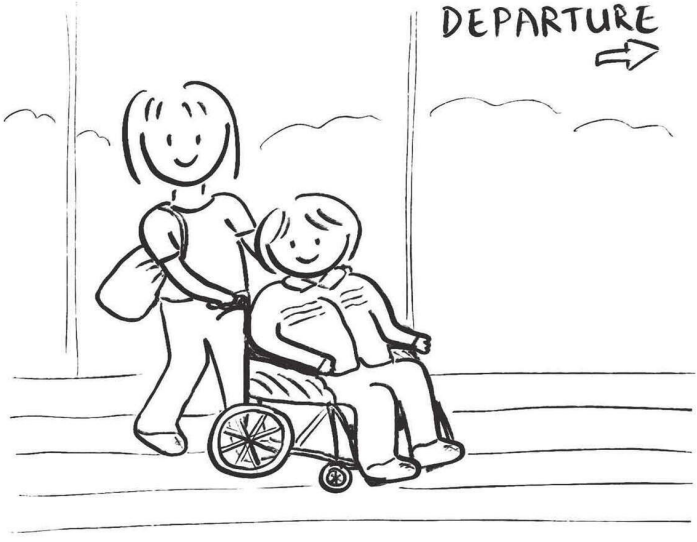
Shall we travel?

when love leads the way



XIUMING LIANG

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The events in this book have been written to the best of the author's ability. Some names and details have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals.

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For my mother

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1

With you

I stared at the wheelchair beside your bed.

What does the world look like when you sit in it?

You were sleeping like a baby. As gently as I could, I carried the chair to the living room. I was afraid that the sound of the door closing would wake you. You were such a light sleeper.

I unfolded the wheelchair and sat in it. Images and memories came to my mind. I remembered you asking us to help when you were uncomfortable.

I tried to be you. I leaned towards the left side of my body. With my left hand pressed onto the armrest, I tried to adjust my sitting position. I could hardly lift myself without using my legs to support me.

I saw how challenging it was for you. I wished I had been more considerate to make it right the first time. Now, I could see how every adjustment would bring much discomfort.

I leaned back.

How would you feel when we push you along the road? I hoped the ergonomic design of the wheelchair would make you more

comfortable.

How would you feel when we push you across bumps and curbs? You would naturally hold on to the armrest for safety. It occurred to me that we should do the lifting and the landing with grace. A hard landing could send pain to your body.

What was on your mind when we pushed you up a ramp? With your view tilted slightly up to the sky, you had to trust the person behind you. I hoped that when I said, "Mama, we are going up the ramp now," these words made you feel safe.

When I tried to see from your eyes, these details became more apparent to me. I started to see more clearly how my actions could affect you.

"Thank you for taking care of Mama," I patted my hand on the armrest. I was still getting to know this new companion in the family. With your chair, we could bring you with us. One day, we would push you and see the world again together.

A dream is a little getaway to a faraway land.
A place we hope to visit, although it seems too perfect for now.
One day, it will come true.

* * *

The week had been like a whirlwind.

It began when you started losing your appetite and then your strength. You were unable to walk on your own, and Papa had to support you. We thought you had become weaker because you had not been eating. However, you leaned onto Papa so much that we became worried and decided to go to the hospital right away.

No one spoke in the car. We were each preoccupied with

our thoughts. I recalled that you had mentioned a headache. I thought that could have been the trigger, but I refrained from making any premature judgment. That would only create anxiety. I hoped I was wrong.

The doctors and nurses began their work. The more tests they did, the more worried we became. When one of the doctors verbalized the voice in my head, I could no longer tell myself that everything was a dream.

"Your mother will have a long road to recovery." I stood there and listened. The eldest daughter was expected to take on more responsibilities, especially in times of challenge. By the time he finished speaking, I had to excuse myself for a walk.

My head was spinning. A quiet corner was what I needed.

* * *

I walked until I saw a row of empty chairs. The moment I sat down, tears trickled down my face. I stared at the floor and could hear footsteps approaching. It didn't matter if strangers were to see me cry.

Although you were lying in the hospital bed, I was thankful that you were still around. I remembered the words you once said, "Treasure the times when you can still see me. If I'm gone, you can't see me anymore."

"Don't talk like that," I had responded. I had always wished that you and Papa would stay healthy and live to a ripe old age. You did not have to worry about growing old. Shan and I would be there to take care of you both.

But now, I had no idea how much time we might have you by our sides. I had researched and learned quite a bit about stroke in the past few hours. The recovery period would be

different for every stroke survivor. Some people recovered in a few months. Many others took longer, a year or more.

It caught my attention that the stroke might not stop at one. As much as we could try to prevent it, the possibility of a second occurrence remained. The scary part was that we would not know when or how it might happen again.

I stood up and walked to the window. The sky was dark, and it seemed rain could fall anytime.

Mama, the stroke could have taken you away from us, but it did not.

The rain spattered on the window and blurred the view outside.

If God gave us a little more time to be with you, I should treasure it. For time, once gone, never comes back.

Time became my catalyst. I tried to find an abundance within its constraint while it was still possible. I would be with you as you recovered. For you, I would jump to the front line.

* * *

Would I be able to care for you?

My courage must have come from a place called love. It drowned all the fears I had felt over in the past few days.

It came from within, a part of me that I hadn't known existed. I had been a quiet and conscientious girl in school. That was what most teachers had said about me.

Long ago, the umbilical cord connected us. You gave unconditional love to your firstborn when all I could do was to receive.

In my years of growing up, you were always there. You and Papa brought us along everywhere with you. I remembered the

warm and snuggly feeling as you put the seat belt across me. Sitting in the car was always fun, for it meant we were going out. We did not know exactly where we would be going, but we knew that we were not left behind. That was who we were. A family of four everywhere we went.

As I returned to the hospital ward, Shan walked up to me. Neither of us could hide our swollen eyes. "The nurses are inside," she said. "I need to talk to you."

I thought something had happened to you while I was away. But what I heard filled my heart with warmth.

"I'll be there to take care of Mama," she said with certainty in her eyes. "But I don't know how or where to begin. You have to teach me."

"What about your job?" I asked. She had joined a company a few months prior after graduating from the polytechnic. "Well, I want to be with Mama for the time being. I can pursue a part-time degree while taking care of her," she continued.

"My little sister has grown up," I said with a smile. No longer the child who had left me to put away the pile of toys after we played when we were kids, she had grown into a young lady willing to learn and shoulder more responsibilities.

Both of us would be with you in the recovery journey, even though we had not discussed it with each other beforehand. I knew it was not an easy decision for either of us. I was about three years into my career while Shan had just entered the workforce. But there is never a perfect time for challenges to show up at the door.

"With us around, Papa wouldn't have to take care of Mama all by himself," Shan said. I nodded. You would require help with your daily needs and we could imagine Papa standing up, walking around, and bending over multiple times in

a day. Although he was considered fit and healthy in his fifties, caregiving would take a toll on his health over time. With the three of us as your caretakers, we could share the responsibilities. We could take turns and also give each other some needed rest.

A strong man with a tender heart, Papa had not said much since we had arrived at the hospital, but we knew he would feel the pain more than anyone else. He had been the pillar of strength in our family, and we knew he would continue to be so. "A man with broad shoulders is dependable," you had told me, and that had been one of your first impressions of him when you met him in your twenties.

You recognized him the moment you saw him. As a girl, you had known him as a good friend of your brother Ren. Although you would often see each other in the neighborhood or sometimes at your house when he came to look for Ren, the interaction between you was minimal.

When your family moved house, it wasn't until many years later that both of you met again. This time, it was Ren who connected you both. Ren had always doted on you, his little sister and the youngest in the family. He wanted to find a good husband for his beautiful sister. With big eyes, long hair, and a fair complexion, you were a natural beauty. And though you had suitors, you weren't in a hurry to settle down.

Ren wanted to find someone who was trustworthy and dependable. Among his wide circle of friends, he believed that his childhood friend would be the best person for you. Hence he took the initiative and became the matchmaker. After a few years of courtship, wedding bells rang, and then I became a part of the family.

Recalling your love story, I always felt that there was an

invisible red thread of fate connecting you and Papa. You would meet again no matter the distance or time.

* * *

There are only twenty-four hours in a day. I could be either at the office or at home, but not both at the same time.

The financial industry is one where people tend to work beyond 9 to 6. If I could only see you very early in the morning or late in the evening, I wouldn't be able to accompany you to physiotherapy or acupuncture treatments. I knew that my heart would be with you even when I was in the office.

Would you be doing exercises diligently when I was not around?

Who would massage your swollen legs when you sat for long hours?

When the doctor had hinted that we could hire a helper to take care of you, you looked away and I saw the bitter smile on your face. You had always been so independent in taking care of our family. My friends were often surprised that I grew up without a helper at home.

"No helper? Did you do it all by yourselves?" they asked me. In their families, the parents had hired a helper to take care of the children and the household chores while the parents worked.

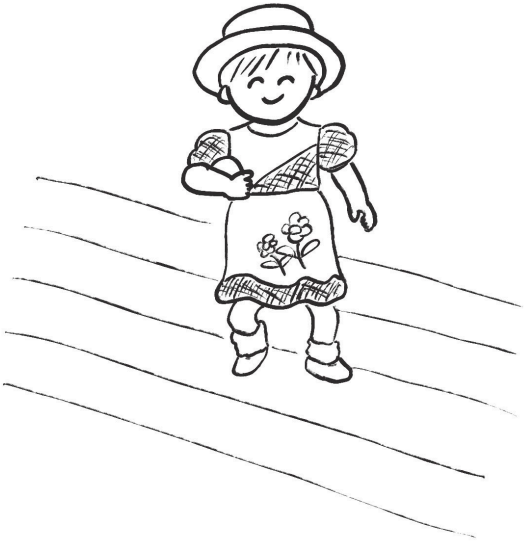
"Papa and Mama would take turns to cook. Shan and I would sweep the floor and fold the clothes," I replied. You had trained us to be independent. "If we can do it on our own, we should learn how to do it," you said.

I knew that you had never been in favor of hiring a helper. I also didn't feel comfortable letting someone else take care of you. I wondered if this person would be as caring and attentive

as we would be. Besides, I believed it would just be a matter of time before I would come to you, just like I did as a little girl.

Do you remember that photograph? Wearing a white hat and a blue dress, I brimmed with joy and excitement as I ran towards you. Little did I know that I was supposed to stand still and let Papa take a picture of me. All I could see was that I was far away from you. *I had to run over.*

Knowing how family support could play a huge role in the recovery phase, I wanted to be there with you. Just as I had run to you in the past, I knew I would do the same this time.



* * *

Like many people, I used to think that the milestones to achieve in life would occur in this order: graduation, career, marriage, parenthood, and retirement. I had thought that a career was important to me, seeing it as a reflection of my capabilities. I had excelled in school and thought I should do the same in my career.

When you became ill, these assumptions were tested, leading me to question what I really cared about. *Am I ready to put my career on hold?* If I were to take a break now, I would lag behind other people my age. Yet one question lingered: *What happens when the people we care for need us while we are chasing after these milestones in life?* My logical mind would tell me not to get too emotional.

Standing at the crossroad between career and family, I had to choose. I knew the importance of family support in contributing to your recovery. I could be your nutritionist, chef, and physiotherapist. All I needed was to learn.

Am I up to it? Am I someone who is willing to veer from a traditional path?

I had no immediate answers but I knew I didn't like the person I became when I compared myself with others. Recognizing we are all different, I wondered why I would put myself in a race with them? I could rejoin the corporate workforce a few years later when you were much better. Since I had created the competition, I could choose to walk away. No one was organizing the race but me.

This question floated to my mind: *What is the life that I am not ready to live?*

The answers came to me right away.

I am not ready to live a life where I pursue my goals at the expense of leaving you behind.

I know that I could do much more to help you, and I should do it while time is still on my side.

I had known for a long time about the unpredictability of life.

It was another typical day spent at home. We had the television turned on, but I didn't pay much attention to it until a newsflash caught my attention. The next thing I saw was a plane crashing into one of the Twin Towers in New York. Black smoke billowed into the sky. I gasped and ran to tell you the news.

