

I AM SAYING GOODBYE TO MY DAUGHTER at the airport. Sasha is ten and about to fly alone to Florida to visit her best friend. We lean into each other, forehead to forehead, Sasha looking fearless and anticipative, I misty-eyed and filled with awareness that this is but one of many separations to come.

On the return trip, Sasha's plane makes an unscheduled stop. She calls to let me know that she has followed some other passengers to a new boarding area and will take a different plane home. I am shaken and irate at the airline; my daughter is matter-of-fact.

A decade later Sasha calls me from the airport in Düsseldorf, Germany, where she is changing planes on a return flight from Greece. She is badly sunburned and has been waiting for hours. There is no information desk in sight, and Sasha has forgotten most of her high-school German. I place a frantic call to her former pediatrician, who advises wet paper towels and plenty of fluids. I spend the night mothering Sasha long-distance, running up an exorbitant phone bill.

Another decade has passed, and my daughter is a scientist doing environmental field research in Costa Rica and Bolivia. She travels in and out of back-country airstrips, in aircraft the size of large dragonflies. I worry about plane crashes, poisonous snakes, killer bees, and political unrest. By phone Sasha reassures me in her clear, calm voice. "Vaya con Dios," I say as we hang up, thinking a Spanish blessing couldn't hurt.

I will never be able to keep her safe — never have been able to, really, even when she was an infant in my arms. My daughter's life — all life — is as fragile as a plane in flight, as a dragonfly's wings. I live in anticipation of our next airport reunion, when we'll lean into each other, forehead to forehead, all distance erased, my daughter returned to me once more.

*Sheila Reed
Elmira, New York*

MY PARENTS WEREN'T THE KIND WHO picked their children up at the airport. "Just take a cab," my mother would sigh over the phone whenever I planned a trip back to New York City from San Francisco. I'd usually find myself waiting in



ORAH MOORE

Readers Write

AIRPORTS

line at the taxi stand outside JFK International Airport. Or sometimes Khan, the Pakistani car-service driver who whisks my elegant, designer-clad mother around Manhattan, would meet me at the baggage claim.

Single and forty-one, I had managed not to meet any of my mother's expectations. I hadn't become a lawyer; I hadn't even married a lawyer. So I had no idea what to expect from her when I announced that I'd decided to adopt a baby girl from China.

Happily, my mother liked the idea of a Chinese granddaughter. She began to send me newspaper clippings about adopted Chinese girls growing up Jewish

on the Upper West Side. Still, she seemed tentative, almost distant, while I waited for an adoption referral. Maybe she wasn't all that pleased. Or maybe she was just being superstitious. She'd once told me it was tempting fate to hold a baby shower before the baby arrived.

Eight months later the adoption agency sent me a tiny photo of a baby with a spiky fringe of black hair. In a burst of excitement, my parents made reservations to fly to San Francisco so they could be there when I came home from China with my new daughter, Clara. They even agreed to rent a car and pick us up at the airport. My mother and I had several long discussions about how Clara would react

to a car seat. "There's no way she'll sit in one," my mother said with certainty. "She's never seen a car seat in her life."

"Well, she'll just have to. And if she doesn't, I'll hold her in my lap," I replied. I was about to fly thousands of miles to a foreign country and be handed a one-year-old. A car seat was the least of my worries.

Clara was given to me, red-faced and screaming, in a government office in Wuhan, China. For the next two weeks, while the adoption was made official, she would not let me put her down. But when we got off the plane in San Francisco and climbed into my parents' rented Volvo, Clara let me buckle her right into the car seat. My mother, completely enchanted, turned around in the passenger seat and offered Clara a long, manicured finger to clutch. They stayed that way for the entire forty-five-minute ride home.

Clara is four years old now, a happy preschooler who likes chow-mein noodles and the matzo balls she and my mother make from a mix when she visits my parents. The last time I planned a trip to Manhattan, my mother said Khan would pick us up at the airport. And he was there, at the baggage claim, holding up a sign with our name on it. But so was my mother, hunkered down in a dirty orange plastic chair, smiling as we approached.

Name Withheld

WHEN MY DAD WAS AT THE HEIGHT of his cocaine addiction, I told my high-school counselor about his rages and beatings. She sympathized and said she could report it, but while he got treatment, I would be put in Chicago's foster-care system; at my age, sixteen, that meant a group home where I would be housed among juvenile offenders. She told me some horror stories about those homes. I thanked her for the warning and told her I preferred the beatings. Then I ran away.

