

1. How I Run Away from America: New York, 1997

I got on the Greyhound to Toronto at Port Authority in New York when I was twenty-one, with two backpacks, a tight black vintage slip, and a pair of fourteen-hole Docs. That was it. You only need one outfit if it's fabulous.

One of the bags was the fake-Guatemalan hot pink and lime green tote Rafael's mami had given me on my last visit to Toronto, drooling out clothes and cloth menstrual pads from its open top. The other was the massive army backpack I'd been hauling around for the past few New York years, stuffed full of textbooks and groceries from the Park Slope food co-op and pepper spray, all of it always inducing massive lumbar pain.

The backpacks held:

- *four Advil with their coatings half-eaten away in a mashed-up Altoids tin, smashed with black from cigarettes being stubbed out inside*
- *the vintage dress with chocolate brown flowers, green background, and pussy pink satin lining*

- *the hand-dyed, leaf green Mexican lace bustier that was my favorite thing to wear, scored for seven bucks at a Market clothing store*
- *a charcoal gray silk camisole, also thrifted from someplace in Kensington Market*
- *four pairs of underwear (because I was still going panty-free a lot that year)*
- *a neon turquoise and cerise paisley flowered polyester '70s skirt*
- *one other pair of jeans from Domsey's clothes-by-the-pound warehouse in Williamsburg*
- *a full set of those G-string cotton menstrual pads from Many Moons menstrual products in Victoria, British Columbia*
- *books by Chrystos, Suheir Hammad, and Audre Lorde*
- *a towel, a passport, a notebook*

The rest would stay in storage in my parents' basement in Worcester, Mass. I felt clear. Clean. I was leaving America, and this was all I needed.

Got second-staged at the border again.

“Nationality?”

“American.”

The border at the Peace Bridge had a cute little clapboard house by the side of the lanes for cars with their flashing neon lights that made the border look like a disco. You got hauled off the 'hound after the driver got on the mic to say the same lecture he'd said a million times: “Take everything off the bus with you, have your identification ready, once you clear immigration come over to the side of the bus to claim your luggage, then you're going to go BACK into the building to clear Customs.” This was the overnight bus to Toronto from Port Authority, 4 a.m. and the sun wasn't quite up yet. Indigo black with a line of darker blue right at the edge. It was a line of people without money, folks who rode the bus, sleepy at 4 a.m. on the gray-ing wooden wheelchair ramp that led into the house, almost enough to make the border seem homey. But we all stood there quietly, practicing our stories in our heads. Waiting for the moment where the questions got barked at you, with all your shit spilled all over the metal table; maybe they don't like your papers, maybe you get sent back.

It was always a trick, trying to rearrange my face while I was standing in line, trying to make bedhead and crusty eyes look respectable. It was all about rearranging my face to look like an arty, middle-class kid on vacation, careless, like I had plenty of money and credit cards in my army bag. Trying to look like I was the guy behind the counter's daughter, or something he wanted to fuck, or someone he didn't want to fuck who was therefore unimportant.

And then there was the matter of which guy behind the counter you angled for. There was a science in trying to figure out whether to hope for the older, potbellied Archie Bunker or the early-twenties model to his right. The older ones barked, “Where d’ya live? Where are you going? For how long?” but didn’t give as much of a shit; the younger ones were more obvious about wanting to fuck you, but were also more nervous about doing their job right and likely to pull you over if they weren’t completely sure. All of us stood in that predawn light, squinting and leaning forward to try to see our choices without being too obvious, while thinking over our strategy and tactics—whirring fast behind all those tense foreheads—trying to look relaxed and casual. You didn’t actually have any choice of border guard; it would look weird saying, “Oh, no, you go ahead,” in the immigration line, but we tried.

This time I’d drawn Archie. He looked just like a Boston cop—big spare tire, iron gray stubble hair cut—just with a little more Ontario British lilt in his voice. I tried to breathe. Picked up my bags, walked up to the scratched-up Plexiglas window, and slid my passport through the slot. “Good morning, how are you?” Trying to sound smooth, but my voice was still too high and squeaky.

He looked at my passport, then at me. What did he see? A frizzy-curly-haired girl with light brown skin (could be so many things), carrying an old US passport that had been through the wash, wearing a leather jacket, tight slip, jeans with holes in the knees, voice high and tight, looking back at him with bleary, milky eyes.

“Purpose of visit?”

“To visit my fiancé.” Smile brightly. *Please, oh please, don't look in my bag.* How do fiancées look? Do fiancées have big-ass dildos and a box of gloves from the HIV street outreach job shoved in the bottom of their army backpack? Who the fuck gets married at twenty-one? Who looks like me and is married? And what finger was the ring supposed to go on, anyway?

“Where does he live?”

“Toronto.”

“*Where* in Toronto?”

“Dupont and Lansdowne.” The intersection known for the toilet factory, the high rise where Rafael lived with its STUDIO APARTMENTS FOR \$400. PAY YOUR DEPOSIT IN MONTHLY INSTALLMENTS sign, the Big Wrecks towing company, and a crackhead Coffee Time branch down below.

“What's his name?”

“Rafael Vidal-Garza.”