Twenty minutes later, another plane crashed into the South Tower. The building was on fire.

Three months before, we had been there on the 107th floor. The beautiful cityscape of New York was still in my mind. My heart dropped as I thought about the people in the buildings running for their lives. So much to say, so little time left. I realized then how everything could change in an instant. I saw that all we could do was to treasure the times we have.

And this had led to my decision to choose family over career. *With every step I take, I will be creating my own path. The trail will be filled with moments where love leads the way.*

* * *

When I decided to leave my corporate job, it never occurred to me that I would be taking on a few new roles at the same time. Life unfolded in its own ways.

My day began early at the break of dawn. I would drive to the market and come home with bags of fresh vegetables and meat. Nothing can replace food cooked at home with love and

less salt, sugar, and oil. Healthy eating would lead to a healthier mind and body.

Exercise was just as important. You would be awake when I came back from the market and it would be time for your morning routine. Papa and I would help you with some warmups to reduce your muscle spasticity after long hours of sleep. After some massage to loosen the grip in your right palm and encourage more blood circulation to your hand and leg, it would be time for you to practice on your own. I could see how strenuous it was when you had to rely on the stronger hand to lift the weaker one. I knew how tiring leg lifting could be for you when the sound of the drop became louder.

When you felt like giving up, I would encourage you to try again. In those few minutes of rest, I would tell you stories and make you laugh, so you forgot about the tiredness. I noticed the smallest changes and would tell you about the little progress you had made, so you could see how far you had come.

In the afternoon, we would bring you on alternate days to physiotherapy and acupuncture treatments to help you regain your mobility. Life was busy as I took care of you and our little snack shop.

A few months before you had fallen sick, you had seen a shophouse for sale and had opened a shop selling Korean tidbits and kimchi. The early 2000s was the period of the Korean wave (Hallyu). The Korean dramas, their music soundtracks, and food were part of the soft culture that swept across Asian countries.

Working at our shop turned out to provide the time flexibility I needed. With Aunt Amy to tend to the shop, I could juggle my time between taking care of you and meeting with the suppliers. Customers liked her friendly demeanor as she smiled with her

eyes. She cared about you just like we did. On the days that she was not working, she would sometimes bring dishes of home-cooked food to our house.

Besides her, a few others of our close family and friends - including Aunt Sarah and Uncle Hong - would often bring food when they came to visit you. Their kind and thoughtful gestures provided us with time for rest as Papa and I took a break from cooking. I could use this time to learn acupressure massage from books and videos to aid your recovery.

While you were making progress, it was not happening as quickly as we had hoped. I began to question if I had made the right choice as my fears and doubts crept out in silent steps.

What else could I do for you?

Maybe I wasn't the right person to help you?

As I questioned my capabilities, my negative thoughts would begin to spiral. As if I was in a room with the walls closing in on me, my chest would tighten and my breathing became short. And then the question arose: *Had I made the right choice between family and career?*

There were no answers, only echoes ringing back in my ears. I would need to stop thinking and get some sleep.

* * *

I woke up with a clearer mind. As I sat in my bed with my feet on the floor, I recalled that this task, simple for me, had not been so for you. Initially, you had been too weak to get up from the bed yourself. Both Papa and I had to help you. Day by day, step by step, you started doing exercises in bed and then progressed to be able to get up on your own.

When I recalled that I had been there to accompany you and

witness every improvement you made, I knew that the time and effort had been worth it. Nothing could ever replace the joy of helping your loved one to be well again.

I decided to stop looking for answers. Instead, I had faith that they would show up when the time was right.

2

Shall we travel?

Snow-capped mountains and beautiful fjords. Whenever a travel documentary aired on television, Papa would ask, "Let's go there, shall we?" Shan and I would exchange glances and jump into the conversation to keep the excitement going.

Papa often said to me, "Your mother has stayed in the house for too long. We should go on a holiday, just like in the past." It had been six years since your stroke and six years since we had last traveled. As a family who used to enjoy seeing new places together each year, a shared journey would be symbolic of better days ahead of us.

Although the past few years had not been easy for us, the greatest gift was to see that your health had improved over the years. Family and friends who came to our house would often say that you were better than the last time they had seen you, be it one month or a year ago. Their comments were encouraging to hear and I knew what they said was true.

You looked radiant and your eyes were bright. You had a good memory and would remind me of the things that I had

forgotten. I believed Papa noticed your improvements too, otherwise he would not have encouraged you to travel.

"I'm with you, Papa," I would reply, "but Mama is not ready to travel…"

When we brought up the topic of travel, you either shook your head or remained silent. This time was no different.

I knew it would only be a matter of time before you opened up to the world again. Although I wished to hear more about your hesitation, I would put you in a difficult spot if I were to ask. Putting myself in your shoes, a few questions that might be holding you back came into my mind.

What would it look like for me to travel to a faraway place in a wheelchair?

Can my body take the long-distance flight?

Will taking care of me be too tiring for all of you and take away the fun of travel?

With a subtle hint here and a little encouragement there, I hoped you would change your mind over time.

"There are many stories of accessible travels. Let me read you one or two of their journeys. We could do the same."

"What do you think if we were to fly to another country? Not too far away from home, just a few hours of flight. Maybe a week only or shorter if you like."

"Mama, are you worried that it would be too tiring for us to take care of you when traveling is supposed to be fun and relaxing? You don't have to worry. The happiness of traveling the world with you would make us forget our tiredness."

As much as possible, I would always keep our conversations open-ended.

"When you feel like traveling again, just let us know. We will be waiting for you," I said as I wrapped my arms around you.

"Leave the travel planning to me," I continued with my hand on my heart.

Shan and I were confident that you would surprise us one day. You used to say that everything has its time and place, and this had become a part of our outlook on life. I believed that the right door would open when the time came, for you and for me.

With your improved health, Papa felt that he could take care of you by himself so he encouraged us to pursue our careers again. I felt more at ease at the thought of returning to my profession. But I also knew that the pace and expectations of corporate work would leave me with only a few hours to be with you at night. I could continue to help you with massages but many of the daily tasks that I had been doing would have to pass on to Papa. I wasn't sure if this would be a viable option for all of us, even though Papa said he would be able to manage.

I also wondered how easy my job search might be. I had the qualifications but lagged behind others in terms of job experience. I might not stand a chance if a recruiter was just screening through my resume for relevant work history.

I listed my skills on paper.

Empathy and compassion.

Interpersonal communication.

Resourcefulness.

Time management.

Go above and beyond the call of duty.

These are transferable skills and applicable in any industry, aren't they?

If a recruiter considered my overall experience and skills, I might stand a chance to get an interview. But once I submitted the resume, the selection process would be beyond my control.

I remembered your wisdom when you used to tell me that there is a time for everything in life. Hence I told Papa that I would explore the opportunities and keep my options open. I would let things happen on their own and liberate myself from the process of worrying.

If the time had come for me to move on to a new phase of life, I knew the door would open for me to return to the corporate world. In the meantime, I would still be at home. I wasn't in a hurry to leave you.

* * *

I did not expect things to move so fast.

Two interview opportunities at different banks came one after another. This was unbelievable as it had been only one week since I had sent out my resumes.

I felt butterflies in my stomach as I thought about getting some smart attire for the interviews and preparing for the list of commonly asked questions. It had been a long time since I had needed to enter a room, talk about myself, and then leave in anticipation of what would happen next.

The following week, I wore a black suit and went for the first interview. The hiring manager was a senior banker who was looking for an assistant to join her team.

When the door opened, a tall and slim lady walked in. Her bright smile made me feel at ease as we began casually chatting. She asked questions about my work experience and soon we talked about you–how you were doing and what had made me decide to return to work at this time. I told her that you were much better and that I was returning to the financial industry because there were still a lot of things for me to learn.

I could sense that although previous work experience was an important criterion, she was also looking for someone who was willing to learn and figure things out. She asked if we had a helper at home. When I told her that we had none, she was curious to hear how I had taken care of you and the challenges that I had faced as a young caretaker. When I received a job offer the next evening, I was stunned. I had expected a long waiting time or even no reply.

With an offer in hand and another interview the following day, I felt blessed to be in a fortunate situation. Since I needed to discuss this with the family first, I requested some time to consider. She gave me two days and asked me to let her know earlier if I had made up my mind. There was still the paperwork and checks to be done before I could begin working.

The hiring manager at the other bank was also a female senior banker. She was looking for someone who could join soon because her assistant had resigned. She asked about you too and was more curious about how I had taken care of you than about my other work experience. The interview lasted for about twenty minutes, and then I left.

I was still in the business district when my cell phone rang. The number looked familiar. Sitting behind the wheel, I looked for a spot to park my car before answering. There was a sign pointing to an open-air carpark ahead and I turned left.

I parked my car in the nearest empty space. Returning the missed call, I watched traffic moving along the main road while waiting for a response.

It was the lady whom I had just met. She was calling to offer me the job along with a slightly higher salary than the first offer. I could sense the urgency in her quick offer, recognizing I might be the only candidate who was quickly available since I had no

notice period to serve.

I was speechless. I had never expected to receive so many offers in such a short time. I called Papa and asked him to put our conversation on speaker mode so that you could hear. Both of you felt happy for me and I knew we could discuss further when I reached home.

While I was talking, a bus passed in front of me and I saw a familiar name being advertised. It was the name of the bank from my first interview.

Was that a sign of serendipity?

The name showed up even though I had not yet said a word to anyone about my thoughts.

* * *

"Mama, I'm home."

I knew you would hear me. You would know from the sound of the opening door.

It had only been a few months since I had started working at my new job. I was grateful for the doors that had opened for me and for meeting people who had seen me for who I was. Both hiring managers were nice and friendly, and they had both recognized the work that I had done for the family.

You, Papa, and Shan had been supportive and encouraged me to go with my heart. I felt that I had more rapport with the first manager, so I accepted her offer. When friends heard about my decision, some of them suggested that I could have asked for a higher salary before accepting the offer. I did not, because I was already content.

After a long day in the office, I looked forward to seeing you again. Before I walked up to you, Papa came over and said that

you had a surprise for me. I wondered what it could be.

"What is it you want to tell me, Mama?" I asked as I pulled a chair to sit beside you. My head leaned forward as I put my hands on yours. You were always the first person I looked for when I came home. I felt curious and excited to hear what you would say.

You spoke in Mandarin.

"Did you say Hanguo (Korea)?" I asked. I could not believe my ears because you said it on your own, without any help.

While I was still trying to make sense of this, Papa's hands were up in the air. It had been a long time since I had seen him so excited.

"Hanguo," you repeated. I heard it loud and clear the second time. My ears could not be wrong.

"We are traveling?" I asked in bewilderment.

You nodded your head.

I tried to piece the puzzle together. "Why did you choose Korea?" I smiled. Papa told me that you had been watching a few Korean travel programs on television during the past week. That could have been the reason. The more we see and hear about a place, the more we remember and feel drawn to it.

Yet I could see another possible explanation for your choice because I remembered that day.

The sun was bright, and you wore a hat. We were standing in a lush green field on Jeju Island. You remarked that it would be nice to retire here.

I didn't think that you meant it. I thought you referred to the idyllic life there. It would be wonderful to slow down and live in a place where natural beauty is only a short drive away. During spring, the canola flowers would be in bloom. It would be so picturesque to see the field of yellow flowers with Seongsan

Ilchulbong in the background. When the tangerines were in season, it would be so fun to join in the fruit picking. A perfect activity because you loved fruits.

"Sure, let's come here again. I'll bring you," I said.

* * *

When you said yes to travel, I would be the family's travel planner. That was the promise.

Now, the time had come. I had long ago decided that you would be at the center of my travel planning decisions. But first, I needed to know the places you would like to visit.

"Mama, where would you like to go? Seoul? Jeju? or other provinces?" I asked as we watched television after dinner. With a clue or two, I would be able to work from there. You smiled without saying more.

I could tell from your expressive eyes that the words flowed like a river in your mind. But the stroke left behind a big rock that stood in the way of your speech.

