarten, while I was a big stupidhead, and after a while I saw that the gigantic bowl of ice had arrived, but no one had started eating, everyone was fingering their spoons. Fourth Uncle broke the silence: “First bite goes to Xiao Bao,” he said and scooped a big bite into my mouth. The cold must have paralyzed my tears, because things went back to normal, and nine spoons reached for the mountain of ice. But I’d exposed myself to be a big crybaby, and the only thing that kept them from saying so was that I was the little genius from America who had lost his parents. I crunched through the ice almost as fast as Second Aunt did, felt the pain go up the nerves in my teeth.

On the car we were quiet again. This time Liangliang sat beside me, while Mingming snapped at the pocket of the seat in front of her, back and forth, with her finger. Liangliang pulled out a scrambled Rubik’s cube from her brown leather purse and offered it to me.

“I’m out of practice,” I muttered.

She held it in her hands for a few seconds longer before dropping it back. I looked out the window and watched storefront signs flash by, signs I couldn’t read. I fell asleep on the car.

I woke up to Mingming dropping seven pairs of chopsticks on the table, getting ready for dinner. Second Aunt hurried from the kitchen with plates in her hand. I washed up and made my way to the table. Second Aunt leaned over, telling me Third Uncle’s family had gone back to Tainan but would visit again next weekend, as her chopsticks transferred food from each of the dishes to my bowl. When she finished I picked up some of the vegetables with my chopstick.

“What are these?”

“Dragon whiskers,” Second Uncle said as he shoved rice into his mouth from a red plastic bowl with the word “fortune” etched in calligraphic gold.

“By the time this year is over, you’ll know all the vegetables in Taiwan,” Fourth Uncle declared, “We’ll send you to the day market so you can do the shopping for us. And no one will be able to tell you were born in America.”

I placed two strands of dragon whiskers into my mouth, so they stuck out left and right, their tips curling like springs. I slowly edged them into my mouth.

Mingming glanced at me and started to laugh but then looked away.

“That’s right, it’s your year, isn’t it, little dragon?” Fourth Uncle continued, “You’ll be twelve. Such a big kid!”

The whiskers vanished inside my mouth. They leaked bitter juices but had the tang of crisp mountain air. I’d never hated one Asian vegetable. Maybe if Americans cooked with Asian vegetables the sentence “Mommy why do I have to eat my vegetables?” would vanish from dinnertime conversations.

“Mom, I don’t want the sticky rice,” Mingming said.

“Eat some, I made a lot,” Second Aunt said.

“But you burned it again.”

“I’ll get it right one of these days. Liangliang, your posture! Put your book to the side; you can do homework later.”

She straightened up but kept the book on her lap. “You tell me to do homework and then you don’t want me to do homework,” she said flatly, and then scooped up half of the remaining sticky rice. “What squared gives 256?” she leaned over to ask me, her mouth full.

“16,” I whispered.

“Did I tell you? Your *A-Ma* used to make sticky rice,” Second Uncle said. “She had a stand just at the intersection of Wenheng and Xinde Road. She would scoop rice nonstop for several hours. And the last people in line wouldn’t get any. She never quite made enough, even though she got up at six.” Second Uncle put his empty bowl on the table (he ate fast), balanced his chopsticks on top, folded his hands, and leaned towards me. One of the chopsticks rolled off. “Do you remember? When you were four, she was still doing it.” I shook my head. “Let me tell you, Second Uncle tried for many years to learn her recipe. But I could never do it.”

“I’ll get it one of these days,” Second Aunt repeated. She chopped up a piece of white radish into thirds with her spoon, and fed one of them to A-Ma. Second Aunt didn’t spoon any of the sticky rice into her A-Ma’s bowl, I noticed. The loose skin of A-Ma’s chin bobbed up and down.

“Why don’t you ask her to teach you?” I asked Second Aunt.

She shook her head.

“She has Alzheimer’s,” Liangliang said besides me as she pinched a clump of charred rice with her chopsticks, like she was going to throw it to the side. “It started after you left last time.” She put the charred rice in her mouth.

“I’d love her to help but she can’t remember our names half the time,” Second Aunt said.

“A-Ma’s getting better with the medicine,” Fourth Uncle said. He pointed across the table at me. “A-Ma, who’s this?”

“He’s, he’s,” A-Ma started, and the radish fell from her lips onto her blouse, white with wavy pink stripes interspersed with tiny roses. Second Aunt snatched at the fallen radish with her napkin, like an osprey catches a fish. “The one from America.”

Mingming clapped. She stopped when no one else responded.

“What’s his name?” Second Uncle asked.

A-Ma shook her head slowly. “Where’s his dad?” she asked. “Jinglong?”

“He’s not here anymore,” Second Uncle said softly, directing his voice away from me, but I still heard. I averted my eyes from the table, instead concentrated on the cuckoo clock ticking away behind Second Uncle’s chair.

“Xiao Bao, what’s the square root of 289?” Liangliang asked, pencil waving.

