

Borders

By Sarah Kamal

I applied for and was accepted into a Master's program in the US for 2002. This post discusses the changes to US border policy in 2002 and 2003 and how that impacted me as a researcher.

[Sometime, early March 2003]

It is 10am, and I am waiting for my second interview and fingerprinting session with the US Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS), which is actually now called the Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services (BCIS) under the new US Department of Homeland Security. I am still in the middle of filling out their five page form when a woman interviewer flounces into the waiting lounge. The computer system is down, she hisses to her colleague.

I finish my form, then sit and fidget and try not to think about much. Too late - tears of I'm not sure what redden my eyes.

Dammit.

I have of course played my little psychological game, dressing carefully to be as cute as I can - if I remind enough of these officers of their daughters, better. If I can just pierce that blustering certainty - just a little bit - and allow a sliver of self-doubt through...

People are called in as numbers. I am lucky #22. The well-dressed, handsome business man sitting beside me has taken time off work to come here. "This is my vacation," he says. His number is called, and he jumps up and enters the interview room with alacrity. I watch through a large window as he raises his right hand and mouths words with a slightly nervous, pleasing smile.

It is 12:30 and my number is called. My interviewer is a woman with crooked teeth and a well-meaning smile. As requested, I raise my right hand and swear to tell the truth.

"You were first inspected in Toronto?" she asks. I feel like I have venereal disease.

"Yes."

She wants to see all my credit cards and ID - and I am under oath. I can honestly apologize and say that I was not told that I had to bring my ID with me, and she is satisfied with that. She then fingerprints me, and I watch my distinctive whorls and spirals appear on her screen. I am quiet, unlike the first time I was fingerprinted a month ago, when I stared tearfully at my interviewer and said that I was complying under protest. By doing that, I only made him miserable which in turn made me more miserable, and I don't have the energy to go through that again.

We go through all the data they have on me line by line and correct mistakes. They have my father down as a 25 year old, along with numerous mistakes in my address - I am later told that

their computer system crashes daily and often has its data scrambled. I am amazed again at the outrageousness of this being considered a 'security' measure.

My interviewer seems to like me and is almost chummy by the end. I don't begrudge her that friendliness, even while I am aware that for the more swarthy, accented, and male, (unlike half-Chinese, half-Iranian, Canada educated me) there is likely to be less easy sympathy.

After 15 minutes, the interview is over and I am free to leave. Of course, I will be interviewed and fingerprinted again in less than a month when I leave the US for Canada (via a specially designated port which people like me can use) and again when I re-enter, and again 30 days after that - but for now I'm done.

I don't want to be here.

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[a few days earlier...]

I get caught in a moment of stormy emotion after being turned away from the INS (now BCIS) office. I've been psychologically prepared to get this whole INS requirement over with, but have forgotten some document or another (if you've already entered all my data into a database, why do you need to see everything all over again?!) (The document is required, the official shrugs.)

So back home I trudge, the lump in my throat bursting somewhere en route to the subway.

I turn to words, and I storm and I splatter on a dampening page. When I dribble to a sniveling stop, I have a moment of conceit: damn, this is good writing! I've captured the moment exactly! But those words and that moment, scrawled on the back of my grocery list and tucked in a Boston Globe newspaper, are left behind when I scramble out at my stop. As I turn back the doors are closing, and my little explosion of water-fire drifts away, a solitary innocuous roll of paper swaying through dark tunnels of screeching subway black. A message to me, perhaps, to let my anger flow away when I would rather hoard it and nurse it and banner it.

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[Today, March 19th]

I am listening to the radio for two hours a day now, reading emails that I receive on Iraq until I just can't face them anymore, and I'm punishing my body and studies quite irrationally. I remember this feeling: I had it in the prelude to the bombing of Afghanistan, although much more strongly - it was a numbing paralysis then. I hate this violence, I refuse to accept it, and I feel its poison seep into my skin. I feel fat and ugly (is this a standard female response to feeling powerless?) but I know that this will pass and that I will be okay again, even if others won't.

I reflect on a meeting I have had in a very ordinary building in an "unsafe" neighbourhood in Kabul. Inside that building, a highly popular radio drama called "New Home, New Life" is

produced by an all-Afghan team of writers, researchers, radio dramatists, engineers, and producers. Yet despite all their expensive equipment and BBC funding, and the stream of foreigners that enter and leave, they do not have an ostentatious display of uniformed, gun-toting guards. Unlike NGO compounds in the "safe" part of town, there are no high walls, yards of barbed wire, or security checks.

It is sobering to realize that this level of comfort with vulnerability and openness is the exception rather than the rule. In the US, [Operation Liberty Shield](#) has become yet another weapon in the US administration's growing arsenal of border restrictions. As war looms, Americans' sense of security seems ever more to come from complicated technology and higher, bigger, and more unforgiving walls. For "New Home, New Life" however, security comes from serving and living like their fellow Afghans, and being, quite simply, honestly and truly loved.

I know which road I would choose.