

## WTFUK

*People have been asking me what happened when I didn't show up to give my talk on the Web Animations API at Smashing Oxford. Here I'm writing it down so that they might know, and so we, as human beings, can reflect on how we treat others at our borders in a global era. Or something like that. There are themes here, on how we treat other human beings who don't look like "us," how we make laws to make ourselves feel safe that just make everyone less safe, on bureaucracy and systems that punish honesty. I did a poor job of tying them up.*

*I apologize for the length. I wrote and illustrated it in bouts over three months. I simply didn't have the energy to edit it down, and I am unable to forget any of it. My hope is that with this I cast my albatross back into the sea.*

*TLDR: Read the block quotes and enjoy the illustrations.*

. . .

Packing for Philly London Oxford. It was fun,  
[Pennsylvania.pic.twitter.com/nRh6MtVx80](https://pic.twitter.com/nRh6MtVx80)

— [@rachelnabors](#)

It would not be fun for much longer.

The first time I visited the UK, the young immigrations officer at LHR was very inquisitive about this old friend I was going to meet while I was in London for a conference: Who was he? Where did he live? What was our relationship? My awkward answers and copious fear sweating must have been unsatisfactory, for she waved me over to the Corral of Shame to join other suspicious characters while she had a chat with a man I can only assume was her supervisor.

I had thought speaking in London would be like speaking in Berlin or Zurich or Barcelona or any number of European cities I'd been to already. A few moments later, her supervisor took one look at me and gave a very managerial shrug that said, "Just let the American lady through and get on with the next." I was relieved. Damp and cold with fear, I swore the next time I visited the United Kingdom for a conference, I would go above and beyond to my make sure paperwork was in order.

*I had no idea that no amount of preparation would save me from a nightmare deportation at the UK border on my second trip to England, two years later.*

Some background on me and what I do: I am self-employed and work in web development. If you want to get specific, I work in the niche emerging field of web animation in interaction development. Trust me when I say this is the best thing to happen to the Internet since iPads and iPhones killed Flash. Over the winter, I'd been documenting a new API, unsurprisingly called the Web Animations API, that lets web developers animate things like interfaces and cartoons in the browser for the first time in almost a decade. It's exciting, if you're a web developer, and currently I can count on one hand the number of people qualified to give an instructional talk on the topic—and none of them live in the UK.

I don't get paid much to do this kind of work. It is a labor of love I can indulge in largely thanks to being married to another web developer. I'm somewhat ashamed of this, as I could have a "real job" that would let us buy cars and houses and jet skis or whatever it is people with a large, expendable income do. But I've been content to break even at the end of each year and see a bit of the world by traveling to give talks, sharing what I know. As such, international travel in Europe, even "all expenses paid" (for what few days the conference lasts), puts a dent in my wallet, both in spending and in time spent not taking paying work while I prepare talks, travel, and give them on stage. Sometimes it feels more like being a musician than being a web developer.

So a few years back I had to start charging speaker fees. It was that or get a "real job." Still, most web conferences I speak at are small "community driven" things, meaning they don't have a lot—if any—money to spend on speaker fees. Many times I do not get the fees I request. Sometimes organizers help arrange a workshop while I'm in town, the fees from which

help fund my continued travels and outreach in the country outside the host event.

*I'm kind of a big deal in my industry, I guess, but that niche knowledge doesn't translate into big bucks. I often run a loss to visit another country, even with an honorarium. I do it for the community.*

Spring 2016, I'd been invited to give a talk at a conference in Oxford. They offered an honorarium in addition to expenses to help cover my time spent preparing a new talk for the season and threw in a workshop to help make up the difference. The talk was no small feat, full of custom Alice in Wonderland demos introducing the Web Animations API. Very appropriate given Oxford is Alice's rightful birthplace. I also arranged to give a talk for free at a women's event in Brighton, meet and stay with several colleagues from Bath to London, then finally round out the trip in a London flat where I would finish another talk to give in San Francisco, which I would leave for directly from London Heathrow. All the pieces were in place.

Before going, the conference organizer and I had a careful look at the VISA requirements at gov.uk. It stated:

### **Business visits**

You don't need a visa if you're coming to the UK for activities allowed under the following visas:

- a [Standard Visitor visa](#) - eg if you're coming to the UK for conferences, meetings, training, academic research or a sabbatical
- a ['permitted paid engagement'](#) (you must have been invited to the UK because of your expertise) - you can only stay for up to 1 month

However, you should bring [supporting documents](#) to show at the border.

From gov.uk. There was nothing in this documentation that said the company had to be from the United Kingdom. At the time, I didn't think about this.

