

The Best-Laid Plans

A vomiting child in an airport hotel—
it wasn't the vacation she had in mind.

ANNE CUSHMAN on the teachings of
a trip gone awry.

LAST WEEKEND I had a spiritual breakthrough while staying with my feverish ten-year-old son at a hotel at the Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport.

Well, okay, so maybe it wasn't exactly a breakthrough. Maybe it was more of a little crack in the prison walls through which a ray of moonlight could shine. By prison, of course, I don't mean our hotel room. We were actually in a very comfortable seventh-floor room with a panoramic view of the runway. That is, until Skye threw up all over the rug, at which point we were switched to an identical fourth-floor room with a panoramic view of the parking garage. No, by prison I mean those iron bars of thoughts and beliefs that... well, maybe I should just start this story at the beginning.

LATE LAST FALL, I began planning a two-week trip to Guatemala with Skye to study Spanish and live with a Mayan family in a remote mountain village on the shores of Lake Atitlán. I set up our trip through a nonprofit organization run by a young American couple who had made Guatemala their home. The more they told me about what we would experience there, the better it sounded. Our homestay family—Pedro, Gladis, and their three boys—didn't speak English. We'd learn to make tortillas in Gladis' wood-fired stove. Skye would accompany their ten-year-old, Selvin, to the village school. Every morning, we'd take Spanish lessons while looking out at the three huge volcanoes that ringed the shimmering waters of what Aldous Huxley called "the most beautiful lake in the world."

What could be better? I booked our flights for Skye's February school vacation, and began making plans.

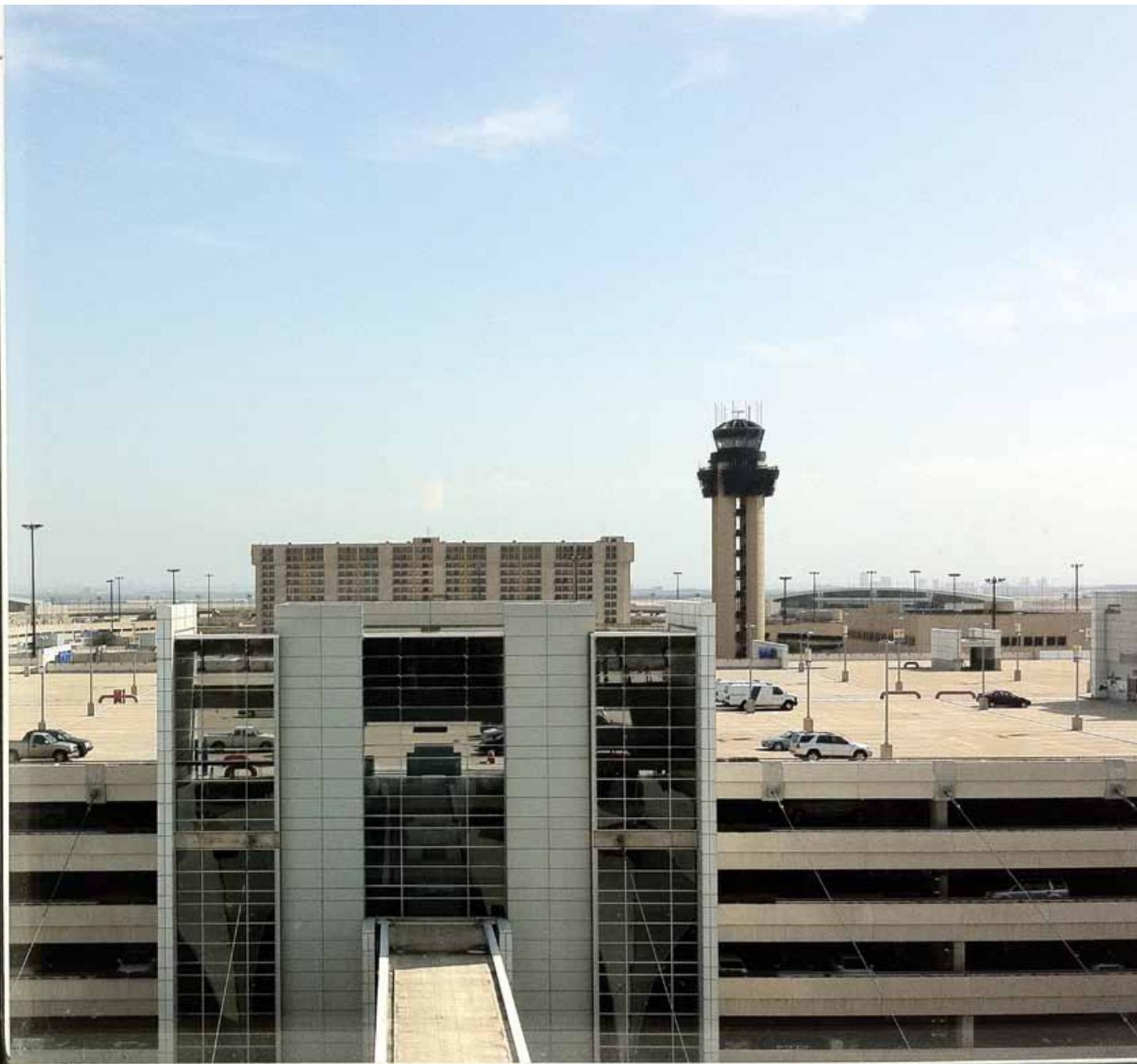
Before I go any further, there's something you should know about me: I plan stuff.