It hadn't been easy in the beginning. When you had tried to express yourself but we still could not guess your intentions after repeated unsuccessful attempts, I could feel the frustration in all of us followed by silence.

Your first words the next morning conveyed the idea that you had tried to express the previous night. That was when I realized how important it was for you to communicate your message. You had carried the tension throughout the night, and I wondered if you had slept well. From then on, I told myself that I would keep trying until I understood you.

What could have led you to say this?

Could it be some conversation we had earlier or something you

had seen?

If I couldn't figure it out on the same day, I would reassure you that I would try again tomorrow. With every try, I came to understand your thoughts a little better. Over the years, I became the one in the family who could interpret the few words you were able to say and weave them into meaning.

I wondered how I could hear your voice now to make our plans. I intended to show you some travel booklets and leaflets with colorful photographs, so you could point me to the places in your mind.

In the meantime, I was thinking about how to make you more comfortable sitting during the flight. The traveling time from Singapore to Seoul would take about eight hours. Besides going to the bathroom, you would be sitting most of the time. Your muscles could get stiff from poor blood circulation. Since I could not increase the leg space in front of an economy seat, I could massage your legs onboard the plane, just like I did for you all those years. With my closed fist, I would pound the side of your bum, thighs, and calves.

I had learned to do this when I was still a little girl. Grandma would lie on one side of her body like the reclining Buddha. She would call me over to give her a little massage. The pounding of my tiny fists was just right for her.

I liked it when she called me over. I felt that I could contribute something even though I was a child.

* * *

I had intended to keep our travel group small with just the four of us. But I knew it would be unlikely.

Mama, you were well-loved by many people. They had been

waiting to travel with you again, just like we had.

It all began with our first trip. Two families on a road trip around the South Island of New Zealand in 1998. Rolling mountains and beautiful lakes. Meadows and fruit farms. We stopped wherever we liked to take in the scenic beauty, feeling carefree and gay. We drove to fruit farms and had a try picking apples.

We had a few firsts on this trip. We went on a helicopter ride and soared above Mount Cook, the highest mountain in New Zealand, and stepped into a winter wonderland. The exhilarating jet boat experience at Shotover River was also unforgettable. Many times the boat was so close to the cliff that I held tightly to the handrail for dear life. With everything moving so fast, excitement and fear engulfed me at the same time. I shut my eyes. I had to trust our skillful driver. *We are on the same boat; who else can I trust but him?*

Are we banging into the cliff?

Phew!

Again?!

When I thought it would finally be smooth sailing, he raised his hand and made a few circles in mid-air. The iconic 360-degree spin had all of us screaming with excitement.

Family and friends saw our travel photographs and expressed interest in joining us on our next trip. Some of them said it would be more fun to travel in a group than on their own. A few others said, "How often in life can we travel together? Everyone is so busy. If we have the chance, we should do it."

Our travel group started to grow. We had enough people to take up almost a third of the seats on a travel bus for our subsequent trips. We were like a big extended family, with ages ranging between 16 and 50. Together we traveled on package

tours and left our footprints in New York, London, and Beijing.

Being the tour leader now, I felt a huge responsibility to tell the group that this trip would be somewhat similar, but with important differences. I wanted to provide a frame of view for people to decide if they wanted to join in.

"We will be traveling at a slower pace this time."

"My priority will be Mama. We will be going to the attractions which are wheelchair accessible, so there is a possibility we will leave some places out. Would that be alright with you?"

"I may be asking for help along the way when necessary. For example, could you help me to keep the door open while we push Mama into a restaurant?"

Their responses were similar. And they replied almost right away.

"Your Mum is the priority. I understand, and we would follow wherever you go."

"Don't worry about us. You go ahead and plan with your mother in mind."

"If you need any help, just let us know."

I was at a loss for words in front of these loving people. There are many people we meet in life. Some stay for a while; some stay longer. Only time will tell. I realized that my self-inflicted stress had almost turned them away.

This time, we would be having our own tour. I would research the places of interest to find out if they were wheelchair accessible and then work with a travel agency to plan the trip. The agents are the professionals who could help me with logistics and accommodation. But I would not leave it all to them. I would be involved, working together with them, providing your voice.

3

Will our voices be heard?

Would you hear my words even if I didn't say them out loud?

Mama, I hope to find someone who will care about you and have your best interests at heart. A person with empathy who can understand the importance of this trip for us.

I had no idea whom I would meet. I did know that we might start on a journey alone, but it would not be lonely for long. We would meet someone along the way.

I told you a little about my wish before Shan and I left the house for the travel fair. You smiled and nodded. I wondered if this meant you had heard me or that you already knew whom I would meet.

At the travel fair, we met up with Aunt Cathy. I recalled that she would often check out the holiday deals for her annual family trips, and had asked her to come along for a second opinion.

We met many travel agents who were friendly and open to discuss our trip with us.

"Where would you like to go?"

"When do you intend to travel?"

"How big is your group?"

I could answer these factual questions quickly, but I had more questions of my own.

"Do you provide accessible travel to Korea?" I asked.

"Yes. We work with our local agents there, and they could help with the planning," they replied.

Oh, so this is how it will work. There will be at least three parties involved in the planning – the travel agent in Singapore, a Korean travel agent, and me.

We had spent hours at the travel fair and had spoken to many travel agents. I didn't think I had met the right person yet. In my heart, I had been looking for someone who would take care of you as well as we would. I wanted to be supported by someone who would seek to find possibilities when things might not work. Someone who, in my opinion, would go the extra mile to help us in the planning.

Perhaps I had been too quick to judge. There were a few agents with whom I could explore working.

I thought of you and your smile. *What would you do if you were here with me?*

* * *

When we walked up to the counter, there were only two chairs so one of us would have to stand.

"Let's go to another table, and we can all sit down to have a chat," was the first thing Kay ever said to us.

The suggestion came at the right time. We had spent a day walking around, going from one travel booth to another. I had felt a little apologetic that Aunt Cathy had to accompany us and

stand for long hours. Kay guided us to sofas in a corner — a comfortable setting for conversation, where we could see one another at eye level while our legs took a rest.

"I don't usually sit at the counter. You are lucky to meet me," Kay said in a half-joking manner. I could see Aunt Cathy raise her eyebrows as I did the same. Was she trying to be humorous? I was intrigued by her depth of experience which seemed to underlie her confidence.

I glanced across the hall to the counter. Most of the travel agents were in their twenties, and she seemed to be someone more senior. Her tanned skin told me that she was often under the sun.

"Are you a senior tour guide?" I asked.

"Don't make me sound so old!" She gave out a hearty laugh.

"Why did you say that we are lucky to meet you?" I was curious.

"I meant that I'm seldom here in Singapore. Most of the time I am away in Europe for months."

Ah... She is a tour guide for European countries.

I observed Aunt Cathy and Shan chatting with Kay about traveling to Europe. Travel is a topic that can open doors to overflowing conversation. The glimpses of her stories left us asking for more.

When Aunt Cathy asked her to give us a good price for the tour, for we had a ready group of travelers and there was no need to look for others to fill up the seats, Kay had an awkward smile on her face and looked as if she might break out in a cold sweat. Her expression was so funny that we all laughed.

A natural conversationalist. Her easy-going personality. I believed she would get along well with everyone.

"Tell me more about where you would like to go. Only Seoul?"

Kay asked.

"We are looking to go to Seoul and Jeju Island," I replied. "My mum is in a wheelchair, and we have about 30 people."

"Got it. Tell me more about the places you would like to visit. With such a large group, our company would assign a local tour leader to travel with you to Korea," Kay said while making her notes. "We do have some places in mind and are open to suggestions," I replied as I handed my list to her. It contained my handwritten notes about the attractions we intended to visit. Before Shan and I had come to the travel fair, we had briefly discussed the trip. With a list, conversations with the travel agents would be easier.

"This list is not finalized and could change," I said. There was something that I had collected from the travel fair and wanted to show you.

"Don't worry, I'll convey your message to our in-house planners on Monday," Kay replied as she took a quick look at my list.

"Did you mention a local tour leader that would accompany us? What does this person do?" I asked.

"The tour leader will travel with your group from Singapore to Korea and accompany you back home. You will meet the tour guide in Korea," she explained.

It occurred to me that the tour leader did not have to be the country's history expert. The tour leader would be sharing the duty with the tour guide in taking care of us.

I had been looking for someone who could take care of others. What if Kay was our tour leader? It would be a plus if she knew Korea well. It would not be a minus if she did not, since we would have the Korean tour guide telling us the history and stories.

I imagined the tour guide leading us from the front while Kay would take care of the people who walked more slowly.

"Oh, I see. Can you tell me more about your travel experience taking care of elderly passengers?" I asked.

She told us that constant walking during travels could be tiring, especially for the elderly or people with weaker knees. She would always carry some ointments and creams in her travel kit for people who needed topical pain relief for knee pain and tired legs. I was amazed when she told us about the foot massage she had given to one of her elderly passengers.

"Can you be our local guide?" I asked without consulting Aunt Cathy and Shan. I listened to the little voice inside me, and the words just came out on their own. I felt like I could trust her, although we had met less than an hour ago. Her eyes were big and clear when she spoke. I didn't think she had said those words to impress me. The most vivid descriptions can only come genuinely from the heart. The eyes won't lie.

When I looked around at my two trusted aides, I could tell from their eyes that they supported me in this decision.

* * *

Mama, I never get tired of telling this story.

"I met an interesting person today. I asked her to be our tour leader, and she declined right away," I said as I poured a cup of water and sat down beside you. You looked at me in amazement, wanting to hear more.

"She said that she isn't the right person. She recommended a few other people, whom she believed would be better tour leaders for Korea than her," I continued.

Kay's reply wasn't unexpected. One would need to consider a

request such as ours. An immediate yes would seem too unreal.

"I believe that Kay would be a good fit, even though she usually covers European tours," I said. "She has the empathy and willingness to go the extra mile," and I shared stories of how she had cared for her older passengers. You smiled as you continued to listen.

"She was also easy to talk to and I believe she would get along with the people in our group," I added. "Moreover, she seemed to be the big sister I was looking to work with on this trip. I could learn from her to become a better travel planner over time." Although this was our first trip, I looked forward to more trips to come.

"We'll see how it goes," I said. I believed everything would turn out fine. In the meantime, you reached out your left hand to take a travel booklet from the table.

"I'll get it for you," I said. I put down my cup and held the booklet in my hand while you flipped the pages. I had collected a sizable stack of booklets and leaflets from the travel fair that day. We would go through them together. I wanted you to be involved in the decision making, like how you had included us during our New Zealand trip.

* * *

"Where would you like to stay for the night?" you asked. We looked at each other. It was hard to choose between all the beautiful motels around us.

"I like the one with the blue-colored roof," Shan said, pointing to a house on her right.

"I like the one that we just passed. The house with the grey-colored roof," I said. "It has beautiful flowers in the garden." I

was hoping that my elaboration would help to pull some votes.

"Let's check out the motel with the blue roof. Your sister said it first," you said. I looked at Shan and she made a victory hand sign.

We had not pre-booked any accommodation for the trip. The adults felt that it would not be too difficult to find lodging for two families. We would decide when we arrived in a town.

While Papa and Uncle were checking out the rates, the four youths gathered in the car park and discussed the motels that caught our fancy.

"I liked the white houses located at the corner of the street."

"I liked the one with the orange roof, but the sign showed no vacancy."

"The one with the brown roof, across the street, with balconies."

"Why don't you all take turns and choose a different color each day?" Your suggestion could not have come at a better time. We went with it and had so much fun. Blue, orange, brown, grey, and white. That was how we decided on the accommodation for the night based on colors.

* * *

With these travel booklets and leaflets about Korea, I hoped you could tell me where you would like to go. It didn't take long before you pointed to a place on the brochure. I knew this place. We had been there before.

According to legend, the seven nymphs from Heaven would descend and bathe in Cheonjeyeon Waterfall, known as the Pond of the Emperor of Heaven. There are two ways to see this three-tier waterfall, either admiring the view from the

Chilseonyeo Bridge or exploring on foot. We had taken both routes, going first to the bridge before climbing the stairs.