Given that Americans get a 90 day VISA waiver, this seemed to make sense. But to be sure, I asked the conference to write a letter of invitation for me, which I kept with my travel documents for entry.



**Rachel Nabors**  
@rachelnabors

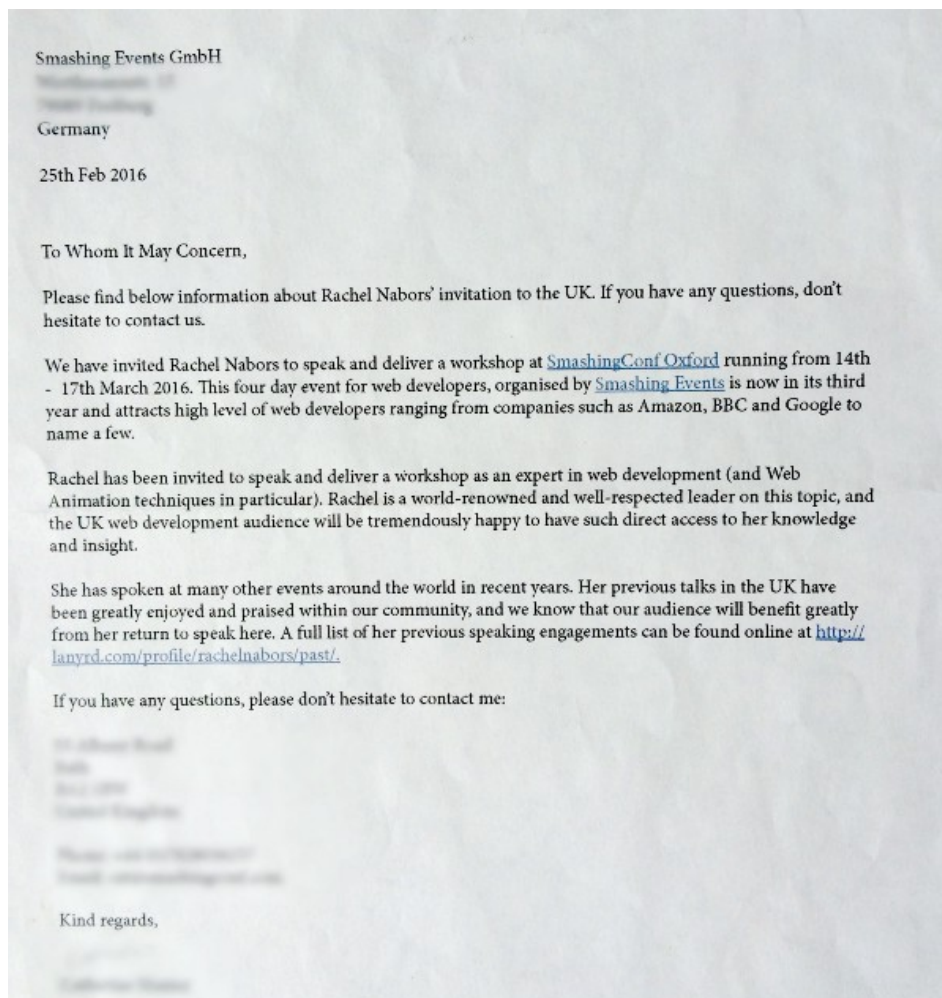
Follow

Face masks or huge sunglasses have an impact on my human interactions. Without a smile, no one knows what you think.

7:24 AM - 13 Mar 2016

1 6

My last tweet before detainment. I was wearing the face mask because I was still recovering from some residual coughs from an earlier bout with pneumonia.



My letter of invitation from the conference. Notice that the company has a German address. That's very important later.

After arriving at London Heathrow, I was confident as I approached Border Control. I was waved to kiosk 22 where a young man somberly asked me what brought me to the UK.

"I'm giving a talk at a conference then traveling to see a bit of England. I have a letter of invitation," I replied, confidently handing over the requested documents.

"Have you given a talk here before?"

Yes.

"Were you paid?"

Wait, what? Was I charging speaker fees back then, or did I do that one for free? I told him I couldn't remember.

He rolled his eyes, "Yes or no."

My mind blanked.

“You can’t remember if you got paid *two years ago*?” he huffed.

No? I’d like to think I’d remember if I got paid. But without my accounting software, I couldn’t be sure.

*He took one look at my carefully prepared documentation then waved me to the Corral of Shame. It was happening again.*



**Border Force**

**Information**

The purpose of this form is to inform you that the Border Force Officer intends to make further enquiries, or there are other formalities to be completed before you can pass through the Immigration Control. It also explains the reasons for your detention. You will be kept informed of any developments.