It was winter in Chicago. I couldn't afford an apartment or even a transient hotel on my meager income from a part-time job. So I rode the trains and buses to stay warm, and, when I had absolutely no place to sleep, I went to the airport. There was almost always a delayed flight, and where there was a delayed flight, there

was a crowd of stranded travelers for me to slip into and find a place to sleep. The roaming security guards made me feel safe. A bathroom was never far away, and, if it was deserted enough, I could risk washing my hair and taking a sponge bath. Some mornings I might talk to a monk in robes and learn about his religion, or hear some Bob Dylan wannabe strumming a beat-up guitar. Those terminals were my only safe haven during that frightening time.

Sometime in the early nineties, I was watching the ten o'clock news, and the anchor reported that, for security reasons, the terminals at O'Hare would be open to ticketed passengers only from then on. A sadness came over me, and I wept for anyone who might be looking for a safe place to sleep on a cold winter night.

Name Withheld

IT WAS 1969, AND THE VIETNAM WAR was in full swing. At my father's urging, my eighteen-year-old brother enlisted in the navy to avoid the risk of getting drafted

into the army and ending up dodging bullets in the jungle. I don't remember much about the day my brother left for Great Lakes Naval Training Center except that I got his room. I was eleven.

Six weeks later my brother was coming home on his first leave. My parents, my sister, and I waited at the airport gate, surrounded by hugging strangers. As the crowd thinned out, I began to think my brother was not going to walk down the narrow jetway. What if he didn't come home? I had never before considered the possibility that something might happen to him. The thought disturbed me, because I did love my brother, who expressed his affection for me, his kid sister, mostly with punches to the arm and thumps to the back of the head.

Then I looked up at a tall sailor with a shaved head, dressed all in white, wearing shiny shoes and carrying an enormous sea bag on his shoulder. My brother shook my dad's hand and hugged my mom and tousled my hair. Where was the punch? Where was the thump? Who was this

READERS WRITE asks readers to address subjects on which they're the only authorities. Topics are intentionally broad in order to give room for expression. Writing style isn't as important as thoughtfulness and sincerity.

Because of space limitations, we're unable to print all the submissions we receive. We edit pieces, often quite heavily, but contributors have the opportunity to approve or disapprove of editorial changes prior to publication. (If you don't want to be contacted regarding the editing of your work, please let us know.)

We publish only nonfiction in Readers Write. Feel free to submit your work under "Name Withheld" if it allows you to be more honest, but be sure to include your mailing address so we can give you a complimentary six-month subscription if we use your work, as a way of saying thanks. Occasionally we will choose not to publish an author's name, or will use only a first name and last initial. While we don't question the truthfulness of the writing, we must be sensitive to considerations of libel or invasion of privacy. If you've already changed the names of the people involved, please say so.

Send your typed, double-spaced submissions to Readers Write, The Sun, 107 North Roberson Street, Chapel Hill, NC 27516. If you cannot type, please print clearly. We're sorry, but we can't respond to or return your work, so don't send your only copy unless you don't want it back. Because we must wait until the last minute to make our final selections, we are unable to answer questions regarding the status of submissions. If your work is going to appear, you'll hear from us prior to publication.

UPCOMING TOPICS	DEADLINE	PUBLICATION DATE
Patriotism	December 1	June 2008
Now Or Never	January 1	July 2008
Up All Night	February 1	August 2008
Porches	March 1	September 2008
Finding Out	April 1	October 2008
Immigrants	May 1	November 2008

polite, grown-up stranger?

My brother eventually went to Vietnam, where he served on a ship, relatively out of harm's way. After he'd finished his tour of duty, he was stationed in Long Beach, California. He'd send me albums by the Beatles and Jackson Browne and James Taylor, records my friends and I hadn't heard yet. California seemed the source of all cool music.

A couple of years later he got discharged from the navy and came home to Virginia. Once again we headed to the airport. I was now fifteen and, in my mind, almost grown-up. Waiting at the gate, I tried to look nonchalant in my frayed bell-bottoms, straight hair, and John Lennon glasses: as if I came to the airport all the time; as if I knew my way *around* the airport.

I watched the narrow jetway, eyes peeled for the tall sailor. But as the last passengers emerged, there was no sailor. There was only a tall, shaggy-haired hippie carrying a huge sea bag. He was smiling at us. Once again my brother was a stranger to me.