I remembered there were signboards pointing to the left and right of the trail. "Do you want to climb up or walk down the stairs?" I asked.

"Let's climb up first, and then we will make our way down," you suggested.

You led the way, and up we went. It wasn't too difficult a climb, just many steps. While we took short breaks along the way, you were the one with stamina that day. You only stopped because of us.

I was glad that we took the way up and saw the waterfall from near and far. At the highest section, we saw the plunging waterfall from a distance. The air was cooler when we made our descent. The occasional shade provided by the canopy of trees made our walk more enjoyable as we approached the second tier of the cascading waterfall. Her gentle flow calmed our hearts as we took a rest.

The lowest section was where we could get closest to the waterfall and feel the cooling breeze. I recognized this place from the photographs that I had seen in the travel brochures. Most tour groups chose to come to this spot. No wonder we had seen fewer group tourists when we had climbed up.

I had intended not to include the waterfall in our itinerary this time. The steps were not suitable for you.

"We have been there before," I said, trying to dissuade you.

You shook your head saying, "Let's go."

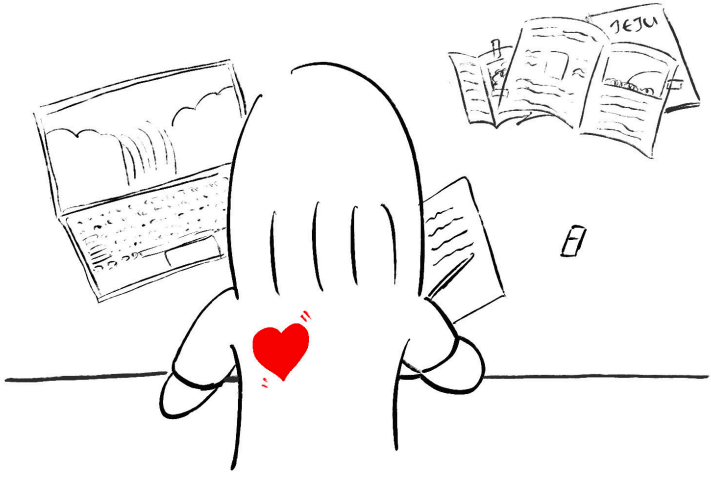
"We could go to other places," I said as I searched for another option. "Mama, we could go here…" You shook your head again.

"Do you want to go there? It's for them, am I right?" I asked.

You nodded. I knew why you insisted. You didn't want our travel companions to miss this popular attraction when most of them would be going to Jeju Island for the first time. As much as I put you in the center of my planning, you would put others ahead of yourself.

I knew you did not mind waiting for the group, but I worried about how you would feel while waiting. *Would you feel left behind?*

This time, I hesitated.



* * *

I would not say no to you. I relented and emailed Kay to explore the possibilities.

There are a few places we would like to include. I know it's not suitable for the wheelchair, but Mama does not mind waiting while others climb...

Kay's reply was brief, a quick note to inform me that our request had been sent over to her Korean travel agent. The waiting time after each email always felt like a long time. I thought, *maybe this is how it works. There's a lot going on behind the scenes which I do not know about.*

Two weeks passed with no news from Kay. I called her up. She apologized for the delay in reply as she had been leading another tour group in Europe.

The Korean agent was still working on the itinerary. "The travel pace cannot be too fast for your mother. We had to buffer time at each attraction." Kay paused and continued, "In thinking about adding more stops, we are still working to see if it is feasible to include them. We need to allocate time for lunch and toilet breaks too." Hearing Kay describe these details of our days, I felt as if I were already traveling in Jeju.

This is how I should plan. I had to prepare as if I was already there.

What will I be looking out for when I am there? What could go wrong? If we were to go for a second trip, I would know how to do it better.

Meanwhile, the big question remained.

Will Kay be joining us?

I had requested Kay be our tour leader by sending an email to her company. As much as I might like her to join us, it would depend on her company's decision.

After four months of planning with multiple emails back and

forth, the itinerary was ready. Kay invited the group for a tour briefing at her office. We were getting closer to the departure date.

4

The first trip

It had been a long time since I had last been there, but the sense of familiarity came back once I saw the iconic control tower. The airport was a place I had loved to come when I was a teenager. When you had asked me where I would like to go during the weekend, I would reply, "Let's go to the airport, shall we?" and everyone would laugh. I guessed my answer was predictable.

Just walking around and seeing the planes take off and land would make me happy. With every departing plane, I would imagine it flying to a place of adventure. With every returning flight, I would think of the people coming back with memories and gifts.

This time, we would be flying to Korea, the land of the morning calm. It would be a journey to realize our long-awaited dreams. It would also be my journey of love and learning.

We had arrived at the airport three hours before departure time. It would be better to have time to spare rather than to be in a rush. We could catch up with the rest of the group while waiting for the check-in counters to open.

* * *

"Hi everyone!" Kay said as she waved her hands at us and looked around at the collected group. "All of you are already here," she said, her voice trailing off. "You are my first tour group who arrived earlier than me!"

"Hi Kay, you're not late. You are right on time," I reassured her. I hoped our early arrival had not caused any undue stress for her at the beginning of the trip.

Kay came over to say hi to you. She noticed that you wore a few layers beneath your jacket and asked if you felt cold. You smiled as you shook your head. You had worn three layers for the top and pants with fleece lining. We knew you would feel the cold more than we would so we had helped you to dress in layers.

Keeping you warm was important so that you could enjoy the holiday. The air-conditioning in the airport and in the cabin could be strong at times, and the temperature in Korea was expected to be below 20 degrees Celsius. I had a cashmere blanket in my bag on standby. Shan had prepared an extra set of clothing for you in our carry-on bag, and Aunt Sarah had bought some hand warmers too. It would be better to prepare more than less, just in case.

"Ladies and gentlemen, please wait here. I'll be back again soon to bring you over to proceed with the check-in," Kay announced.

"Yes, Kay!" the group replied loud and clear.

Our tour leader tied her hair into a bun and adjusted the backpack on her shoulders as she headed to the counter. It was time to get to work.

* * *

"Hi, I have a passenger in a wheelchair, and we will require some assistance," Kay said to the airline staff at the check-in counter as she handed our passports over.

Prior to our arrival, Kay had asked me for some details about your wheelchair which she would need to submit to the airline. "It's a lightweight and foldable manual wheelchair," I had replied during a call. "I don't have the dimensions–length, width, and height–with me now. I will send you a text message," I had continued.

The airline needed all the necessary details to assist with pre-departure boarding. We waited while the lady behind the counter performed her checks.

"Would you like me to arrange for our staff member to come over? He will bring her to the boarding gate," she said.

I turned to Kay, "It seems a little early for Mama to go to the boarding gate now. We would like to bring her around after we've cleared immigration." We didn't want to be separated from you so early. There was still time for us to visit the shops and eat some food if you liked.

Kay understood. "Can we arrange for assistance at the boarding gate to bring her to the aircraft please?" she requested.

"No problem, we can arrange that," the lady at the counter replied with a smile. "Please arrive early at the boarding gate. She will be one of the first few passengers to board the aircraft."

"Can we board the plane together with her?" I asked. I knew you would feel uncomfortable if we were not around you. When you tried to say something in Mandarin, the flight attendant might not understand you. At least one of us had to be there with you. I would not agree to leave you alone with a stranger.

"There can be one accompanying passenger with her. Who will that be?" she asked.

"That will be my father," I replied right away. Even though I would like to be there with you, I knew you would prefer to be with Papa. You had never left each other's side in all these years.

"Can she walk a little? Shall we arrange for an aisle chair?" she asked.

"She could walk a little, but perhaps we could have the aisle chair on standby too?" I replied. I wasn't sure about the walking distance and thought it would be better to have an alternative option available.

"Please arrange for it," Kay said in support of my decision.

While the counter staff continued with the administrative procedures, I updated you and Papa on what had been discussed. "Mama, there will be an airline staff member to help you later at the boarding gate. Papa will accompany you to board the plane first. Shan and I will join the queue and you will see us … " I stopped halfway when the lady from the desk came over to place a tag on your wheelchair.

The importance of this tag had not occurred to me until that moment. We had to get our passports stamped, our luggage checked in, and the same for the wheelchair. Without it, the wheelchair would not be able to fly with you. From then on, I would always take a second look for the tag on your wheelchair before leaving the check-in counter.

* * *

While the flight attendant had thoughtfully offered us the aisle chair, Papa thought it would be better to help you take a slow

walk when you needed to use the lavatory. Some walking would encourage blood circulation in your legs.

Making your way to the restroom turned out to be quite a challenging task as the narrow aisle had space for one and not much room for two. With your left hand placed on the seat in front of you, you could lift yourself up a little but lacked the strength to stand up on your own. Papa tried to support you as you stood up. Step by step, you tried to move out from the seat to the aisle. Standing facing each other, he led you as you moved forward and both of you soon walked in perfect synchronization.

With his back facing towards the front and his eyes focused on you, Papa might not be aware of any potential knocks and bumps that he might meet. Even though I knew Papa would not care about these little knocks, I felt that taking care of him was just as important as taking care of you. I followed behind you and became the extra pair of eyes to watch out for the safety of you both.

Watching the two of you, it occurred to me to think in pairs. I saw that I should consider both your caretaker and you when planning our travels. The caretaker could be anyone–Papa, Shan, or the person who was helping you at any time.

I had read about the empty chair that Amazon's CEO Jeff Bezos would place in his meetings. The chair represented the customer and was a reminder to consider their voices, though absent from the room when decisions are made.

In my planning, I should place two seats side by side instead of one. It is easy for the caretaker to put himself or herself second and say, "Don't worry about me." I could see now the importance of thinking of your caretakers as I had done for you.

It would be another two hours before we landed at Incheon International Airport. *What would make Papa happy?* Just like you, I knew he wouldn't want us to go out of the way to buy things for him.

Something simple would be good. A cool, refreshing Korean beer would be nice for him to relax and unwind in the hotel room.

* * *

We started early the next day and went to the Mysterious Road, a place where cars were said to move uphill on their own. The bus was filled with silence as we approached the starting line. Everyone focused on the experience as the bus moved along the Mysterious Road. It was rolling. Well, it was cruising, gentle and steady to the finish line.

We got down from the bus for some free time. There were small groups of tourists rolling plastic bottles on the road. It was our turn to try.

Kay said to me, "Let me take care of your mother. Papa and both of you can take a rest."

She had also proposed this to Shan and me when we were at the airport. We had declined the offer, "Thank you, we can manage. We would feel uncomfortable if Mama's not around us."

It wouldn't have been very nice if I kept turning her away. This time, I asked for your opinion. You nodded to let Kay take care of you and suggested we join in the fun.

Shan and I walked ahead, feeling excited and a little hesitant at the same time. *Would you be comfortable with Kay?* I knew you always preferred the family to be around you. In all these

years, besides us, you had only allowed a few other people, such as Aunt Sarah and Uncle Hong, to push you. The rapport and chemistry between the pusher and you were important. You needed to feel safe and comfortable with them.

We chose a spot where you could see us. As we took turns, we felt like kids again rolling a bottle and catching it. Your turn and then mine. It had been a long time since we had played.

* * *

There was a place where we could see the sky and the sea, the mountain and the flowers all together. I had been captivated by a beautiful photo I had seen since the first time we came to Jeju Island. We came in September that time and missed the flower season.

This time, the canola flowers were still in bloom. I could see the outline of Seongsan Ilchulbong amidst the backdrop of the blue sky and the sea. Seeing the vastness of the blue sky and the endless stream of flowers opened my heart. I hope it was the same for you.

You wore a happy smile on your face as you watched our tour companions make their way into the flower fields. They were so excited, and we could hear their laughter from afar.

The wheelchair would not be suitable for the fields. You chose to stay in your spot and asked us to join the others.

While I was in the arms of the lovely canola flowers, I could see your smile from a distance. I formed the letter L with my thumb and index finger on both hands to frame a shot. Some people call this the "finger frame." I wanted to capture this moment of your happy smile with my mind, and not with my phone. I wanted to hold this memory as a part of me.