To: Rachel Lee NABORS

Sex:  Male  Female  X

**You are liable to be examined / further examined by**

Me or another (Border Force) Immigration Officer under Paragraph 2 / 2A of Schedule 2 to the Immigration Act 1971

A Medical Inspector under Paragraph 2(2) / 2A(4) of Schedule 2 to the Immigration Act 1971

**You are liable to be detained under**

Section 2 of the UK Borders Act 2007 because I think you are  
 an individual who may be liable to arrest by a constable, or  
 subject to a warrant for arrest

Paragraph 16(1) to Schedule 2 of the Immigration Act 1971 pending your examination and pending a decision to give or refuse you leave to enter

Paragraph 16(1A) of Schedule 2 of the Immigration Act 1971, as inserted by the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 pending completion of your examination and pending a decision on whether to cancel your existing leave to enter

**And**

I have suspended your leave to enter/remain under Paragraph 2A(7) of Schedule 2 to the Immigration Act 1971

I have also retained your passport, identity card or travel document

Please report to the (Border Force) Immigration Office on arrival in the UK

Signed [Signature] (Border Force) Immigration Officer on (date) 13/03/16

Passenger arrived on (date) 13/03/16 at (time) 08:25

From PHL Flight / Ship DL194

Nationality USA

Date of birth 08/18/80

Form issued at / Detention commenced at (time) 08:32

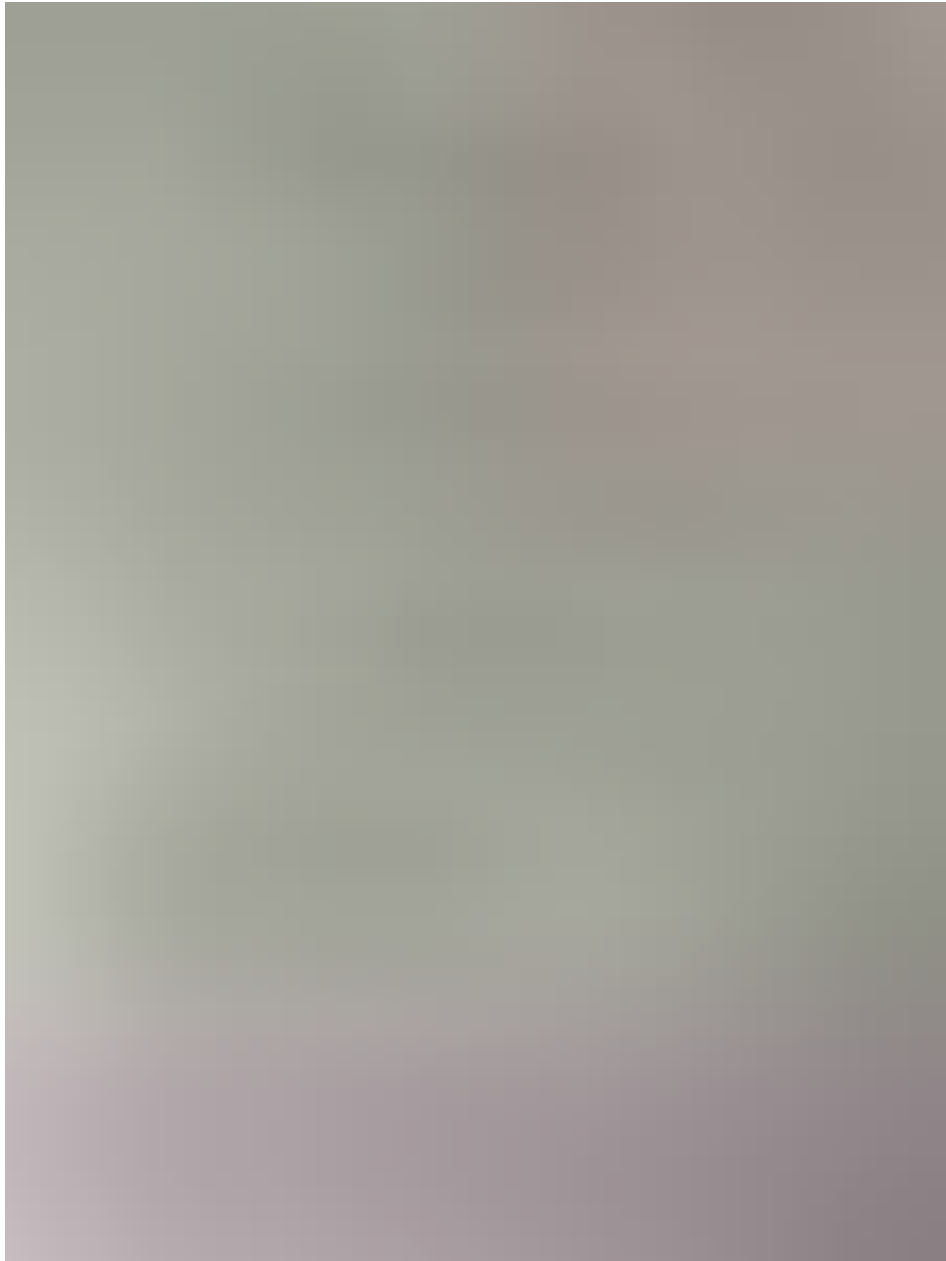
Home Office Form IS.81 Notice to a Person Being Detained at the Border / Required to Submit to Further Examination