Already this morning, I've planned a novel set in ancient Assam, a dinner of butternut squash and black bean tacos, a Skype conference with

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PHOTOS BY SKYE CUSHMAN HAWTHORNE



View from the airport hotel.



The glowing red ball of the sun over the runway; the crunch of hot buttered toast; the laughter of my boy on the bed next to me. The trip—just as it was—was bursting with miracles.

Above, Anne and Skye setting off on their trip. Right: the hotel room. Opposite: view of the runway from the room.



Skye's fifth-grade teacher, an online yoga workshop, and a trip to Walgreens to buy wart remover. And I haven't even washed the breakfast dishes yet.

Not that there's anything wrong with planning, in and of itself; my plans have created some wonderful outcomes over the years (as well, of course, as some spectacular misfires). The problem is, my planning respects no boundaries. I plan while driving, hiking, washing my hair, and sitting on the toilet. I scribble my do-lists everywhere—crumpled napkins, torn-up envelopes, Post-it notes, dream journals, the palm of my hand. I sit during meditation retreats planning to sit during future meditation retreats.

For decades after I started my mindfulness practice, my incessant planning—amazingly—remained largely invisible to me. Sitting in meditation, I noticed the ice storms of fear, the tsunamis of lust, the endless reruns of disastrous love affairs and childhood disappointments. But my planning mind was a constant background hum I took for granted—the way when I visit my brother, an editor at the *New York Times*, NPR is always playing on a radio on the kitchen counter. (Once, on a recent visit, I suggested that we might not want to eat our scrambled eggs while listening to a broadcast about how syphilis was on the rise in the D.C. area. His whole brilliant, well-informed family looked at me in bewilderment, as if I had suggested turning off the oxygen.)

But a few years ago I began to catch myself planning during my

yoga practice. I've always thought of yoga as a sanctuary from the din of my thoughts—a sensual, intuitive, intimate realm I explore with no GPS. But there I was, deep in a forward bend, swimming through a wordless flow of sensation and emotion—when I noticed my own voice-over, preparing instructions to an invisible future yoga class about how to swim through a wordless flow of sensation and emotion. There I was, blissfully doing sun salutations under a tree on my deck, when I caught myself planning a “yoga in nature” retreat, where I could do yoga under a tree on a deck.

Suddenly it was as if a black light had been turned on in my inner world and all my invisible-ink planning was glowingly apparent, scrawled like graffiti over every available mental surface. I realized how often I slaughtered my actual life—the smell of bay laurels in the rain, the creamy surrender of an avocado to my spoon—on the altar of a ghostlike future. I saw how regularly I sat outside the wide-open gates of heaven, trying to order the keys online.

