ESSAY

# The List Maker

by Johanna Montilla




"leap of life." by Ching Ching Liang

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I am a planner.

I go through the day with a notepad, a checklist, and a pen in my pocket. I'm traditional, I'd rather use the paper version instead of electronic devices, but also, I carry one of those for emergencies. You never know when a pen might run out of ink.

I am good at organizing anything. From large and important celebrations like birthday parties, baptisms, even weddings (I planned mine, my two brothers' and a few of my closest friends') to the messiest cabinet full of plastic containers (squares on one side, rectangles, and rounds in the other; biggest on the bottom to the smallest on the top).

I love to be prepared, to have a plan B under my sleeve. I look at any situation from different points of view, trying to find possible problems and their solutions. Some people might say it's too stressful or that kind of thinking eventually would cause anxiety. But not for me. Order is easier, peaceful, it keeps my world functioning.

Or it used to, until one day I had to plan the biggest event of all.

It took my husband and me a few years of discussions, and two columns filled with pros and cons.

*Pros:*
First world country.
Great opportunities for life quality.
Respect for the law.
Freedom and equality.
Chances for our daughter to succeed.

*Cons:*
Weather.
Language.
Leave loved ones behind.
Start over…

Finally, one day we looked at our flow chart and the answer was right there in colorful letters, surrounded by pictures of Vancouver, Calgary and Toronto, the CN Tower, the Parliament, and Niagara Falls. Pros had won, and we agreed to move our family to Canada.

In that instant, I grabbed my pen and started writing down a list of every list I needed to make our transition as smooth as possible:

? Travel arrangements.
? Shopping to do.


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? Business obligations.
? Banking.
? Power of attorney, just in case something happens after I leave.
? Job resignation and help to find my replacement.
? Telling the news to family and friends.
? Farewell parties.
? Things to sell, to give away, and treasures to keep.

Today, I have the strength to admit that the last list was the most difficult to make. How to choose which ones are the most important memories to take with us?

It was a strange selection process, some things didn't get a second look: clothes, shoes, furniture. I just gave them away. Other things landed in the replaceable category, like the expensive china, the flat screen, computers and kitchen appliances, so I opted for selling them and saved the money for the expenses I knew were coming. With the jewellery I collected for years I just kept the ones with more value (emotional and financial). I saved my precious books in a box, hoping to go back someday and bring them with me (it hasn't happened yet).

Finally, I decided to bring with me things that one day I hope they become heirlooms to my daughter, like family photos, the tiara I wore when I got married, souvenirs we bought on our honeymoon, and the guardian angel portrait my Dad gave me when I was a toddler.

My husband was a little more practical. He mostly cared about diplomas, certificates, and any other valuable documents that would make our settlement easier. With my daughter, I compromised. She couldn't bring her entire room full of toys, but I let her pick her favorites. The result: half of one of the suitcases filled with stuffed animals — her friends —, as she said.

Meanwhile, every time I scratched a task as done, I got this weird feeling in my stomach, but I didn't have the time to figure out what it was. I had so much to do. The same feeling took over me when I saw my husband's watery eyes handling the keys from our no-longer home to the new owner.

"Our baby learned how to walk in that living room," he said.

But again, I didn't stop to think or cry. It wasn't on the list.

Finally, after a million checkmarks, we were ready to move. The moment of our departure arrived one morning in June. It was too early, I remember, the sun hadn't come out yet. That day, my husband, our daughter, and I stood at the airport's gates surrounded by six suitcases filled with the remains of our memories and what was left from those ten years building a


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family. Everything else (furniture, curtains, appliances, clothes) was gone. It was necessary, I told myself, we can always start over.

Our closest family and my best friend joined us to say farewell. At first, I wasn't sure if it was a good idea to see all the faces of those people we were leaving behind. But their hugs were packed with encouragement and support, things I needed desperately.

"I'm so proud of you," my mom said between sobs when I hugged her one last time.

I crossed the door to the security area without looking back. My eyes were fixed on our new life waiting at the other side of the next door. We boarded the airplane, I fastened my daughter's seat belt and then mine. I took a deep breath doing a mental check and I realized, it was done. We made it. We were on our way to the life we planned so many months ago.

Then I cried.

I cried so much and for so long that a flight attendant reached to me and asked, "Is there anything I can do for you?"

"What about a list with the steps for not to be sad?" I answered.

Of course, he didn't understand the bad joke so, instead, I asked for some water.

We landed at Pearson airport in Toronto at midnight. After the never-ending and meticulous paperwork for new permanent residents, we drove for forty minutes to Burlington, the winning city from an extended research looking for a nice place to raise our child and to fulfill our expectations, our dreams. There, in a hotel room with two beds, exhausted and overwhelmed we fell asleep almost instantaneously.

The next day, after the first cultural shock — breakfast without arepas (similar to a round bread, handmade with corn meal) — I wrote down a new list with things we needed to do first:

? English assessment.
? Open a bank account.
? Ontario services' visit.
? School, jobs and where to live.

It was there, at that exact moment when our life took three different roads, one for each member of our family.

My daughter, with barely two sentences in her English vocabulary, — "I'm allergic" and "I only speak Spanish" — jumped into her new reality, a little scared but also determined to find the girl who would later become her new best friend. In less than three months, as


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amazing as she is, my daughter adapted to this experience wonderfully. She didn't just find a best friend but many more, and now she is a high school student taking AP classes, and as she usually affirms, she is as Canadian as the maple syrup.

