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From Borders to Tweezers: Reflections on 9/11 a Decade Later

When I was travelling as a backpacker people used to ask me how difficult it was for me to cross borders. I'm from Colombia, you see, the second most dangerous country in the world. The first - I learned this when Bina introduced herself last week- is Pakistan. Colombians need visas to enter almost every country in the world. We have to pay fees, queue in the embassies, show our bank statements and pass interviews as if applying for an elite school. We even need visas for stopovers in airports, visas that don't allow us to leave the transit airport. We're searched, interrogated, smelled by dogs, taken to the dark room, x-rayed and maybe, if you're not sweating too much and the dogs don't get all happy around you, they let you out of Colombia and into another country.

Oh, it's not difficult at all, I used to answer, I've never had the slightest problem when crossing a border; immigration officials are just too nice to me. My husband, on the other hand, the poor thing, is always asked to take his shoes off; they make a mess frisking his bags and look at him with suspicious eyes while I'm already on the other side. He's from Ireland, from Belfast, in the North of Ireland, which is, I say, the third most dangerous country in the world.

Or so I thought.

A few weeks ago I told my tale to a speed-boat driver from Colombia who had had a very hard time getting into Panama. I was trying to console him, to show him we were not alone in the world. There were the good long-suffering Irish people. He answered with loud laughter. They frisked my husband not because he looks any more like an IRA terrorist than I look like a Cali Cartel mule. They frisked him instead of me because we Colombians, are so cunning, deceptive and treacherous that we put the drugs in our travelling companion's luggage.

And that was that.

Now I could see why, when I travelled with an Israeli boy, they took him to the dark room and body-searched him, and never did they do it to me. I always found that strange. Israel is not the fourth most dangerous country in the world; that's Palestine. Now it was clear to me why, as soon as I started travelling alone, they started to x-ray me, shake me down and look at me with suspicious eyes.

Where are you going? I'm going to the United States. Who with? Alone. Alone, hmm... Yes, alone. Did you pack your bag yourself? Yes. Did anyone help you pack your bag? No. No? No. You packed it yourself. Yes. What are you doing in the United States? I'm going to a writers' residency. A writers' residency, of course, please follow me. But, why, where to?

In the dark room, they have this huge scanner that can see through you. Last time I was in there the immigration official asked me if I smoked. My lungs are that bad, huh? Oh, no, he said reassuringly, it's just that you have a Marlboro pack in your purse.

After travelling for more than a year in the mountains and jungles of South America, my husband and I arrived in New York. A police officer ran away from us when we approached him for directions, the buildings were so tall you couldn't reach the sky with your eyes and our jeans were torn. We felt like Tarzan in, let's say, New York.

And then it happened.

I was walking down a main street when a stranger stuck his head out the window of his building. A plane had just crashed into one of the Twin Towers. He had to tell somebody, anybody, the first passerby in the street. A second later the stranger was back at the window. Now another plane had crashed into the remaining tower. And just when I thought this was too much to take in, there were no Twin Towers anymore. A column of grey smoke rose into the sky, the city went silent and in a corner there was a bearded man with an American flag and a hand written sign that pleaded for war.

When we left New York there were endless queues at the airport. Everybody, not just my Irish husband, had to take their shoes off. We were all frisked, asked questions and looked at with suspicious eyes. An immigration official confiscated the tweezers from my little pink make-up bag under the pretense that I could use them to hi-jack the plane, though everyone could see how thick her eyebrows were. All of a sudden they were finding lethal weapons in the most unlikely places and we had all become, indistinctly, Colombians, Irishmen and Palestinians.