I was horrified. All those decades of meditation and yoga, and things were still this bad? Surely, there must be something I could do about it. There must be—well, a *plan*! So I promptly made one: To make planning itself an object of my mindful awareness. To learn



how to live skillfully with a planning mind without being ruled by it.

That's a good idea, I thought, grabbing for a scrap of paper to scribble it down. *I should write about it sometime.*

AS OUR TRIP to Guatemala drew nearer, my to-do list drummed relentlessly through my mind, waking me up at two in the morning to bark commands: *Update Skye's hepatitis-A immunization. Buy travel-sized contact lens solution. Get international plan for cellphone.* I loaded *Speak Spanish with Michel Thomas* into my car stereo and began repeating his useful phrases as I drove from errand to errand: *Can I make a reservation for dinner tonight? What do you think of the political and economic situation in Argentina? My friend is a drunk.*

With each mental preview of our future trip, I thought of more items to add to my list. Skye gets carsick on winding mountain roads: *Candied ginger.* Skye should offer a gift to our homestay family's kids: *Remote-control helicopter.*

The problem was, I'd squeezed the trip to Guatemala into some white space on my calendar, right between teaching a yoga retreat and rewriting a screenplay. A website I'd helped develop was due to launch while I was away. Emails were sprouting like kudzu in my inbox. My life felt like a suitcase I'd stuffed too much into. Now I was sitting on top of it, trying to get the lid to close.

Through studying my planning mind over the last few years, I already knew some tools for working with it—the first one being, of course, to notice and name it. As my trip grew closer and the planning crescendoed, one of my meditation teachers suggested some

other inquiries: How much of my planning was redundant? What benefit did I derive from it? What feelings did it help me avoid? How did it help me bolster the illusion of a solid self?

Again and again, I spread out my yoga mat, sat on my cushion, and offered a deep bow to my planning mind: *Thank you so much, but not now.* I drew my attention gently back to my body and noticed the feelings that lay underneath the plans: the shallow breath, the gripped spine, the emotional cocktail of excitement and anxiety—wildly out of proportion, as if I were Jack Bauer on the TV series “24” with the clock ticking on my plans to purchase sturdy walking sandals and thereby avert worldwide nuclear annihilation. Apparently, deep in my cells, I believed that if I didn't keep reciting the mantra of my shopping list, the entire universe would implode. And as my breath slowed, I looked straight in the eyes of the demons that muttered and snarled under the veil of my plans: *If I wasn't planning, I wasn't worth anything. I didn't even exist at all.*

THE NIGHT BEFORE we left, Skye was so excited he couldn't fall asleep until after midnight. Walking into the airport, our carry-on packs strapped to our backs, he caught my hand and exulted, “We're off on an adventure together! We've been planning it for so long, and now it's here!” But as our plane lifted off, he turned pale and droopy. He leaned against the hard plastic of the window and went to sleep, forgoing the usual thrill of watching the San Francisco Bay fall away below us. He turned down apple juice and honey peanuts, and watching *Megamind* on the seatback video screen. By the time we landed in Dallas for our connecting flight to Guatemala City, his head was throbbing and he could barely lift his backpack. > page 83

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As I hustled him toward our departure gate, where boarding had already started, I looked at his face—pale and miserable—and knew we couldn't get on another plane. I spoke with the gate attendant, who tore up our boarding passes and issued us new ones for the next day. Fifteen minutes later, we were checking in to the airport hotel for what I imagined would be a night of recovery before flying on. Three hours later, Skye was vomiting, with a fever of 103, and I knew we wouldn't be doing a homestay with a family in Guatemala any time soon.

Skye was too sick to go on, and too sick to fly home. We were stranded at the airport.

Sitting up in his bed the next morning, Skye wept with disappointment. "I'm supposed to be driving to Lake Atitlán today!" he sobbed. "I'm supposed to be giving Selvin his helicopter!" I ached for him. I knew the all-too-human pain of comparing your actual life to the one you had envisioned and having it come up short. We'd pictured this day so many times—the shimmering water of Lake Atitlán, the bright clothes of the Mayan women washing their clothes at the well, Skye running down the cobble streets with his new Guatemalan friends. We'd planned it so much that we had thought it was real—a solid future, just waiting for us to come and inhabit it. Instead, it had dissolved like the mirage it always was. We were looking out the window at a runway with a jet roaring down it and lifting into the air—filled with people, presumably, whose plans had worked out.