*Debbie Remington
St. Petersburg, Florida*

MY MOTHER, MY FATHER, AND I ARE late departing for the airport, and I am annoyed. My father is holding us up with his primping, slicking his hair down with some acrid-smelling gel. At this rate, I may miss my plane.

"For God's sake, we're only going to the airport," I say.

"I need to look good for my little girl," he says, "in case I don't see you again."

This comment catches me off guard. It's the first hint he's given that he is aware of his failing health; normally he insists that my mother is exaggerating. She has whispered to me over the phone, her voice tinged with fear, that she's found my father walking through the neighborhood in his pajamas or standing in the corner of the living room, staring at his feet.

My father speeds us to the airport, focused and tense, and we arrive so late that he has to drop me off at the curb. My mother will walk me to the gate while he parks the car and tries to catch up with us. I hustle to my gate but put off boarding the plane while I look around for my

father. I'd hate to leave without saying goodbye to him. I live two thousand miles away, and it may be a full year before I see him again.

When they call for final boarding, my father still has not shown up. Reluctantly I get on, find my seat, and shove my baggage into the overhead bin. The cabin door is about to close when the flight attendant announces my name over the intercom and motions for me to come to the front.

My victorious father is there, having pushed his way through and demanded to see me. Every ounce of anger I have been feeling vanishes. We hug and accidentally kiss on the lips. I go back to my seat, buckle up, and promptly burst into tears, gripped by a powerful fear that I will never see him again.

I never do.

*Tama J. Kieves
Denver, Colorado*

MY EMPLOYER TELLS ME I'M THE first line of defense in the "war on terror." That's a lot of responsibility for an airline baggage handler whose paycheck has been cut numerous times (while the corporate heads have done everything in their power to secure their own salaries, pensions, and lifetime flying privileges). Management once expressed its appreciation for my hard work by giving me a chocolate-chip cookie adorned with a smiley face.

"If you see an individual without the proper badge in a restricted area of the airport, you are to challenge that individual," says the authoritative voice on the training video. This "challenge" involves approaching the suspect and asking for evidence that he or she belongs there. The narrator goes on to say that if the suspect fails to produce proper identification, the employee is to escort him or her to the nearest exit.

Call me stupid, but if I am a terrorist intent on causing destruction at an international airport, and I've managed to get by the Transportation Security Administration, the airline's gate agents, the airport police, and the numerous key-coded security doors, do you honestly think being "challenged" by an underpaid, overworked employee is

going to stop me?

*K.R.
Los Angeles, California*

AT THIRTY-FIVE, BLINDED BY THE desire to have a baby, I rushed into marriage with a man I'd been dating only four months. The night before our wedding, my fiancé held me by the neck and threatened to kill me. I married him anyway. Within three months I was pregnant.

Throughout that short union I lived in constant fear and often locked myself in the bedroom to escape my husband's rage. One hot summer night he told me he would kill me and take the baby if I did not shut up. I moved three states away, taking our four-month-old son with me.

After a prolonged custody battle that forced me into bankruptcy, my ex gained visitation rights. My son, now seven, flies once a month as an unaccompanied minor to see his father. As we head to the airport together, there is a routine I follow: a certain toll road, a certain parking garage, a certain check-in line, a certain family bathroom, a certain airport store, a certain McDonald's, a certain time when the flight attendant takes my son away from me.

It is never easy, and, inevitably, after my son has walked away, a bystander asks me how I do it. This unsuspecting soul has no idea how painful it is to relinquish my child to the care of his father. I wear sunglasses so no one will see the tears in my eyes.

Back in my car I feel my son's still-warm seat and put in the CD we were listening to together just a short while ago. As I drive home alone, I watch the airplanes fly over my car. One of them carries my precious boy.

Name Withheld

AT THE AGE OF THIRTEEN I WALKED through JFK International Airport holding tightly to my mother's hand; my younger sister walked on her other side, clutching her favorite stuffed animal. Our mother wore a print dress that showed off her figure, beaded necklaces around her neck, and a knit cap that covered her red hair. Though her clothes hadn't changed since her flower-child days, the lines on

her face betrayed the intervening years of hard living.

My sister and I were headed to California to live with our grandparents. Everyone had agreed it was for the best. I was even looking forward to life in my grandparents' tidy house, where dinner was always on the table at six and making the rent was never an issue. At the same time, I clung to the hope that our mother would come with us to California; that, in the end, she wouldn't be able to let us go.