I could see the shit hitting the fan, right on the dude's big-ass steel aviator frames.

“Step over there, please.”

“Sure.”

Look eager. Look a little puzzled but compliant. Look like you've never done anything wrong in your life.

I chanted it to myself as dude led me over to the big steel table, like the gynecologist's table from hell. But I couldn't quite manage it. I was shaking and pale, my voice was trembling and I knew that they could tell I was wrong, a liar, sneaking into their country to plot the anarchist-First Nations-Kensington

Market revolution with two bags full of sex toys and some hoochie dresses. And maybe was a ho too. Which was what I'd planned. I'd chatted with Amber, my mentor at the Lesbian AIDS Project where I interned, about how I wasn't going to go on to grad school, I was going to move to Toronto, work on the prison justice paper and do 'net porn. It was a fine and honored career path for girls like me, whoever they were.

"Put your belongings down here." It was the younger guy. Archie Bunker had nodded him over from where he was covertly gazing at my tits to go do search and rescue. He snapped on the rubber gloves, and I had a flashback to the hundreds of Lesbian Safer Sex pamphlets with the gloved fist on the cover that I'd handed out on Pride Day. Things were moving slow like molasses here, and all I could think of was Kristina's cock buried in the bottom of the backpack below the lube, the condoms, the other hoochie dress, and all my underwear. *Maybe he'll stop before he gets there. Maybe I don't look like a ho, standing there in a couple days' worth of musk and my slip.*

But he was thorough. He methodically worked his way down through the dresses and the underwear, picking up the Altoids tin and looking at the ash and the mottled pills.

"What are these?"

"Advil."

"They don't look like any Advil I've ever seen."

"They got wet and the coating got eaten off. You can throw them out if you want, I don't care."

"Okay. Have you ever been arrested? If you're honest with

me, it'll be fine. But if you lie, I'll find out and you'll be in big trouble."

The classic cop throwdown. I flashed to Rafael repeating what cops always said to him when they stopped him for not having a light on his bike or slowing, not stopping, at a stop sign: *We can do this the easy way, or we can do this the hard way. We could kill you and make it look like an accident. No one would know. No one would even care.*

But what if they really did have everything in their damn computer? What if they knew already? Then again, what if they didn't, and I'd give away a crucial piece of info to the one-world government? But they had fingerprinted me at the squat bust in May, and they'd done it before then at the shut-down-the-city, anti-Giuliani demo. Too late.

"Once. But it was for disturbing the peace, at a demonstration."

"What kind of demonstration?"

"Oh, a student one. Against a tuition hike." *Arty girls with money sometimes protest tuition hikes, right?* Better to say that than to try to describe the demonstration I'd been arrested at where a motley, beautiful coalition of ACT UP-ers, Asians Against Police Brutality, and the CUNY student coalition had managed to sit down in traffic and shut down all four bridges and tunnels leading out of Manhattan, at rush hour on the day Giuliani released his budget destroying all funding for AIDS-related programming as well as hiking tuition, and funding tons more cops to enforce "quality of life" laws that would bust you for being homeless. The mayor had been really pissed, and

we'd all been kept in jail for three days, not the couple of hours the white-guy ACT UP veterans assured us was standard.

"Okay." He stared at me. He was kind of cute for a white boy. Soft brown eyes, brown hair that was growing out a little from his crewcut. How old was he? A few years older than me? He didn't look evil, no more than any other twenty-three-year-old white guy. Who decides that working for the border is the way to go in their early twenties, though?

He started going through the bag again, emptying out each piece of clothing in its coating of tobacco dust and cat hair. And, *oh shit*, he wasn't seeing anything that made him want to stop. I decided to speak up.

"Um," I said then, with more of a purr, "Um, sir?" I peered from behind my lashes.

He looked up, irritated. "What?"

"Um, there's something really embarrassing in the bottom of that bag!" I chirped. I sounded just like a Spice girl wet dream, five years too early.

"Oh yeah? What's that?"

"Uh, well." *C'mon, make this good.* "A friend of mine is getting married, and she's having a bridal shower. We were all supposed to bring a, um, gag gift, and, um ..."

At that moment, his fingers closed around my dick at the bottom of the bag. I watched his face go through a couple of contortions. *What the—oh my god, its a cock, holy shit, it's bigger than mine.* I saw disgust mixing with an instant boner.

He blinked. Straightened up and didn't look at me. "That's all, miss. You can get back on the bus now."

I climbed back on the bus. “They sure kept you for a long time,” one lady said.

“Yeah,” I said. I set my bags down, took off my jacket, and scrunched it up for a pillow. My body was all corded up, tense, like I’d been clenching all my muscles for an hour. But now, I could feel it softening. My whole body was letting out one big exhale as the bus shuddered awake and groaned forward. I’d made it. We’d passed over that invisible line on the map. The trees were greener, the air was less polluted, the signs were in kilometers not miles, and I was rushing to that safe place in my head, with Rafael’s big grin, our twin plum-colored futon on the floor, café con leche in chipped tiny cups in the morning, a hand on my ass and around my waist—and my parents, America, and everything bad thousands of miles away.