

# **Excess Baggage**

**One mother's transformation through travel**

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by  
Tracey Long Carisch

traceycarisch@gmail.com  
970.485.4500  
[www.100ways.co](http://www.100ways.co)

## Table of Contents

Maybe This Wasn't Such a Great Idea	4
Pinot Noir and Panic Attack	6
The Short Road to Midlife	10
Crazy Hair-brained Ideas	16
Togetherness	20
Idiots Abroad	27
Heading to Hvartska	32
Peaches and Coconuts	42
Shiny Happy People...Drinking Beer	48
Into Africa	58
Spiritual Failure	77
Spiritual Success	91
Drug Drama	102
Second Chances	110
Bula! Bula!	116
Return to the First World	128
Breaking the Language Barrier	144
Seeing the Water	153
Into Thinner Air	163
Grief	167
Finding the Way Home	171
Why Hello, Dysentery	185
Prepare for Landing	196

*We must be willing to let go of the life we planned  
so as to have the life that is waiting for us.  
~Joseph Campbell*

## Maybe This Wasn't Such a Great Idea

Countries visited: 18

Miles traveled: 24,680

Bangkok airport employees: 10

Steel cages: 1

Thoughts are powerful. I know that now. Looking back on it all, I can see how this whole thing started with one little thought. An idea born among the synapses and left to float around my mind, rising to the surface of consciousness for breath every now and then. My attention gave it air, letting it grow and expand and intensify. Then, one day I finally acted on that little thought, and it launched my family into the adventure of a lifetime. An amazing, life-changing dream trip...that was now mutating into a nightmare. And it all started with one seemingly powerless thought – that my life was supposed to be different. Supposed to be something *more*.

I considered this ironic turn my life was taking as I sat in a plastic chair, surrounded by a variety of airport employees. An older gentleman wearing a dark suit hovered over me, jabbing his thumbs against his phone. Two women in matching red blazers stood nearby, one of them sorting through a stack of papers and the other inspecting the pages of my passport. A young security guard planted himself directly in front of my chair with his hands set firmly on his hips, as though waiting for me to make a break for it.

My knees bounced nervously, sending an incessant cacophony of annoying squeaks out from under my chair. I tried to sit still, but my legs seemed to have taken on an anxious life of their own. Searching the room's sterile grey walls for a distraction, my eyes settled on a large picture window cutting through to a concourse hallway. Travelers rushed by with carry-ons slung over their shoulders and suitcases rolling at their heels, all of them oblivious to the predicament I'd found myself in. I watched as a family walked into the window's view, and the father stopped to help his little girl adjust her backpack. My mind immediately flashed to my husband and our three daughters, all sitting at our gate wondering why I'd been forced to leave with a security guard.

A few Thai words crackled through a walkie-talkie mounted on the guard's shoulder, sending the group of airport employees into an animated conversation. I couldn't understand a word they said, but the issue at hand seemed to be what they were supposed to do with me. After what felt like an eternity, two airport police wearing bulky bullet proof vests entered the room and gestured for me to follow them. Standing up, I thought my legs might buckle, but I took a deep breath and managed to propel myself into motion. As we walked through a series of brightly lit hallways and secured doors, I caught a glimpse of my reflection in a glass wall. The two police officers were in front of me, two security guards were behind me, and the man in the suit trailed all of

us. My heart pounded in my ears as scenes from the movie *Brokedown Palace* began running through my head.

One of the officers pushed open a door, and a nauseating mixture of steamy air and jet fuel hit my nostrils as we walked out onto a staircase attached to the side of the building. The roar of jet engines and the clanging of our footsteps on the metal stairs competed against the panic-stricken thoughts screaming through my head. When we reached the pavement, a man in a yellow vest directed our group to follow him under the wing of an airplane and into a baggage area beneath the terminal. We walked passed busy workers with clipboards and carts piled high with luggage, and within a few seconds I found myself entering a small room with steel mesh walls. On a table in the middle of the cage, covered in colorful flag stickers from countries we'd visited, sat one of our black, hard shell suitcases.

My heart sank and bile stung the back of my throat as the bag's presence eliminated the possibility this had all been a big misunderstanding. I hadn't walked down here to breathe a sigh of relief. Whatever this was, it was actually happening. And it was happening to me. Suddenly, I felt like a caged animal.

A man in a blue uniform hoisted himself out of a chair and gestured wordlessly at the bag's 3-digit lock. I stepped forward and, with trembling hands, turned the dials to pop open the latches. The top of the suitcase rose several inches. *Was it really that full when I packed it?* As the man began rummaging through our things, a sickening dizziness careened through my head, forcing me to grab the edge of the table.

*This wouldn't be happening if I hadn't thought my life was supposed to be different.* The nauseating vertigo intensified, threatening to pull me to the floor. *I went looking for more out of life, and now it's going to land me in a Thai prison.*

## Pinot Noir and Panic Attacks

Inbox count: 596

Weekly errands: 23

Loads of laundry to fold: 4

Moments of joy and bliss: Data unavailable

I sank into a shabby-chic, overstuffed armchair on the patio of Chattanooga's new wine bar and savored the stillness of the moment. My hands weren't typing. Eyes weren't scanning my inbox. Feet weren't stomping up the school's concrete steps in the mad dash to pick up my kids from the aftercare program. For the first time since I'd woken up that morning, my body was completely motionless. Warm spring air settled over my arms and reached down into my chest, filling me up like a balloon and pulling a deep sigh from my lungs. To sit. To breathe. To do nothing. *What a glorious thing this is. I should do it more often.* Soon the silence shattered with greetings as a parade of friends began to arrive.

