

The Other Side

On January 10, 2009, I was at the Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport, standing in the immigration line again. Except this time was different. I had a fever close to 40°C, my whole body ached and I was on antibiotics for angina, a nasty disease that produces severe chest pain because the heart is not getting enough oxygen. I was freezing one minute, sweating the other, having coughing spasms in between.

Close to 200 non-U.S. citizens, or aliens, as we are called by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, were waiting in front of me, including almost everyone from my flight. I urgently had to go to the bathroom right when I got off the plane, because I listened to my grandma's advice and drank tea as much as I could. Now everyone was in front of me.

I quickly eyed the people in the winding line, who were as anxious to get to the other side as I was. All I could think about was my queen-sized bed at home. My eight pillows and my level 6 IKEA down comforter. "Once I get there, everything will be fine," I thought, as I mustered all of my strength to keep standing.

Eager to make my stop at the immigration booth as short as possible, I mentally started going through the list of required documents I would have to present to the immigration officer to grant me entry. "Passport. Obviously have that. I-94. Got that on the plane. In my bag's side pocket. Customs form. Same as I-94. Work authorization card. In my wallet. I-20. Had to show that before I got on the plane, so I have that."

It only took me a second to realize that even though I had my I-20, the most important document that *almost* guaranteed my entry, it wasn't enough. It wasn't signed. I heard the words of Bessy Bennelick, Chatham University's international student coordinator, from my first orientation in my head: "You have to have your I-20 signed every six months if you are planning on leaving the country. Otherwise they won't let you in." A hot flash overwhelmed my body. And it wasn't just because I was sick.

"How could I forget?" I was on OPT this year—Optional Professional Training. I was working full time, but was still on a student visa. I had maybe set foot on campus twice in the past 6 months—only to catch a ride with my roommate back home. So I missed all the pre-holiday international student sessions, where they tell you everything you need to do to get back in.

I fished out the document from my laptop bag. "Maybe the signature isn't that old," I hoped. I flipped to the second page. The signature of the "designated school official" was nine months old and almost four months past its validity.

Suddenly my vision of resting in my own bed in a couple of hours fell apart. “I cannot survive another nine-hour flight back to the Czech Republic. Not right now,” I thought. But it wasn’t just the bed. Getting to the other side meant getting home. My home, which was now in the U.S., in Pittsburgh. That’s where I worked, went to school and, well, lived. In that baby blue brick house on the giant hill in Greenfield. Almost everything that defined me as a person was tied up in the U.S.: my education, my work, my friends, my cat, my stuff.

I started having another coughing spasm and suddenly couldn’t breathe. I tried to grab my chest to ease the pain, but it didn’t help. I wasn’t sure if it was the disease or the fact that somebody could deny my getting home. And then it hit me. The idea of not being able to enter the U.S. scared me, but the feeling was nothing compared to the guilt I felt when I realized that I considered the U.S. to be more of a home than the Czech Republic, where all my family lived.

I started referring to both places as home a while back, but suddenly I realized that one took precedence. The one that shouldn’t feel like home, because that’s not where my family was. But that was the one I was eager to get to. “What’s wrong with me?” I thought. “Does that mean I don’t care about my family? Of course I care about them. I love them,” I reassured myself. But it was too late. The guilt over choosing my life in the U.S. over my family was already planted in my head and I knew it would stay there.

I sensed that everyone around me was staring. I felt the sweat running down my face and back. I could smell it too. I looked like shit, but I didn’t care. All I cared about was getting home.

I thought about forging the signature on the form. “They wouldn’t know anyways,” I thought. “It’s just a signature.” But the risk was too high. Security cameras were spying from every corner, and uniformed employees walked around the line, keeping an eye on us, aliens, invading the United States of America. I wouldn’t be able to sign it without being seen. Plus, if they found out, I would be deported. Forever. Another hot flash.

There was a large family with two small children from Ecuador in front of me, who seemed to be on their way to starting a new life in the United States. “I already have a life there,” I thought. “In Pittsburgh. Just let me in. I have a cat there, for God’s sakes.”

I wanted to call Sandi, my friend and mentor, who happens to be an immigration lawyer. Except that I couldn’t because of the no-cell-phone-no-camera policy in the immigration area. If I even pulled out a cell phone, chances were I would be hand-cuffed and escorted into a little interrogation room, which would be the last place I would see in the United States, my home. I had to come up with something by myself.

I was getting closer to the yellow line, which separated the waiting area

from the no man's land with the two rows of immigration booths. After that was the official United States of America. The other side. I was running out of time.

"Maybe the signature isn't that important," I tried to convince myself. I had everything else. My visa, work authorization, and even my lease and a letter from work saying I was an employee. I decided my best bet would be to play dumb and, if I needed to, tell a made-up story that my university did not have an international student coordinator (which was true then) and that I was told that showing my work authorization with my I-20 would be sufficient. The only problem with that story was that my work authorization card proclaimed in bold, red letters "NOT VALID FOR REENTRY."

I was at the point where a uniformed employee was dividing the big line into individual booth lines, when I got another coughing spasm. "Are you okay?" the employee asked. "Yeah," I managed to get out between the coughs. "If I get to the other side," I finished in my head. She showed me to a line at the end of which was a booth with an older male immigration officer. "Thank God it's a guy," I thought. "He'll feel sorry for me."

Five people in front of me. I talked through the made up story in my head one more time, not admitting that the story might not work. Not even thinking that I might be on the next flight back to Czech Republic. Four. Three. Two. One. I was next.

I waited behind the yellow line for him to motion for me. I knew what he was going to do next by heart. That is, if I had everything in order. Take my documents. Scan my fingerprints. Take my mug shot. Swipe my passport. Open my I-20 to look for a signature. Stamp my I-20. Staple the I-94 to my passport. Mark the customs form. Hand me my documents back. And finally say, "Welcome to the United States."

He did everything as I expected. Except for two things. He never opened my I-20. Instead, he stamped my passport. "Welcome to the United States," he said.