You have been smiling a lot more during this trip.

It had been a happy day. While waiting for the group at Cheonjeyeon Waterfall in the morning, we bought you some tangerines. Jeju Island has two types of tangerine–the bigger hallabong (named after Mount Halla of Jeju Island) and the smaller gamkyul mandarin oranges. You were in a zesty burst of happiness.

When the rest of our group returned from the climb and saw you enjoying the fruit, they could not wait to try. Off they went to the nearest fruit stalls, returning with boxes of tangerines, much to the bewilderment of Kay. She wondered if they could finish it all in two days before we left the island.

"Don't worry, Kay. We can finish," they replied. Laughter was in the air as we made heads turn.

* * *

We came to know Kay better after a few days of spending time together. She was helpful and took care of her passengers, just as I had imagined from the first time we met.

We had agreed to take turns pushing your wheelchair. When it was not her turn and she saw a slope ahead, she would say, "Come, let me do it," and try to take the job again.

She took care of the bus driver too. When we saw her helping him unload our luggage from the bus, we noticed how strenuous it was for them. We stepped forward to help, thinking that more hands were better, only to be scolded by her. According to Kay, we were not supposed to do that because we were the customers.

Well, who set the rules? It did not matter to us because Kay had become a friend. Friends are supposed to help one another.

It all started with a simple gesture. You help me. I help you. Every act of kindness was an exchange of giving and receiving, bringing people closer to one another.

Kindness has a ripple effect. It spreads.

There was one person who walked ahead of us to hold the restaurant door open for you, Mama. He didn't follow behind us after we entered. I noticed he continued to hold the door for the rest of the group. It was so beautiful to see smiles and friendly exchanges from a distance.

Once you have been touched by kindness, there is a tendency that you will do the same for others. When we left the restaurant, another person stepped forward to open the door this time. And there was another one of us who would walk last, making sure the members of the group stayed close and that no one was left behind.

We had no assignment of duties. People saw an act of kindness, and they responded with another. The bonding we had strengthened our relationships. Together was better. I think many of us felt the same way, and I knew it to be true when many asked us at the airport, "Where are we going next year?"

"Shall we travel again, Mama?" I asked. You had a beaming smile on your face.

"Just let me know where you want to go," I said.

Possibilities were in the air.

5

At the end of the world

You took me by surprise for the second trip.

Papa unfolded the newspaper in his hand. He pointed to a photograph—a globe monument stood at a cliffside, surrounded by silhouettes of people admiring the sunset over the sea. The caption was *The midnight sun at Nordkapp.* He said with a chirpy voice, "Let's go there."

I replied right away, "Are you sure?"

A place very far away from home. I guessed it would take at least twelve hours by flight and long bus rides. Before my thoughts ran wild, I needed to find out one thing. I took out my phone. A quick search online gave me an answer.

"Okay, Nordkapp is wheelchair accessible. But I'm curious. Why do you want to go there?" I asked.

"Because this is a beautiful place," he replied. "We came across it in the papers today. When I was reading the article to your Mother, she suggested that we go there."

I smiled at you. It was as simple as that. We said yes to a place because it spoke to us. Like the first trip, the second trip came out of the blue.

"Would you like to go to the neighboring Scandinavian countries too?" I asked. I wished you would say yes. There was someone I would like to see.

* * *

"How should we travel to Nordkapp?" I asked Kay over the phone. "I am thinking of flying from Oslo to Honningsvåg, the closest town to Nordkapp."

She knew Europe well and spent most of December in the Scandinavian countries each year. Many tourists flew over to see the Northern Lights and Santa Claus.

"Well, we could also drive from Finland to Nordkapp," she replied. This was a new idea to me.

"Does that mean we could visit Santa Claus first before we head to Nordkapp?" I felt excited about this possibility. It had always been one of our dreams, both for Shan and me, to see Santa in person. Jolly and generous, we knew him as the man in his iconic red suit sending presents to children all over the world during Christmas.

"Yes, we could fly to Helsinki, then to Rovaniemi to see Santa before driving to Nordkapp," she replied. This seemed too surreal.

* * *

It had been beyond my wildest dreams that we would ever visit Santa Claus Village, a place so far away from our home. I had thought that the winter would be too cold for you, and the snow would make it more challenging to move around. Thanks to Kay, I saw another possibility when she suggested we visit in

May.

Besides seeing Santa, we would get the opportunity to cross the Arctic Circle. We moved up to the white line as we prepared for the shortest sprint of our life. Papa stood behind you in the center while Shan and I held your hands.

"Ready? 1-2-3!" I said. Together we crossed.

"Mama, we're now at the Arctic Circle!" I exclaimed. "Look over there, they are doing the crossing too!"

We turned around to watch our fellow travel companions crossing. Some of them walked right across while a few others jumped over the line. Seeing that, I knew you would laugh if I were to jump back and forth across the line. "Now I'm in the Arctic Circle, and now I'm not," I said as I jumped and played like a kid.

This white line seems to go on forever. Where will it lead to?

We followed the line and came to a signpost full of arrows pointing to different cities in the world. "Taipei, Rome," I read. "New York, Madrid, and Singapore," Shan continued. At the bottom of the signpost was the name of the garden city we had come from. We had traveled so far from home.

After having fun outdoors, it was time to meet Santa. Although there was no snow, seeing Santa Claus in the spring did not dampen the fun. It was as lovely as it could be. As it was the off-peak season, there were few tourists. We made our way into his house, and there he was waiting for us in his armchair. Behind him were maps of the world and his shelves of books. His place was cozy, and our presence filled it with warmth as we gathered near him to take a group photograph.

"This is a big group!" he commented as we split ourselves into three rows. I replied, "We are all the good boys and girls, so we have come to see you early!"

* * *

Sitting on the bus, the beautiful town of Honningsvåg lingered in my mind as we headed towards Nordkapp. The day before, we had spent hours on the bus traveling from Saariselkä, Finland to Honningsvåg, Norway. Endless views of scenic beauty were on my right. I had tried to stay awake, afraid that I would miss any breathtaking sights.

The most memorable moment was when the bus made its way into the town of Honningsvåg. The sun's golden rays were all over the town, some cascaded onto the colorful wooden houses, and some were on the sea, turning it a beautiful turquoise color.

As I reminisced about the previous day, I felt a shiver up my spine. *Oh, it's cold*. I looked out of the window. We had entered the land of the snowy mountains. I put on an extra jacket and asked Papa to help you with the same. It would be better to keep warm rather than to become chilled and catch a cold. We had only begun our journey and had many days ahead.

The road seemed to go on forever as we traveled from the mountains to flatter terrain until we spotted a blurry view of a circle far ahead. The bus pulled to a stop. We had arrived at Nordkapp. Our tour bus was the only one in the carpark, and I thought we were the only group around. I was pleasantly surprised when I saw a man with his bicycle.

"Good morning," I waved to him as we pushed you closer to the globe monument. He was as surprised to see us as I was to see him.

"Can I help you to take a picture?" I offered. He had been taking pictures of himself when we arrived.

"Sure, thank you. That's very nice of you," he replied.

As he walked down the stairs, I asked about his journey. "Did

you cycle all the way here?" I was full of curiosity.

"Yeah, I have been cycling around Norway," he replied.

"Unbelievable. It must have been cold to cycle past the snowy mountain, and you did it," I said and gave him a thumbs up.

That is one thing about travel—we don't know who we might meet along the way.

He was French. We were from Singapore.

He cycled while we took the bus.

Despite our different starting points and various ways of traveling, we met at the end of the world.

Staring far ahead into the horizon, I said to you, "Life is full of possibilities."

We smiled.

* * *

After a long day of travel from Nordkapp, we arrived at our hotel in Ivalo. I had asked Kay to arrange for an early dinner so that our group could get some early rest.

The timber interiors of the restaurant reminded me of a log cabin with a cozy ambience. We got you a table beside the window, with an unblocked view of the Ivalo River. Dinner with a view, perfect for celebrating special occasions.

I had asked Kay to prepare for something special tonight.

Mama, I knew you didn't like celebrations, but we could not ignore this day. Since it would be for all the mothers on the trip, I believed you probably wouldn't mind.

Kay appeared with a cake in her hands. A waitress walked close behind, holding another cake. "I got two. One cake is not enough for all," Kay told me. People started murmuring. Everyone would have guessed by now.

"Can we have all the mothers to come over here, please?" I said with welcoming hands and asked them to gather at your table. They were all too shy to move forward.

With a simple thank-you speech and a song, we celebrated Mother's Day in Finland. A day to honor all the mothers who have given so much to their families. You smiled as we surrounded you with hugs and kisses. Although it was simple, I found it to be meaningful.

Had you known that it was a special day since morning?

Had you noticed a Mother and Child monument when we were at Nordkapp? It was near to the Children of the Earth monument, which we passed by. To see a Mother and Child monument on this day was symbolic to me. It seemed to tell me that no matter where we are, the love between a mother and her child will always be there.

* * *

The love between mother and child had been there since long ago.

Remember our morning walk when you accompanied me to school? I remember the pine trees. They were a rare sight. I found them unique and special when most of the trees around our neighborhood had dome- or umbrella-shaped crowns.

I didn't know their names. Their spiny needles reminded me of Christmas trees. With my limited knowledge of trees, that was the closest match I knew. *Maybe this is what Christmas trees look like in the tropics*, I thought. It made me happy thinking this way.

With you around, I felt protected. You would watch out for the cars before we crossed the road. You would make sure that

I was on time for school. We were supposed to walk together, but sometimes I ended up falling behind. There was a game I used to play.

I wonder where my feet should land to leave this masterpiece untouched.

There were leaves, twigs, and spiky cones scattered everywhere. They had fallen from above to form a carpet of natural beauty. If I walked without looking, I might kick the tiny cones and they would roll in all directions. I wanted to leave nature untouched.

I tiptoed and stepped on the white spaces, bordered by the twigs and cones. Perfect landing. Nothing was disturbed. I repeated with another similar step. One after another, I explored instead of walking straight until I heard you say, "You are going to be late for school…"

"Coming!" I shouted. With both hands holding onto my school bag, I ran as fast as I could. I stepped over the leaves, twigs, and spiky cones I had tried so hard to avoid. You looked at me while I gasped for breath. I gave a cheeky smile in return and held your hand. With you around, I would never be late for school.

You were always there for me as my guardian angel. I wanted to be the same for you.

6

Together

A beautiful place in Miyazaki, located in the southeastern part of Kyushu, Japan. The Pacific Ocean, blue and vast, the sunshine warm and bright.

We were on our way to see the replica Moai statues in Sun Messe Nichinan. This was the only place where we could see them other than on Easter Island. I heard from the local guide that the seven statues stood in a row with their backs facing the sea to protect the people on the island. *Guardian angels*, I thought.

Some young children walked past us. Their bright red caps caught my attention. Holding their partner's hand, they looked so carefree. I could hear their laughter and singing. *Are they on an excursion?* The lady who walked last could be the teacher. Side by side, together they walked. I remembered that I was once like them.

We were all 7-year-old kids in our first year of primary school. The teacher grouped us in pairs according to our height. I was asked to stand somewhere in the middle of the group. On my left was a girl with spectacles.

"The person standing next to you is your buddy. Hold onto each other's hands," the teacher said. *Is she afraid that I might get lost in school?* I was puzzled.

After a smile and a quick introduction exchanging our names, we did not quite know what else to say. With hundreds of students in the assembly hall, Irene was the first person I knew in school. We held hands as we walked to the classroom. There was something unique about holding hands. It made people feel connected, as we learned to care for each other and became friends.

Irene was sporty and, being an extrovert, she made many friends in a short while. Being quite the opposite of her, I preferred to stick with a few close friends. I was happy to know that she called me one of her best friends.

Thinking back, I was glad to have met Irene. Together was better. It was nice to know that someone was there for me, someone I could call a friend.

As I watched the children at Sun Messe Nichinan walk further ahead of us, I smiled. Thanks to them, a lot of things became clear to me.

When I was still a child, you and Papa took care of me.

When Shan was born, I played with her. I wasn't quite capable of taking care of her yet.