"Hey, how are you!? It's been too long!"

"Did you get your hair cut? I love it!"

"Oooh...cute purse! Where'd you get it?"

This was just what I needed: an evening of zero obligations. No emails, no meetings. No homework drama with the kids or reminders to bring juice boxes to a classroom party. Just easy conversation with good friends who expected nothing of me, except to maybe pass them a bottle of wine.

When we reached a lull in the conversation, one friend asked the group in her charming southern drawl, "So, ladies, what'd y'all do this week?"

And that's when it happened.

Evidently, a mind-altering revelation can surface anywhere. I wasn't having a near-death experience or praying at the feet of a spiritual guru. Given my love for wine, I guess it shouldn't come as much of a surprise that my life-changing epiphany made its grand entrance in the middle of a bar. But there it came, in all its agonizing glory. My heart pounded and tiny beads of sweat erupted onto my forehead. A buzzing sound rushed through my ears, drowning out my friends' responses and making it sound as though they were talking into the over-sized wine glasses they held in their hands.

Terror and embarrassment ripped through me. *Oh. My. God. I'm having a panic attack! In the middle of a damn wine bar!*

The only thing more surprising than the onset of these symptoms was the innocuous nature of the topic provoking them. What on earth *had* I done this week? I honestly couldn't remember. It was all a blur of meetings and errands and car pools and house chores. In my attempt to answer a friend's simple question, a wave of disheartening clarity came crashing in on me like a tsunami. *My life has become a repetitive, uninspiring to-do list.*

Get everyone to work and school on time.

Check.

Read and send emails at all hours of the day.

Check.

Sit in countless meetings.

Check.

Go to the grocery store, pick up dry cleaning, fold laundry.

Check.

Check.

Check.

*Was nothing in this entire week worth remembering? Am I just going through the motions to the point that I'm practically catatonic?!* The longer I sat there trying to think of something that could distinguish this week from the last, the harder my heart crashed against my rib cage. My lungs fiercely rejected the air I attempted to gulp down through shallow, shaky breaths and my hands went completely numb. In one brief moment, I'd gone from happy, laughing girls-night-out gal to sweaty, terrified panic attack victim. Looking for an escape, I mumbled something about needing to pee and beelined for the bathroom.

After few minutes alone in a ladies' room filled with faux finishes and antique knick knacks, I was finally able to take a deep breath. The drummer in my chest was wrapping up his solo, and the bizarre numbness in my hands had faded to pins and needles. Gripping both sides of the sink, I leaned in and studied myself in the mirror. A sheen of sweat had smeared my make-up and given me a bad case of racoon eyes. My long blonde hair, blown into submission with an expensive hair dryer, was now tangled and damp at the roots. A red wine stain ran down the front my designer shirt, evidence of my frazzled flee from the overstuffed armchair. I barely recognized this headcase staring back at me.

"What in the hell is wrong with you?" I said out loud. Of course, it wasn't lost on me that I'd simply replaced a panic attack with the equally-worrying issue of talking to myself in a damn mirror. I took a deep breath, smoothed out my eye make-up and combed my fingers through my hair. Then I gave my reflection a cold, hard stare. "Get back out there and just *be happy*," I said with conviction.

And that's just what I did. I pulled it together and returned to my friends, determined to sweep this little episode under the rug and go on with life as usual. But something in me changed that night. It wasn't just a mild panic attack. This had been a cataclysmic shift. An unexplainable, unalterable, uncontrollable upheaval in the way I looked at everything.

I got home that night and stood in my kitchen contemplating another drink. When I opened a cabinet to grab a wineglass, I noticed the shelves of martini and margarita glasses we never used. I pulled open the next cabinet and saw the juicer I

bought after watching a documentary on Netflix. Another cabinet held the new Tupperware I'd picked up at Target that week, not because I needed it, but because it looked so much cuter than the Tupperware I already owned. My heart started pounding again as I frantically yanked open doors and rummaged through drawers. *When's the last time I used this melon baller? Did I ever figure out how this stupid julienne knife works? And why in God's name do I own an egg slicer?* Within seconds, our kitchen looked like something out of a poltergeist film. Every single drawer and cabinet was wide open and a terrified woman stood in the middle of it all.

As I took deep breaths and tried to avoid yet another panic attack, I suddenly remembered a story I'd recently heard. My Power Yoga instructor told it during the "quiet meditation" period she did at the beginning of each class. I'd barely listened to it at the time, but now the symbolism in her little Zen tale seemed to perfectly describe my life.

A horse was galloping at a great speed, and it appeared the man riding it was going somewhere very important. As the hooves thundered through a village, a young boy watched the man ride by and called out "Where are you going?" The man on the horse turned back to the boy and yelled, "I don't know! Ask the horse!"