For my husband, in that first month, he got his driving license and found a job even though it wasn't in his field. He would later switch to a different company, then step by step he worked his way until finally, he got the phone call of his dream job.

In my case, things didn't work out as I planned.

The best way to explain my first year of the arrival — and yes, sometimes it felt like I was an alien crashing on Earth — it's to picture a child learning to walk, standing up and falling, standing up again, giving two steps and falling even harder. It makes parents proud to watch how their kid tries once and again, but if the child feels like I felt that year, there is no pride, more like a silent scream of frustration.

The first time my list let me down happened in our search for a place to live. It isn't easy if you know almost nobody to be your references and being new in the country, guess how many people did we know? — Exactly!

In the end, we found a nice apartment (I think our Latin charm worked in our favor) but then, I had an ambitious list of furniture and appliances that I needed to adapt one more time. Instead of a bedroom set, we got just the bed. Instead of a fully furnished living room, we opted for a couch and a TV. I adjusted my wardrobe too, I said goodbye to my awesome high heels, in exchange for flats — not having a car, they were better for walks — and, of course, bought the necessary winter boots.

Another challenge was to find people to connect with. Sure, mostly everybody was nice and polite. They smiled and said good morning, but I didn't have someone who listened to me cry while patting my back and extending a tissue to clean my smudged mascara and telling me everything would be fine. I needed somebody different from my husband or my people back home, someone new, who would understand without much of an explanation. I needed a friend.

A few months later, the moment came when I realized my list had lost its magic and therefore, I had lost my superpowers.

It didn't matter the number of recommendations or references I brought with me, or the accomplishments and school degrees, or how great I thought I was in my profession, I convinced myself that my English wasn't good enough — even now, sometimes I feel the same — therefore, I didn't even try to find a position related to my career. Besides, something else was in the way: as a lawyer and in order to practice the profession, I needed



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to meet some requirements and to obtain a new set of skills in the law area, a fact that I was aware of, but I didn't expect to be like climbing the highest hill.

As a consequence, instead of making a list to pursue that dream, I wrote some ideas of what I could do. After all, there had to be something else I was good at.

I applied to more than twenty companies, just one called for an interview. It turned out I needed "Canadian experience." Honestly, I get it. I guess if I were on the other side, I'd ask for the same, the problem is how to gather that kind of experience without the opportunity. That manager who called me took a risk giving me a chance, and I'll be always grateful.

With time I got to be the best at customer service. There is no need for modesty, I earned awards to prove it. Also, my organizing addiction gave me the chance to experience management and leadership.

I should have been proud I went out of my comfort zone, despite the panic, the tears, and the many times my list didn't help me to understand when I customer asked me for "some product" they saw on a tv commercial that might help to clean rugs (a synonym of carpet which I learned on the spot) but they didn't remember its name nor the brand. Or when a customer asked for help to pick a gift for his neighbour's grandchild, but they didn't know the age, or what they like or even if they were a boy or a girl.

However, part of me missed the girl in high heels and suits. At some point I lost her, worse, I lost her strength and I think that was the reason why I never told my former colleagues and friends what kind of job I did here. That deep inside feeling of failure.

The lists didn't work.

What was the point of planning and organizing projects?

What was the point of dedication? Of having dreams and hopes?

All my lists went to the same place as my expectations, the garbage can.

For a while, I quit writing lists, even for groceries. When it was time for shopping, I just walked every single aisle in the store, even the pet's food, and I don't even have a pet. At the mall, I used to enter every store, even those that sell travel items, though I hadn't planned a trip, and I still had those six suitcases I've never used again.

The sense of running in freedom or detachment because I didn't need a list anymore, it never came. Instead, I felt like walking kilometers and kilometers with a limp.

Day by day, I just went with the flow, I didn't plan the meals for dinner anymore or what we should be doing for the weekend, nor the dentist appointments or summer camps.



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Soon, I felt like a person scared of the dark and closed spaces, trapped in a small room with the light off. My life turned into chaos, what was I doing?

It happened one New Year's Eve, — it might have to do with the idea of new beginnings, and fresh starts — I looked through the window thinking about the traditions back home (eating lentils to call the fortune, holding onto a suitcase for a chance of a trip, eating twelve grapes and asking one wish for each month). Also, I thought about the three hundred and sixty-five days ahead of me full of possibilities. So many new pages asking for ideas, plans, for new lists.

The organizer in me woke up taking charge again, muzzling the whiny one. I took a piece of paper, and I wrote a few resolutions, nothing crazy or over the top, more like baby steps.

? Dye my hair (I didn't go as far as changing the color, but I got red highlights.)
? Join a book club (Actually I joined two, Romance and Y/A, my favorite genres.)
? Start a new hobby (I picked knitting, now I know how to make scarves and hats.)
? Jogging or running (I switched for meditation, I'm not a very working out person.)

The next year I tried again, and the year after that, until I've found myself again: The list maker.

Although I confess, I haven't made peace with myself, yet. Sometimes I am like a puppet letting my doubts take over me. I hope someday it'll happen, that I give myself the chance to feel complete. After all, it's part of my list.

For now, I am content with contemplating some of the checkmarks I've made so far.

? Got new friends, people who care about me and my family.
? Became a Canadian citizen.
? Got my driving licence.
? Quit my job and applied for a new one. This time I got more than a few calls and the chance for me to choose the best fit.
? Earned a certificate in a Creative Writing Program. A dream I had since I was a little girl.
? Made new traditions. Every Sunday we have a family brunch.
? After fighting some demons, I'm taking some classes in the law field.

There is so much more on my list, though, I am not even close to being done.



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