When I was old enough to attend school, one of the earliest lessons was learning how to be there for someone and take care of each other.

As we grew older, it became our duty to take care of others. We learned to give and receive.

This is what life is about. There will always be people who care for us and the people we care about.

You had accompanied me when I was a kid. Now it is my turn.

"Mama, are you happy to be here with us?" I asked.

You looked a little surprised by this question of mine. You nodded your head just when I said, "I am!"

"Look!" Shan said. The rest of the group had arrived at the area where the statues stood. They were waving for us to join them, with the same excitement they had when we were at Horikiri Pass.

* * *

"We'll be making a stop here for you to take some photographs," the local guide announced. "It's also your chance to try some special flavored ice cream," he continued.

People had been talking and taking photographs when we drove along this stretch of the coastal road. I knew this place would arouse curiosity the first time I saw it. Palm trees, ocean drive. The scenery reminded me of Hawaii, even though I had not been there. How interesting would it be to know we were in Japan, but to feel that we seemed to be in another country? I knew we had to come here to experience it for ourselves. Moreover, it would be on the way to Sun Messe Nichinan. In terms of accessibility and location, Horikiri Pass was a suitable choice for the itinerary.

What took me by surprise was the unique flavors of ice cream that the local guide mentioned. I had known about the roadside station called Phoenix, but there was no mention of the ice cream. Perhaps only the tour guides knew because they often brought tourists here.

"What are the flavors?" someone asked.

"You'll see. It depends on what is in season," the local guide was still keeping us in suspense.

We got down from the bus, and he led us to the counter. A colorful poster displayed the current flavors available–milk, mango, Angelica keiskei, shrimp, and sunflower.

Curiosity was in the air. With so many choices, it was hard to decide. Many people were asking for second opinions.

"What is nice?"

"Which one are you trying?"

"I have two flavors in mind. Shall we share?"

You were quick to make a decision. You chose milk, and Shan wanted to be the same as you. Mango for Papa and shrimp for me. We managed to get our ice cream before the queue began.

I invited you to try mine, and you shook your head. Too exotic for you. But you were curious. You leaned forward, looked at my pink ice cream and asked me to try it. It was smooth and creamy and a little bit salty, but the taste of the shrimp wasn't overpowering. It blended well with the sweetness of the ice cream.

I could see a lot of smiling faces around me. People were enjoying their ice cream in each other's company, talking and having fun. Each holding a cone in their hand, they looked relaxed and happy as they posed for photographs.

As I walked around and chatted with our group, these sweet encounters inspired me to look for interesting spots for our future trips that would bring surprise and smiles to our group. Ideas came to my mind as I thought about finding the best ice cream in town or interesting cafés with beautiful interiors.

Most standard tours might not visit these places, but I could include them in our self-organized itineraries. During city tours, instead of just passing by the beautiful shop windows, we could have the option to visit them. It would be nice to take a break from all the walking too.

All this while, I had been thinking: What can I do for them? Our group was more than people whom we traveled with. They were also the people who had watched Shan and me grow up from little girls to independent adults. They had been there for us as much as you had been there for them. Instead of just traveling from place to place, I could see how little details in the planning could bring surprises and joy for them.

Being your travel planner and companion, these dual roles had enriched me with a perspective that I believed was unique within our group.

After planning a few trips, I had learned that it was not difficult to find out more about attractions and their accessibility by searching online. In addition to information posted on official websites, some travelers generously share details on their blogs, helping those who will make the journey the next time. It would take me some time to gather the necessary information and check out the accessibility at each attraction, but it was doable.

I tried to do better each time we traveled. Besides identifying places to visit, I would also check the flight schedule and the different modes of transport, and try to create a different travel experience each time. I knew that Kay and her team would be able to refine my idea and together we could come up with a better itinerary for the group.

As a daughter, I was happy that we had traveled again. All the times we had spent together would be moments now and memories later. I was always thinking about how to create, notice, and capture the moments. As I did it for myself, it became a part of my travel planning to create a unique experience for people to discover their moments.

* * *

When Shan asked me if I would include Tokyo DisneySea on our Japan trip, I nodded and told her that I would like to make it optional. Although we traveled as a group, I wanted to include some flexibility when we were in Tokyo. There would be a day where group members could choose to go to DisneySea or spend some time exploring Tokyo on their own before we took the flight home.

The theme park is suitable for all ages, but perhaps not everyone in our group was a fan of Disney characters and rides. Moreover, there are many possible ways to spend a day in Tokyo–shopping, sightseeing, or trying the local food. For people who would like to venture on their own, the public transport system is efficient and the subway can bring one to many places.

"I would like Mama to be there. I know she will agree," Shan sounded confident, her eyes full of hope. I knew that the Disney theme parks were Shan's favorite places where she could feel like a kid again and buy bears to add to her collection. It would mean a lot to her to have you there with her, for your presence would become a part of her happy memories when she looked back.

I took out the itinerary. After Sun Messe Nichinan, we would be traveling to the southwestern part of Kyushu where we would take a ferry to Kagoshima to see one of Japan's most active volcanoes, Sakurajima. Although we would not be taking the hiking trail, we would stay for a night in a hotel where we could see Sakurajima from our rooms. It would be an interesting experience to admire her beauty during sunset and sunrise.

The next day, we would take a flight from Kagoshima to Tokyo and arrive at Haneda airport. We would then drive for about an hour to Kanagawa where we would visit the Kotokuin Temple, renowned for The Great Buddha of Kamakura. We would next travel to Yokohama and have some fun creating our unique cup noodles and exploring the largest Chinatown in Japan.

I had tried to create a balance between designing a variety of experiences with activities for everyone and traveling at a comfortable pace. But I wasn't sure if you would prefer to go slow after days of traveling around. "Well, we have to ask her. If she feels tired, then let her rest in the hotel. If she chooses to go with you to DisneySea, I'll follow too," I said.

I wanted to give you the option, but I knew you would say yes to her request just as Shan had said. You would be there for us if you could.

* * *

Do you like this white T-shirt? Or this blue one?" Shan asked in her chirpy voice. "Shall I get both for you?" she asked, holding one in each hand. It brought her much delight when you said that both the T-shirts were nice. She had been preparing for this day to buy you gifts. It was her way to show her appreciation that you had come along with her to DisneySea.

While Shan went to buy the shirts, you and I went outside to meet the rest of the group. Although I had made it optional to visit DisneySea, everyone wanted to come along because they had not been here before.

I noticed that almost everybody had walked out of the shops with a bag or two. Happy smiles were on their faces as they

shared with us the goodies they had purchased. Some had bought adorable plush toys for their grandchildren. Others had chosen a variety of magnets, keychains, and limited-edition postcards for their friends and colleagues. Most bought more mementos for the people they cared about than for themselves. I could feel their joy of giving with these little acts of generosity, just as I recalled Shan's happiness when she chose T-shirts for you.

I remembered your smiles too. It did not matter if the gift was big or small. Like the saying "it's the thought that counts," you were happy with whatever Shan had chosen for you.

Shan had asked me to check the program schedules while waiting for her. She had planned to watch a show or two with you before taking the rides. I was glad that she had put you first above herself. Having identified a few shows, I would let her decide and lead the way.

7

Kindness in circles

We had arrived at the scheduled time but there was no place to park. Our bus driver had spent ten minutes driving around to no avail. Many tourists had come to the Sea Organ earlier than us to watch the sunset.

I spent every second on the bus waiting in anxiety, for I knew that beautiful moments don't last for long. I hoped we could find a parking space soon.

We were so close and I hoped that I could make it possible. There was something that I wanted to do for Papa. He loves to take photographs of the sunrise and sunset, but I knew he would not leave the bus without you. Even if this was perhaps the only sunset of Zadar that we would see in our lifetimes, accompanying you would always come first.

I remembered his excitement when he first saw this promenade. He came over just as you pointed to a photograph in the travel guide for Croatia. In the picture, the sky and the sea were different shades of blue. The clouds and the marble steps were white. I knew right away I would include it in the itinerary, even though I had yet to discover that there was more to this

place than it seemed.

Papa said that it would be beautiful to see the sunset here and asked me if I could arrange for it. I was surprised that he could foretell this and a quick check online told me it was true. Hence, I had planned to stay a night in Zadar. We would arrange to see the sunset on one day and go for a morning walk along the promenade again during our city tour the next day.

The bus pulled to a stop and I heard Kay's voice from the front. "Let's get ready. We can get out of the bus now," she announced.

"Papa, I can take pictures of the sunset for you," I said and then I ran.

I found my way past the crowd and walked down a few steps. This was the closest I could get. Any further and I would be enveloped in the arms of the sea. I held Papa's camera in my hands and started taking photographs.

"Beautiful," I said as I looked through the tiny frame. The orange and yellow hues were spread wide across the horizon as the sun made her slow descent. I could feel the breeze in my hair and hear the natural symphony in my ears. There was a layer added to the sound of the rolling waves breaking onshore. Beneath where I stood were columns of pipes, where the sound of the waves would travel and form its magic. I wished to share this special moment at the Sea Organ with you.

I turned around, hoping that you and Papa were approaching. But you were still a distance away.

It's okay. It would be nice to linger here while I look for the next photography spot. I wonder if you ever feel that travel opens up the heart?

Maybe it was the sea, the sunset, and the beautiful symphony which made me feel relaxed and calm. I felt the vastness in my

heart and the anxiety that I had carried with me earlier had vanished. *Life is beautiful.*

I looked around and saw an elderly couple seated on a bench, her head leaned on his shoulder. *So loving.* I believed you and Papa would be like them in years to come. As a daughter, I was touched by his love for you. He had been taking care of you all these years, in sickness and in health.

Remember that I had talked about taking care of you as well as the person beside you? There had been times when I felt that I could do something for Papa. This was one of those moments.

He took care of you. I took care of him. Kindness in circles.

* * *

It was inevitable that we had to get into and out of the bus multiple times a day when traveling. I noticed that climbing the stairs was challenging for some in our group who had weaker knees. For some buses, the gap between the first step and the ground could be a little too high for them.

During a coffee break on one of our trips, I mentioned my observations to Kay and asked if we could do anything to narrow the gap. She suggested that she would bring along two wooden stools in the future, one to be placed at both the front and back staircases to narrow the gaps. I appreciated her initiative but I was also concerned that this could mean a heavier suitcase and less luggage space for her.

The bus driver, overhearing our conversation, told us that he could narrow the gap with a push of a button. I had never known this was possible until then. But this was not applicable to all buses as we came to discover.

I remembered another driver who could not lower the step

due to the design limitations of the bus. He did what he could and went the extra mile. Instead of pulling up next to the curb with one attempt, he would drive forward and reverse several times so that the bus could be parked as near to the curb as possible to make ascending and descending much easier for our group.

We had been lucky to meet with experienced and helpful drivers on all of our trips who tried to make it a more pleasant ride for all of us. They took great care of you too. Once they parked the bus, they would come over and operate the lift for you to get down from the bus. When it was time to come aboard, they would help you into the wheelchair lift and ensure that you were securely seated each time.

Whenever we bought souvenirs for our family and friends back home, you would always buy something for our drivers. That was your way of showing appreciation to them for taking care of you and the group.

In all our trips, we had not met with a lift malfunction until that one time when the door would not open, no matter how many times the driver tried.

"It's sunny outside. Please bring along your sunglasses, hats, or umbrellas," Kay said. I could hear the rustling sound of bags and the shuffling of feet as people prepared to depart from the bus. For the past hour, it had been quiet as most people had dozed off. It always seemed easier to sleep on the bus, rocking people, and sending them to dreamland. Only one or two had stayed awake with music to their ears.

I watched as members of our group exited the bus one by one. We had arrived at the Plaza de España in Seville, Spain.

"Oh no, the lift door wouldn't open." I heard it from the front of the bus, just as I saw it with my eyes. The driver pressed the

buttons repeatedly. He wiped the sweat from his forehead and tried again. No luck, the door of the wheelchair lift would not open.

I looked at you. You shook your head.