“17,” I stuttered, and a dragon whisker poked its way down my throat, like a strand of hair that I couldn’t swallow or choke out. I concentrated on trying to clasp an upside-down shiitake mushroom with my chopsticks. It kept sliding off. Finally Liangliang picked it up and plopped it into my bowl.

Cuckoo, cuckoo, the clock called, announcing 7:00.

“No time, no time,” Second Aunt called as she got up. “I’ll clean up when I get back. Mingliang,” she addressed my cousins at the same time, “Let’s go!”

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“*Buxiban*, cram school,” Liangliang said, snapping her workbook shut, her pencil still inside. “Keep eating. It’s up to you to finish everything now.”

I wasn’t as tired as I thought I would be, so I watched TV with A-Ma, whatever she wanted to watch. Only after Liangliang and Mingming had returned did I turn the TV off and trundle upstairs. My room was the first on the right, Second Aunt said.

Light shone from under the closet cracks. I walked over, and looked around the door for a light switch to turn it off, but didn’t find one. Must be inside, then. I slid the door back.

Liangliang sat on a box covered by a blanket, wedged between clothes, leaning on a shirt with leaves and flowers woven on to it, with a caption of *together we walk down the blossoms heavenly fragrant*. She had a lantern and a pile of papers besides her, and held one in her hand by a piece of tape. Two furry slippers sat upturned besides her bare feet.

She saw me and jerked violently, so that the paper hit the flower shirt and folded, setting the metal hangers rattling against each other. A case of crayons fell over.

“What are you doing here?” she hissed, grabbing onto my forearm so hard that her fingernails made dents.

“I’m sorry, the light was on,” I say.

“Didn’t you see the sign? It says Prohibited to Enter.”

“Oh, right. I’m leaving, I’m leaving.”

“You can put your stuff here tomorrow,” she said sharply. “It’s your room now, after all. I’m moving out. I’m moving all the stuff to sister’s closet.”

On the walls were pictures that she was taking down: Robot cat Doraemon, Totoro, a caricature of her mom, brandishing a pot.

“You don’t have to, I won’t go in your closet again. Your drawings, they’re pretty.”

She ignored me and instead draped the remaining shirts, hangers still attached, over her right arm.

“I’ll help you move,” I said.

She shook her head and pushed her slippers to the edge of the blanket. They toppled to the floor. She got out, clutching the papers to her chest. I closed the door and she took off the sign that I couldn’t read and crumpled it in the wastebasket.

I sat on my bed and kicked open my big hairy brown luggage bag. On the left hand side were my clothes; on the right were a bunch of books and photo albums, big brown binders with pictures of me and small ones in faded blue labeled “Sweet memories” that smelling like long-ago plastic, albums from my parents’ childhoods. So Fourth Uncle had sneaked them in after all, probably while I had been sleeping. The day before Fourth Uncle and I left, he came up with the idea of getting a few large cardboard boxes to ship all my stuff to Taiwan. I told him not to, but he said I couldn’t just abandon everything I had just like that, and not to worry how much it would cost. I grabbed him and shouted that I didn’t want it. I didn’t want anything from home. Mom’s curly handwriting stared at me from portfolios, which she would assemble out of the best work I did every year. Every New Year I would sit in her lap and watch her slide crayoned pictures and A+ homework under plastic covers. I kicked close the top of the bag, jumped down from bed, and tried to pull it under my bed. It wouldn’t budge.

Fourth Uncle sat down beside me on the bed and patted me on the back. I looked up into his concerned face.

“You okay?”

“You packed my books. And albums. Even though I said I didn’t want them.”

He was taken aback. “But it’s your past,” he said.

I took his big hand in mine and ran my fingers over the lines of his palm. “When I look at this stuff, it makes me think of home,” I bit down on my lips, “And Mom, and Dad.” I put my head against his jacket but it was the plastic slippery kind, which wouldn’t absorb my tears. He hugged me but didn’t say anything.

“Fourth Uncle, promise me something. Don’t remind me of anything… before. I just want to belong here. And I need to actually learn to read and write. Just cram knowledge into me any way you can. Like Mingming and Liangliang do at *buxiban*.”

He nodded and squeezed my hand. After a while he got up and left. I stared into space and listened to cats screeching outside, then turned off the light and sat up until I was too tired to sit up any longer.

I woke up at 10AM the next day. Fourth Uncle left a note on the table. He and the kids at school, Second Uncle was at work, and Second Aunt had taken A-Ma to get some fresh air in the park, he wrote in phoneticized Chinese. No sense in starting school for me now, he added, with semester exams so close. I should enroll after winter break. He told me to buy my own breakfast, that Huang Mama’s stand across the street from the 7-Eleven was pretty good, paperclipped 100 yuan to the letter, and put the house key on top. Also on the desk was a first-grade textbook, a bookmark on the very first page. My heart raced at the thought of going out on my own. I blocked everything else out of my head and concentrated on what I had to do.