But when the three of us came to the security check, my mother stopped in her tracks.

"I can't go through," she said.

I knew what the problem was. "Don't worry, they're only looking for metal."

She refused to budge. I wasn't going to let airport security ruin the chance that she might come with us. "I'll take it through," I told her.

We went into a stall in the women's bathroom, and my mother passed me a small bag filled with white powder. I tucked it into the waistband of my jeans and smoothed out my shirt to conceal the bump. My mother looked anxious. "We can't," she said. She was afraid that a belt buckle or something would set off the metal detector, and they'd have to search us. "You don't know what they'd do to us if they found it." She took back the packet of powder.

"Why don't you just throw it away?" I pleaded. I had never made a request like this before, probably because I knew the choice she would make.

Our mother cried as she was separated from us at security, holding tight to the purse that contained her stash. When my sister and I passed through the metal detector, it didn't make a sound.

Name Withheld

THE DAUGHTER OF A U.S. DIPLOMAT, I spent most of my childhood in foreign lands and chose a similar life as an adult. After two years in the Peace Corps, my husband and I began careers teaching in American schools overseas. I have passed through airport after airport, traveling home and then back again, until the distinction between "home" and "away" has blurred or disappeared entirely.

We were in Liberia in 1990 when the opposition forces reached the outskirts of the capital, and the expatriate population was fleeing in a panic. Our three children watched wide-eyed as my husband and I gathered what we could for the trip, leaving behind the bicycles, the car, the furniture. I thought about the friends I'd never see again, the ones who might die after I boarded a plane for the safety of my own country. We traveled to the airport at 2 A.M. with hundreds of others in a military convoy and shook hands with the U.S. ambassador and his wife as we prepared to board the plane. The airport would be burned down within weeks. I would never see that home again.

My husband and I vowed that, from then on, if there was civil unrest in a country, we'd stay put and ride it out. When we lived in Pakistan in the late nineties, we faced a series of evacuations. Each time we declined to leave, determined to keep our home. But after 9/11, we gave in. It took us days to get home to the U.S., which wasn't home anymore. Pakistan was home now, and we wanted to go back.

A month later we returned to Islamabad, having convinced ourselves that it was safe; our school would never be intentionally targeted. Even after we lost a student and her mother in a church bombing; even after a teacher had to throw her body over her child and absorb shrapnel to save his life, we held fast to our decision. But when men armed with AK-47s attacked an American school near ours, killing everyone they saw, we knew it was time to go. Once more we boarded a plane in fear and watched our home slip away below us, getting smaller and smaller until it disappeared.

Kathi Ambrogio

Johannesburg, South Africa

IN OCTOBER 1973 MY FRIEND AND I were released from a Colombian women's prison, where we'd been held for three months on drug-trafficking charges. Physically and emotionally spent, we wanted to get home to the U.S. as soon as we could. Our plan was to fly into Mexico City, take a puddle-jumper to Tijuana, then walk across the border — all this to avoid interrogation at a U.S. airport.

At the Mexico City airport, my friend and I waited nervously in the customs line. A year earlier, a runner we knew had been arrested at Mexican customs and had spent a year getting raped in prison. When it came time for our bags to be checked, several plainclothes cops took over the inspection of our luggage. In a matter of seconds they found the false-bottomed aerosol cans we each had in our bags, and they took us away.

We'd held on to these empty containers, which were expensive to manufacture, in hopes of returning them to the mastermind of the drug-running operation, to make up in some small way for what our bust had cost him. Since the Colombian authorities had never detected the cans, we'd been lulled into thinking they were foolproof.

We were brought to a windowless room, where six black-haired, mustachioed *federales* began screaming at us, their faces inches from ours, demanding to know who'd given us the cans and threatening us with time in prison. They called us "whores" and "stupid mules." The thought of what had happened to our runner friend terrified me. I was sure at any moment one of the men would strike us, and when I began to cry, they screamed even louder.

Finally I threw a name at them, telling them it was the person who'd given us the cans, and I begged them to let us go. They toyed with us a while longer, photographed us, then released us. I clung to my friend's arm and somehow managed to walk the rest of the way through the airport.

In all my years of traveling since then, I've never flown through Mexico City again.

Name Withheld

(end of excerpt)