

Days in Taiwan: 365

by Jeff Nichols

So. A year. Exactly a year ago I landed in Taiwan to find myself in a modest dorm room, with a modest job, and no idea that Covid was about to blow up back at home. I arrived with two suitcases, the \$2,000 I got from selling my car and saving a few shifts worth of tips, about one lesson's worth of Chinese, and the hope for a happier future. It feels weird today. I feel as though I want to look back and revel in the accomplishments. The internal and external changes in my life. Gently accept the moments where I took a step or two back and be floored by the progress I've made. But today, somehow I feel... not enough. For some reason I'm feeling the goals not achieved more than those that I've managed to grasp. That's the work I suppose. I have to remember where I came from. What it felt like to live in that other person's skin.

Today I think about, and want to share, a moment; something I wrote quite a while ago and haven't shared much. It was the moment I made the decision. I was in Japan at the time, visiting a friend, and was wrestling with the decision on whether or not to accept an offer to move to Taiwan. Long story short, I did and that offer unfortunately never came to fruition. But by then I had already decided and this current misfortune, I'd resolved, was a bump in the road. Already a step in the right direction, as other failed opportunities in my past had progressively crippled me mentally over the years. So why not document this occasion, right?

Just a small tidbit of the things that have transpired in my life since arriving here. I've been rejected, wait-listed, offered, and subsequently turned down a position in an MFA program at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama in London. I've had my full length play rejected from a Sundance Institute workshop, ridden a scooter for hundreds of miles through unknown and sometimes dangerous terrain and conditions, swam with sea turtles, began redrafting my previously mentioned play, learned more Chinese than I ever intended to in my life, paid down \$6,000 worth of debt that was accrued in the money pit that is pursuing acting in LA, began developing a program and exercises for ESL learners to feel more confident in their pronunciation and public speaking, was turned down for a job I desperately wanted in Taipei, lost a close family friend and a dearly loved pet to the inevitability of death, shared numerous exciting adventures that have made me feel so damn alive with an entirely unexpected romantic partner, I've made children laugh and, unfortunately, cry at times, and hopefully I've given them something worthwhile, and I've made many unexpected friendships.

All this to say.... Well, I don't know if I have the perfect thing to say. I'm not an entirely different person, but I'm glad to say that I've progressed significantly from the person who wrote the following passage....

“This was it. This was the moment. And yes, my hand was resting on my chin just like that. The context was different then, but the decision wasn't made from context, it was made inside of me. It was Wednesday, March 13th, 2019. I had just left Tokyo on the Shinkansen, the bullet train, to Nozawaonsen to go snowboarding in Japan's legendary powder and soak in impossibly hot onsens. The underground tunnel had given way to endless views of the Mountains of Nagano and I felt it inside of me; the shift. I could feel the knowing look my face displayed so, like any self-respecting, self-loving 21st-century 30-something I turned my phone to face my eyes and snapped away. I wasn't thinking that it was the perfect opportunity for good light, or about the endless hashtagability this moment provided; I just wanted to look at my face. I wanted to see what I looked like truly happy. It was a very rare

feeling, and an even rarer moment for me to see in a reflection. But I was happy. I'd decided it was time to leave L.A.

On my darkest days I'd have regular daydreams of falling off a building, made all the more ominous by the fact that I work on a 15th floor rooftop restaurant. But these images were there before I started that job, which was just more bacterium to add to an already infected mind, so to speak. The daydreams would come and go in my greatest times of self-doubt, while I was stuck in endless traffic, or while refilling someone's eighth diet coke at yet another restaurant job I'd procured to supplement my passion. At times they would be there when I closed my eyes at night and laid next to the person I loved. It was all I could see. I would feel the lifted weight from my shoulders with my feet on the edge, the surge of everything falling behind me, the stress, the resentment, the anger, the sadness, the envy, all of it as I leaned forward and let gravity reach out and take hold of me. I'd stare for an hour or more at my ceiling, waiting for the incessant highlight reel of my demise to cease playing in my head. The peaceful weightlessness of the fall called to me.

One night, while taking a break from the defeat of yet another serving shift, I found myself on the rooftop of my current place of employment. Staring off into the distance, wishing I was somewhere else, I found myself leaning against the parapet, its molded concrete pressing against the faint beat of my heart. I pushed my chest against the edge, let my feet leave the ground, and hung my head over the edge's threshold, staring downward at the construction below as I leaned further and further forward. The ground rushed up and I felt a wave of energy break over me. The wind brought me back to my feet and breath kicked into my lungs, sharp and shallow; I hadn't realized I stopped breathing. I went back down stairs, greeted my new table, and took their drink order with a feigned smile while my heart was still pounding. Something was wrong. Something had been wrong for a long time. What series of had events lead me to this place? How had it gone this far? What now? That was the beginning of the end.

I have moments of great happiness. Moments where the tears in my eyes are brought on by the wonder and awe of the great joy existence has to offer. Fewer and fewer of them happen in L.A. anymore, so I'm off to find where they went.”