I soon fell into a regular routine: On weekday mornings, I went out to get breakfast, and learned at least two new menu items every day. I studied from Fourth Uncle’s textbook, wrote Chinese badly on gridded paper, took a break for lunch, returned to work afterwards, watched some TV with A-Ma after she had her afternoon nap (jotting down words in the captions that I didn’t know). She called me Xiao Bao after a while rather than “the one from America,” pointed to the paper I always carried with me to record unknown characters, and called me studious. I nodded and smiled. Mingming didn’t move back into the closet I had left empty, but she and Liangliang offered to tutor me Chinese if I helped them with math, and I accepted. In the evenings I read to Fourth Uncle from the textbook and he graded my work in red pen.

The albums and books stayed in the luggage.

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Second Uncle stood by the driver’s door of the van, catching a quick smoke. As the sun set, shadows draped over his face. I hurried towards the van but Fourth Uncle called me back.

“Xiao Bao, do you want to ride back with me?”

He straddled the seat of his sleek blue motorcycle. Two helmets dangled from the mirrors on either side, swinging softly. I looked to Second Uncle. “Fourth Uncle drives safely,” he said without moving, blowing a cloud of smoke my way. I walked to the van and peeked inside. Both Liangliang and Mingming looked like they were about to fall asleep. I walked back to Fourth Uncle and nodded.

He clapped one of the helmets on my head, and I clambered onto the space he’d left in front of him. As soon as I had buckled the helmet strap, he fired up the engine and we went roaring down the hill. The wind tore at my short-sleeved I *Ai* Taiwan shirt. As soon as I caught my breath I looked back up, at the Buddhist tower sitting solemnly in the dusk.

I tried not to, but I could still hear the head nun chant *Amituofo* as she placed my parents’ urns in the earthquake-proof locker and squirted out a toothpaste trail of hot glue along its edge. Even though she told us to chant loudly to send my parents off, I had to stop, because my voice was turning into a sob. I kept thinking about how the nun said, “After the vault is sealed you will not be able to see them again,” levelly, like she had done this thousands of times, and judging by the shelves of lockers stretching into the distance, she probably had. She had to remind me they were gone, all over again. It was why I protested about coming in the first place, but Fourth Uncle told me, this was the last thing I needed to do for my parents.

But although she had closed the vault it seemed like one had opened in my heart. I concentrated on the feel of the wind against my skin and watched the highway lights whoosh by one by one. But soon it got cold so I leaned back against Fourth Uncle’s warm sweater and looked up into the sky. He turned his gaze upwards for a moment, too.

A memory came back to me, unbidden. I went stargazing in the park with Dad, once. We spent an hour trying to get our telescope’s “auto-finder” to calculate where the stars were in the sky, but it kept pointing to a stretch of darkness because we had entered the date and time wrong. We spent another half hour looking at the only three visible stars in the urban Detroit sky. I thought would look more detailed under the telescope but they still looked shiny blobs even as I adjusted the dial all the way to the left and right. But what I remembered most was closing my eyes and leaning against his furry black jacket on the walk back, letting him guide my footsteps, keeping my eyes closed even as he opened our front door, nudged the shoes from my feet, peeled off my jacket, and led me upstairs into my room.

Then it came over me like a flood: all the things I missed. Clomping through one-foot snow while holding Mom’s red gloved hand. Robert’s intent face as he stared at his computer through thick glasses, his hands going faster than any typist. I closed my eyes and rushed through memories, making sure I still remembered what the Detroit skyline looked like as we prepared to land after a trip to Taiwan, what Lake Erie looked like during a thunderstorm, the way my stuffed animals were arranged on my shelf. But when I tried to picture Mom and Dad, I saw instead Second Aunt’s sharp nose and Fourth Uncle’s rounded cheeks.

“Chinese New Year is coming up. It’ll be your first one, won’t it?” Fourth Uncle was saying. “We’ll take you to see the New Year parades, then the lantern festival at Love River, how about it?”

I tried to conjure up the memory of stargazing with dad, but it was so long ago, and it blended too much with what was happening right now. I could hardly keep myself from falling asleep as I leaned against Fourth Uncle’s fuzzy sweater.

We arrived back at Kaohsiung. I caught a pungent whiff of stinky tofu, saw the flashing red, blue, and green lights marking the betel nut stands, and espied an Internet bar, an island of light nestled between shops whose lights were darkening and whose metal grates were winding down. A handful of teenagers sat behind a row of 2-feet wide monitors, playing something that could have been Starcraft, and I remembered that I hadn’t played at all, nor kept in touch with Robert, except my second night here, when I messaged him with *Everything’s fine. My cousins have Internet. I’ll find time to play later.* *Maybe.* We passed the baseball arena, where people tossed in coins to have balls pitched at them by machines, saw the 85-story building in the shape of the character “Tall” in the distance, and eyed the stray dogs crossing the streets when the light turned green – all familiar sights by now. I closed my eyes and didn’t open them again we had arrived back home.