Except that's not true, of course. It's safe to assume that every person on that plane had experienced derailments and disappointment in their lifetime far worse than our minor travel setback. What we were experiencing was not one of the big plan-shatterers—the bad blood test results, the phone call at two in the morning, the goodbye note on the kitchen table, the car swerving out of control on the patch of freeway ice. I've sat in the rubble of a shattered marriage; I've come home from a hospital with empty arms to a lovingly decorated baby girl's room. This was not like that. We were comfortable, safe, and well fed, I reminded Skye (and myself). For heaven's sake, we had *room service*.

It wasn't as exciting as being in Guatemala, of course—but was even that true? If Gladis' family had been dropped down in this room, would they have found it tedious? Or would they have enjoyed the flat-screen TV with its on-demand movies; the built-in mini-fridge stocked with Schlitz beer and Reese's Peanut Butter Cups? And how did we know what our trip to Lake Atitlán would actually have been like? We were comparing reality with an air-brushed fantasy pinup and under those circumstances reality always looks uncombed and disheveled.

I decided to look at our stay in this one hotel room—for however long it was—as a mini-meditation retreat. While Skye napped and recovered, I would meditate and do yoga on the travel mat I'd conveniently stuffed in my backpack. When he was awake, I would

embrace being present with him as my practice. I would fully open to the trip that was actually happening and stop comparing it with the imaginary one I had planned. I'd try to remember that what was most important was not what was happening, but how I related to it.

This had its challenging moments. As Skye's fever climbed every night, he thrashed and moaned and called out in his sleep. ("That's my snitch! The snow is two- to three-foot deep!" he cried, apparently deep in a game of nocturnal Quidditch on a ski slope.) As I lay awake listening to him breathe like a winded racehorse, the primal fear of a mother with a sick child surged inside me.

When I was a few years younger than Skye, my father was sent to Vietnam for two years, and my mother took my older siblings and me to the Philippines to wait for him. On my improvised meditation retreat at the airport hotel, I felt my mother's fear bubbling up inside me from its lodging deep in my cells. No wonder I like to plan things, I thought; no wonder I feel that disaster will strike if I don't. Rattling in the back of my plans is the throb of my father's helicopter flying over the war-ravaged jungles and the terror of my mother, waking up in the middle of the night with her children, far from home.

I lay in bed and tried to meditate with the fear—to greet it with loving-kindness, get to know it, make it my friend. When I couldn't stand it anymore, I got up and stood by Skye's bed, bending my face close to his to see how hot he was and if I needed to call the emergency room now, or whether I could wait till the morning. He opened his eyes in exasperation. "Mom," he said. "I'm trying to get some *sleep* here."

But for the most part—when I stopped comparing things with my imaginary trip—the three days we spent in that one small room were actually quite enjoyable. With Skye dosed up on ibuprofen, we played chess and gin rummy and a Scrabble-like game called Bananagrams. We rented *The Last Airbender*, which we both agreed was slightly more entertaining than watching the four-story parking garage out the window. When I wanted a real thrill,

I walked down the hall to the ice machine.

When I opened my eyes, the trip—just as it was—was bursting with miracles. The crunch of hot buttered toast. The glowing red ball of the sun as it dropped low on the horizon over the runway and the plane taking off steeply in front of it. The laughter of my boy as he lay on the bed next to me, reading *Septimus Heap: Syren*.

And the glorious fact that—other than a couple of calls to the airline to cancel our tickets—I didn't make a single plan for seventy-two hours.

AFTER THREE NIGHTS in the hotel, Skye was well enough to board a plane home, though still coughing and weak. We packed up our backpacks again, and headed out the door. Before I left, I turned and bowed to the hotel room, as if walking out of a temple.

It hadn't been the trip I had planned. But it had been real—and I had been there for it. And that, in itself, was cause for a small celebration. ♦