"The lift was still working fine after lunch. Let's wait for a while," I said, hoping that a miracle would happen within minutes. *What could have gone wrong?*

I saw Kay pressing the buttons and speaking with the driver. They both looked anxious. I had waited on the bus because I didn't want to make them feel pressured. It seemed that the time had come for me to leave the bus and find out more about the situation.

"The weather is hot. Tell Kay that we will stay in the bus," Papa said.

* * *

"How's it going?" I asked.

"We are still trying. Not to worry, he has already called his company to send a replacement bus over," Kay said.

The driver had rolled up his sleeves and opened his toolbox. I trusted that the driver would do his best.

I looked up at you and Papa. I couldn't help but feel a sense of relief that you were seated in the bus. If the lift had malfunctioned while you were on it, you could be left hanging in the mid-air for a long time under the hot sun.

"How long would it take for another bus to come?" I asked.

"He is still waiting for a reply," Kay said and turned to look at me, "Can you lead the group to the Plaza? The local tour guide is there waiting for us."

I knew you would be in good hands with Kay around. Besides,

there was not much help I could offer by staying behind. The rest of the group were waiting under the trees for us. The tour had to continue.

* * *

As I walked along the beautiful arc of the Plaza, I kept my composure while my thoughts ran.

How will you get up and down from the bus later? Today, tomorrow, and the rest of the trip? We still have a few more days of traveling before going home.

We will need to change your seats to the front. Getting up and down the steps will be tricky. Papa will help you.

Kay mentioned that a replacement bus is coming. This takes time. Some of the scheduled places for the later part of the day and tomorrow might have to be canceled.

I had reached one end of the arc. I turned around and looked at my surroundings. The plaza was crowded, and yet there was space for everyone.

What do we do when things happen unexpectedly?

Stay calm.

Let's give one another the space to breathe.

* * *

Over the course of the hour, I had thought of a Plan B.

If the lift door is still stuck, we will not be able to continue with the rest of the day's tour. I will discuss with Kay about calling a few taxis to send the group back to the hotel first. The ride will take only about fifteen minutes while the waiting time for a replacement bus could be hours. It will be better for you and the group to get an early

rest while Kay and I discuss the next steps.

If we can get a replacement bus by tonight, there will be no further disruption to the tour. If not, we will have to make tough decisions to cancel some places to visit...

The thoughts I had planned to share with Kay abruptly faded when I saw a white platform ahead. I thought my eyes were playing tricks on me, so I asked Shan, "Did you see that? Is that our bus?"

"I think so, let's run to take a closer look!" she exclaimed.

It was indeed the lift platform on the ground level. *Was it our bus, or had the replacement bus arrived?*

Kay was talking on the phone when we arrived. Shan and I hurried into the bus and to your side.

"How did the driver get the lift door to operate again?" I asked Papa.

"I did not see how he did it. I only know that the lift door opened not too long after the group left," Papa replied. You laughed.

"Isn't it a miracle?" I said. I felt relieved that we could resume our trip and keep my Plan B for another day.

8

The unpredictable

People had asked me, "Since you already knew so much about a place, did planning take away the fun when you were there?"

Well, it didn't.

First of all, we could not travel without a plan. I could not let you wait in the streets while I figured out if a place was accessible or not. Prior research was necessary to provide you with a more seamless experience when we arrived.

Planning was like a different kind of travel to me. I experienced wanderlust in the comfort of home while not forgetting that I had a mission to accomplish.

I still remembered the times when I researched about Nordkapp. I saw Nordkapp in different seasons and learned from the experience of travelers who had been there before us. I felt as if I already knew the place, even before being there.

As much as I could research, I could not know everything. As a novice planner, I had been researching places instead of routes since I knew the travel agents would take care of the logistics. The keywords that I had used in my search influenced

the search results that I read.

It caught me by surprise when we traveled past the snowy mountains before arriving at Nordkapp. For a split second, I felt as if I had been transported to a winter wonderland with a new adventure ahead. *Where are we?*

Surprises happen when we least expect them. This experience was magical. Some caught us unprepared as we scrambled for solutions.

* * *

Looking out of the bus, I had been trying to spot a signpost somewhere, with arrows pointing me towards the nearest public toilets. However, all I could see were some residential buildings on my left and greenery on my right.

I had also been searching for signs of cafés, ice-cream shops, or hotels. If we were in a city center, these places often provided options for finding a public restroom, when the need arose. Before I requested to borrow their toilets, I would quickly check if the café entrance and interior would be suitable for a wheelchair user. I tried to look for barrier-free places. If there was a little step at the shop entrance, it was still manageable as we could tilt your wheelchair up a little and enter the shop. Entering a hotel was usually easier because there would be ramps, lifts, and accessible toilet facilities.

In our travels, we met many kind shop owners and hotel managers who would agree to our request right away. Sometimes shop customers would help to push aside empty chairs or stand up to make more room for you to pass when they saw us coming. Before leaving, Shan and I would buy coffee or ice cream to return the favor.

With these familiar options not in sight, where can I find a toilet in the next few minutes?

The bus came to a stop. I had to get out and start looking. Just when I stood up and lifted my bag, something caught my attention. There seemed to be a white, single-story building a few hundred meters down the road. I had no idea what it would be. The only way to find out would be to run as quickly as possible towards the building.

What if there are no toilets available? What if I'm making a wasted trip?

Realizing that I would be running towards a glimmer of hope, I decided to ask the few young people who were seated around us to help. We would go in different directions to increase our possibilities of finding a restroom in the shortest time.

"Take your time, Mama," I said before I got down from the bus.

"Yes, auntie. We will find it." The voices of reassurance surrounded us. Together we would overcome this time-pressing challenge. I was thankful to have this group of people around me. I wasn't sure if I could find one in such a short time if I were to do it alone.

I ran.

Memories came to mind of the last time I had run so fast.

* * *

We entered the restaurant for lunch and saw that the people in our group were standing around.

Why aren't they sitting down?

As we moved closer, they told me that the toilet was in the basement. I saw a queue had formed at the staircase.

"Is there a lift?" I asked. They told me there was none.

I looked around to find Kay. She was speaking to a waitress, and then her phone rang. Kay looked frustrated as she walked out of the restaurant. I could hear her voice from where I stood. *She must have already discovered that we have a problem.*

How can this be happening? Kay and I had mentioned in our emails over and over again the importance of accessibility for our group. We had requested accessible rooms, a tour bus with a wheelchair lift, and restaurants at ground level for your easy access. We understood that not all restaurants have accessible toilets. That would be fine as long as we could push you to the bathroom entrance, and then support you as you walked a little.

There must have been some miscommunication along the way. Perhaps the person who did the booking had found a restaurant at ground level and forgotten to ask about the toilet.

I could have flown into a rage, but I chose not to step into the whirlpool of negative emotions. That would not solve the problem at hand. You were waiting for me, and so was everyone else in our group. They were waiting around and the food had yet to be served.

"Are we going to another restaurant?" someone asked.

It would be quite impossible to find another restaurant in such a short time for a big group. Besides, that would mean a very late lunch, not to mention the additional costs involved.

"Everyone, please sit down. Let's have lunch first," I replied. "I will find another restroom for Mama."

* * *

I needed to find solutions fast. I explored options and eliminated those that would not work.

Someone had suggested carrying you in your wheelchair down the stairs. Even though your wheelchair was slim and compact compared to the width of the staircase. I would not agree to put your safety at risk.

Our driver had offered to drive us to the nearest petrol station, but I did not wish to trouble him. It was lunchtime and he needed a rest too. Besides, he had a limit on the driving hours per day with breaks to take during the journey. Any unexpected changes would affect the rest of our traveling schedule.

I asked the waitress if there were any nearby shops without a basement toilet. She shook her head and replied that all the shops in the same row had a similar layout.

I had to widen my search. There had been some shops a few streets away when our bus had passed. I recalled seeing signage for a café.

I could try my luck there, and instead of putting the eggs in one basket, I would ask for a few of the young people in our group to join me in the search. Kay saw us and joined in too.

"Let's split up. I'll turn right and search a few streets over there."

"We will go straight ahead."

"I'll turn left and go in the direction the bus came from. Shan, you stay with Mama. Call me anytime."

"Remember to check your phone, we will update one another by Whatsapp."

I ran and wished that the traffic lights at the pedestrian crossing would turn green when I reached them.

"Can I buy a coffee?" I asked, trying to catch my breath as my eyes looked around for the sign, "and borrow your toilet please?"

"Yes, over there," the man at the counter replied.

"One espresso, thank you," I said. The aroma of the coffee was in the air as I walked in the direction he pointed.

The toilet was at ground level. No steps.

"I will buy the coffee and take the drink later. Can I borrow your toilet for my Mum, please? She is in a wheelchair." He nodded and asked me where you were.

Now, I just had to run back to the restaurant and bring you here.

* * *

This time, instead of a café, I saw bicycles.

A stand-alone bicycle shop. Loud music came from within. A father was choosing a bike for his child in the corner of the shop.

Breathless. I needed to catch my breath before I could ask the question. I turned around. I could see tiny figures, members of our group, walking towards me.

I knew I'd better hurry. I walked into the shop. What were my chances of finding an accessible toilet in a bicycle shop? In fact, this seemed one of the least likely places I could think of. Bicycles were arranged in an orderly manner. T-shirts were hanging as displays on the wall. I walked towards the counter. Before I could ask, something on the left caught my eye.

The door had a green vacant sign. I opened it and to my surprise, it was a large and fully equipped accessible washroom. This was far beyond my expectations.

"Can I borrow your toilet for my Mum to use? She's in a wheelchair, and this is the closest toilet I could find. It's only for her. She needs to use the toilet urgently," I said everything in one go.

The man at the counter replied with a smile, "Sure, go ahead."

"Thank you so much! I'll bring her over now!" I ran out of the shop and waved, running towards our group who were getting closer. With nods and "yes," they saw and heard me. They became the messengers telling you to come over.

I was filled with gratitude for the interior designers, the shop owner, or the person who decided to build an accessible washroom in this bicycle shop. I wished that there were coffee and ice-cream to buy. Their foresight and generosity left an impression on me. Their thought and planning included the people in a wheelchair, including tourists like us who might only visit the shop once. Till today, I continue to express my gratitude by sharing this story with others.

9

Unexpected gifts of giving

"Little birds," you said.

I turned around and looked at you. With your head tilted to one side and eyes focused on a spot, you were attentive and quiet. I could tell that you had heard something.

This time I heard it too.

"Yes, I could hear them. The birds are singing," I replied without reading too much into it. I had just received some messages about work from the office and was distracted.

Just then, a pair of birds flew from behind us and across the sky.

"Mama, look!" I exclaimed.

We watched the birds fly higher and further away until they became two small dots and disappeared from our eyes. I felt as if we had a brief encounter with two travelers and got to experience a part of their adventure. Across oceans and land, rain or shine, they would keep each other company.

While Shan and I were looking at our phones and Papa was sipping his coffee, you were living in the moment. If you had not alerted me, I would not have witnessed this using my ears,

eyes, and heart. It would just be another singing of the birds. A part of nature. *Would hearing it make me stop in my thoughts?* I doubted it when my mind had traveled miles back to the office.

I would never have thought that I could learn such a profound lesson during a break while waiting for our group to return. Some of them were still in the café buying their coffee and pastries.

Mama, I wanted to be more like you. I have always tried to become better at being present and staying curious.

Remember the trip that I took with my friends in my twenties? We left the hotel at 8:00 in the morning and only returned twelve hours later. We ate on the go and ran as fast as we could to catch the departing train. We visited as many places as we could each day, as long as our tired legs could carry us. We had a long checklist of places to see and food to eat. We took the subway to a pretty neighborhood called Jiyugaoka to try out the pastries at a café, then we queued for forty-five minutes to eat the famous ramen at Ikebukuro. Whenever I ticked one item off the checklist, I felt good keeping the adrenaline rush alive.

I had traveled with the intention of taking a break from the corporate rat race, even if it was for a week. I wanted to enjoy a slower pace of life, but I was hooked to the thrill of travel. It was fun, but I wondered why I couldn't slow down. Why couldn't I keep to my original intention?

I realized that it was easy for me to get back into the default mode of staying busy, even though I had the intention to slow down. Moreover, I was traveling with my good friends who were around the same age as me and shared similar interests. The trip was for all of us and not just for me. When one person suggested a place to visit, we would go together.

When I traveled with you, the world was still busy. But when I was distracted by a message from work, you taught me to become more aware of my surroundings. You gave me a precious lesson that I could not have learned if I was not at your side. I gave my time without expectation of any return. People have said that the more one gives, the more one receives.

* * *

In all of our itineraries, I would include a visit to the local market. Although there would be some fruit served during breakfast or after meals, I knew I could bring smiles to your face with a trip to explore the local varieties of fruit. The market was also an interesting place for the rest of the group, where we could interact with local people and learn more about their ways of life.

It was approaching closing hours when we arrived at the Riga Central Market. Most of the stalls were closed, but some were still open for business.

"Mama, take your time. Let us know when you would like to stop," I said.

You pointed to a stall and we pushed you closer. Within seconds, you had selected various fruits including a few boxes of strawberries, blueberries, and cherries. You often made the sellers very happy. Not only because you bought a lot, but you also attracted more buying from others. While the seller was busy weighing the fruits and packing them into bags, our fellow travelers started placing their orders.

When we were approaching the end of the fruit stalls, our local tour guide said to me, "I would like to show you my favorite part of the market. I think you would love it."

"Shall we, Mama?" I asked. You nodded. I'd always give you a heads-up to where we would be going.

She led us to the flower market. Red, yellow, white, purple, and pink–we were surrounded by a dazzling sea of flowers under the late afternoon sun. Simply seeing them from afar can make me happy.

I was engrossed in my Lalaland when you asked me to stop. You pointed to some burgundy-colored flowers, and then to me.

"Do you want to buy some flowers?" I asked.

You shook your head and pointed to me again.

That made sense. You were not someone who wished for flowers. *If not for yourself, then who are they for?*

"Are you asking me to buy?" I asked, feeling bewildered. You nodded and laughed because I got your hint at last.

You knew me. I love flowers and would take photographs of them when I saw them. It was a lovely sight to see flowers on trees, at the roadside, or on a restaurant's table. I had never thought of buying flowers when we traveled. With a bouquet in my hand, I would not be able to help you or carry the luggage.

This was a surprise. I had brought you here to buy the fruits you like and ended up walking out with a bouquet for myself.

Seeing me, our local guide walked up and said, "You bought the flowers! You have made us very happy, seeing that you love our flowers as much as we do." The flowers had brought people from two different parts of the world closer in that instant. "Do you know the name of these flowers?" I was curious to know more about these beauties. They had the deep red color of wine, with many small intricate layers within them.

"These are peonies," our guide answered.

Peonies? They looked different from the ones I knew. I had

imagined peonies to be bigger. Maybe it would take a few more days to see them in bloom.

Just as the flowers would blossom in their own time, I had a deeper understanding that there is a time for everything in life. When we give without expectation of return, we receive in ways that we would not have imagined. The gifts are there waiting to be discovered, and one needs to be present to see them.

* * *

We had arrived early for lunch, about twenty minutes ahead of schedule. The restaurant would only open at noon, so we had some free time on our own.

I pointed to the big tree further ahead and suggested that we gather under the shade to wait.

A part of the time spent during travel was waiting as we moved from place to place. We waited for the traffic lights to turn red. We waited for our turn to visit an attraction.

This morning, the traffic had slowed to a crawl when we were approaching Sparrow Hills in Moscow. Many tour buses were on their way to the viewing platform, where one could see the cityscape and the Moscow State University.

I looked out of the window. On my right was a dome-shaped tent which read: Fifa World Cup Russia 2018–Official Fan Shop.

Two weeks later, Moscow would be packed with tourists from all over the world to watch this football competition held every four years. I remembered Kay had told me that the local agent had needed to work hard to secure our hotel reservations in Moscow.

I was glad that we were here in Moscow at the end of May, not in June. Had we met with a larger crowd everywhere, we would have needed to spend more time waiting instead of sightseeing.

Waiting under the tree, many of our group were engrossed in small conversations. After a brief conversation with Kay about the itinerary for the afternoon, I turned to look for you and saw you sitting there.

Whenever I saw you alone, I would walk up to you and initiate a conversation. I'd make some small jokes to hear you laugh. I would ask about what you would like to eat. I didn't like to see you being left out, and I also believed that your speech would improve with practice.

On this day, something small in the grass caught my attention. Small and brown. It was a pine cone with a little twig attached to it. I looked around. There were many pine cones everywhere. I picked up the one that my eyes had first laid upon. The scales of the pine cone opened up beautifully like the petals of a flower.

It reminded me of those little cones that had lined the road on my way to school when you walked alongside me during my first year of primary education. That natural carpet decorated with twigs and leaves that I tried not to disturb.

Who would be happy to receive a pine cone? If I gave it to Shan, she wouldn't pay much attention to it. But I knew you would like it. It had always been the simple things that made you happy.

"Mama, a pine cone. It's for you," I said and brought it close to you.

You reached out your hand to receive it. I saw a childlike smile I will never forget. Simple, pure, tender and sweet. You held the pinecone in your hand, turning it left and right. At that moment, I felt that we saw each other with a deeper kind

of seeing. We saw the inner child in one another. So real, so precious.

People began to gather around us to see what you were holding.

Our hearts were connected. I gave and you reciprocated by receiving. I wouldn't have experienced this if I had not been by your side for so long. Knowing someone takes time.

A little pine cone can make our hearts full of love and joy.

Standing in the field, I realized that the pine cones around me are like the little moments of our story. The ones which I have been collecting and treasuring with love to last a long time.

10

When moments became memories

I liked sitting in the cable car with you, Mama.

Moments before, we were still queuing for our turn to board at Teleférico Do Funchal. "Please come over here," the cable car attendant said as he ushered us to move to the right of the platform.

"Who will be pushing the wheelchair?" he asked.

"Papa," I replied.

He turned to Papa and said, "Okay, when the door opens, you will push the wheelchair into the cable car." He stretched out his hand to signal the forward motion at the same time. "Both of you follow closely behind. One sits on the left, the other on the right," he said to Shan and me. We nodded.

The cable car could seat a maximum of six passengers. If a person in a wheelchair was on board, it could seat only three more people. I liked it this way. With just the four of us, we would be in a world of our own.

"Take the next one," he pointed to the cable car that was approaching our direction. It slowed down to a comfortable speed for us to board. The door opened. "Papa, let's go!" I said

and gave a gentle pat on his back.

1-2-3!

We broke into tiny bursts of laughter as we sank into our seats. It was such an exhilarating experience that happened within seconds before the door closed.

Up in the air, the distant objects started to look smaller and smaller. The cars looked like small moving dots as we got closer to the sky. Little moving dots on the street, I wondered where they were going next.

Each of these dots carried a story. In this tiny capsule, I captured our family togetherness. Although we were in the beautiful city of Funchal in Madeira Island, I didn't feel that I was far away from home. With you beside me, anywhere would be home.

As a collector of moments, this would be the perfect time for photographs. "Mama, I want to take some photographs with you. Can I?" I asked. You weren't always keen on taking photographs, so I would often ask beforehand.

You nodded and smiled. Not wanting to let this golden opportunity slip by, Shan jumped in.

"Me too! I want to take pictures with you, Mama!"

"Mama, let's look here," I whispered. I placed my hand over yours; I always did that to make you feel reassured. You pulled me closer and leaned your head against mine. That was unexpected. Our smiles were unrehearsed, natural as they could be.

"Quick! It's my turn now," Shan said. She didn't want to be the stand-in camerawoman. She wanted her turn. Her innocent fear of missing out made us laugh.

I didn't forget Papa. I asked to take a few shots of the two of you together. To remember this moment of my parents sitting

side by side. To honor the man in your life and the father I respect. For almost four decades, you had accompanied each other in marriage and raised a family together.

Fifteen minutes in a tiny capsule, I wrote our story. I called it Heavenly Bliss.

Beautiful moments were often short-lived. I couldn't help but think of the change we had noticed. You seemed to have become weaker during the trip. When I had helped you up from bed in the morning, you leaned onto me more than before. Your blood pressure was normal, and your appetite was fine. Perhaps you had been too tired from traveling and just needed more rest. I felt uneasy and wondered why.

* * *

There's a staircase leading to Heaven tonight.

I stood on the balcony and let the moonlight shine upon me. The sky was a light royal blue, a color I seldom see at night. Perhaps I had arrived home earlier that day, in time to see this beautiful sight.

The clouds are always changing as they move across the sky. At that moment, I saw their curvy outlines as steps leading to somewhere far and above. *What would it look like if I were to walk on the clouds and let the moonlight be my guide? Would that bring me to you again?*

"Again" used to be a privilege because it meant time was still on my side. I wasn't afraid of doing something for a second time, a third time, or maybe many times when I was a caretaker, travel planner, or your companion. I knew that I was getting closer with every try and would do it better each time.

But when your legs became weaker, and then your health went downhill, I knew that the recovery would be more strenuous for you when history repeats. I saw how much harder you had to try just to lift your right hand a little from the bed when lying down.

It might be a long time before we could travel as a family again. Recalling the times that we had, I felt so blessed and lucky to have been able to travel to many countries with you. I was thankful that I could keep my promise of bringing you to the places you wanted to visit. Time beside you allowed me to discover the gift of perspective and memories created on the journey, both in travel and in life.

I loved the curiosity and open-mindedness that I carried with me, and my attempts to be more present, when I traveled with

you. My experiences, seeing the world with you, brought a thought to my mind.

What if we explore the possibility of travel in daily life, even if we live our days in routine? Every day is, in fact, a day of travel on life's journey. If we could see the world as we do during travel, with curiosity and open-mindedness, living in the moment, that would bring a whole new experience to our daily life.

This beautiful insight came to me at the time when I couldn't help feeling that this could be our last journey together. Perhaps it was the sixth sense of a daughter, I had a hunch that time was running out for me to do things again for you. When there wasn't much time for "again", the shared memories would matter more to me than the results of your progress.

I had intended to leave my job to stay by your side. Having joined a new organization six months prior, I thought it would be too big an ask to request a flexible work arrangement. I had not expected a door to open for me to keep my job and accompany you. When my manager offered this possibility, I was grateful that this time I could tend both career and family instead of choosing one over the other.

For the next six months, I lived in the here and now. I looked forward to saying good morning to you every day. Your big round eyes would sparkle after a night of restful sleep. They spoke volumes, and I waited for you to say the first few words to me. I listened with patience while you spoke. Even though the morning was often busy with doing exercises and getting you ready for the day, I wasn't anxious to rush us through the activities. One thing at a time, we would get there. I was glad that I had learned how to fill our everydays with happiness and moments of bliss, just as our days of traveling.

* * *

Fluffy cotton wool in the sky, may the weather be sunny and nice.

The sky was full of clouds with only tiny streaks of blue. The bright spot in the sky looked like the sun had found her way through the clouds to shine upon us.

Does the sun know that we have traveled far to come here, hence sending us some warm welcome? I took a picture of the Estonian sky to remember the day we were here.

I walked back to the terminal to meet up with you and the rest of the group. In another fifteen minutes, we would take the car ferry from Virtsu to Kuivastu and then we would be on our way to see the windmills at Saaremaa Island. Blue skies, vast fields. The simple beauty is seen with the eyes and felt with the heart.

Looking far into the horizon with a long road ahead, I had a new understanding of travel. It might seem that we had traveled to see the world, moving forward from one place to another. And yet along the way, we would also step into a path of discovery and find the way to our hearts.

I spotted the windmills from afar. Unlike the typical Dutch windmill that we knew, each of the traditional windmills ahead looked like a wooden house on top of layers of stacked rocks. Their unique design had probably caught your attention when we were looking through the travel guide together, and I knew you would prefer to spend time in the countryside rather than the cities.

A gentle breeze blew onto our faces as we entered. The windmills were even more beautiful than in the photographs.

"Mum, we are here," I said.

You nodded and smiled.

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