My passport was taken and I was given this.

I was missing my bus. But surely I could make another one. I used my phone to message the organizers what was happening. It was a long wait. I'd gotten on the plane at 6:30pm in Philadelphia. It had been a 7 hour flight. It was 2:30am on the east coast when my plane landed at Heathrow. I'd done several 24 Hour Comics Days in my life. I knew that I had about 3 more hours to go without sleep before I would start physically falling apart. It would start with my right eye beginning to twitch.

After all the people in the immigration area were gone, I was escorted from the Corral of Shame to "answer some questions." Simple enough. All through this encounter I was cheerful and obliging. The young man had a habit of leaving me for long times, so a more chipper young woman went

through my belongings with me. I detailed the contents of my baggage without fuss, and we made light of situation. She was more optimistic than he was, saying it was probably just a formality. She gave me hope and calmed my nerves.



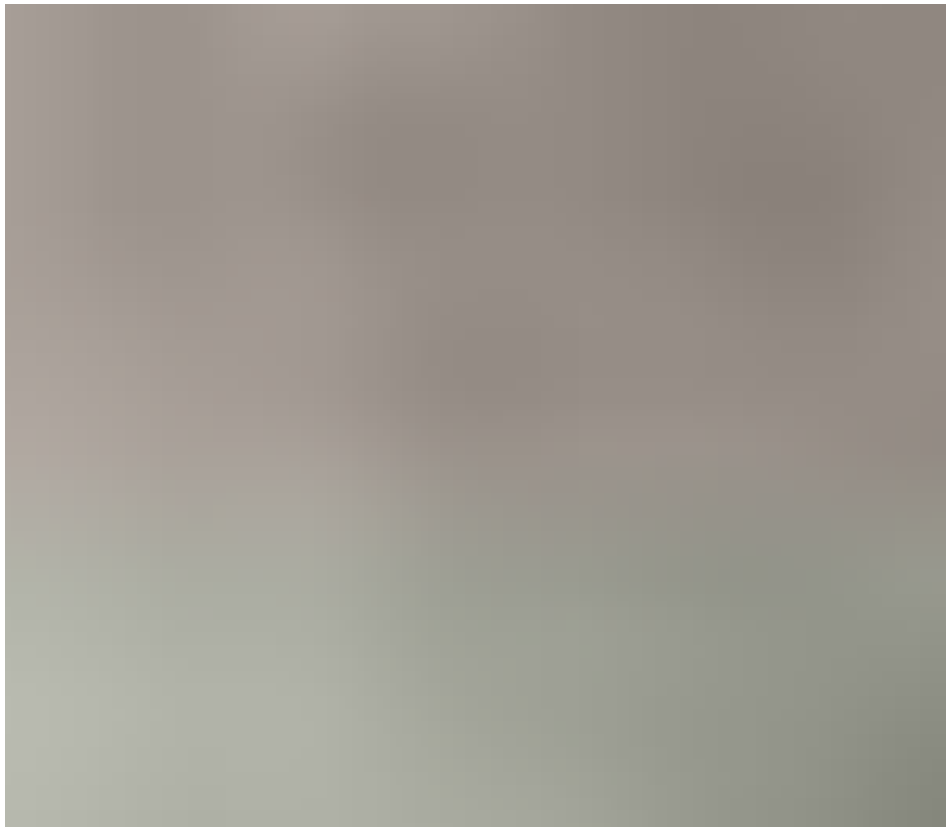
My fingerprints in databases for ten years even though I'd committed no crime.

I was taken below the shiny, glittering level of the airport travelers are most familiar with to an older, lower, more labyrinthine part of the building.

*My fingerprints were taken.*



They are now in a database for ten years where they will be shared with all members of the EEA, which is most European countries. You'd think I'd done something criminal, coming to give a talk about cartoon characters and code.



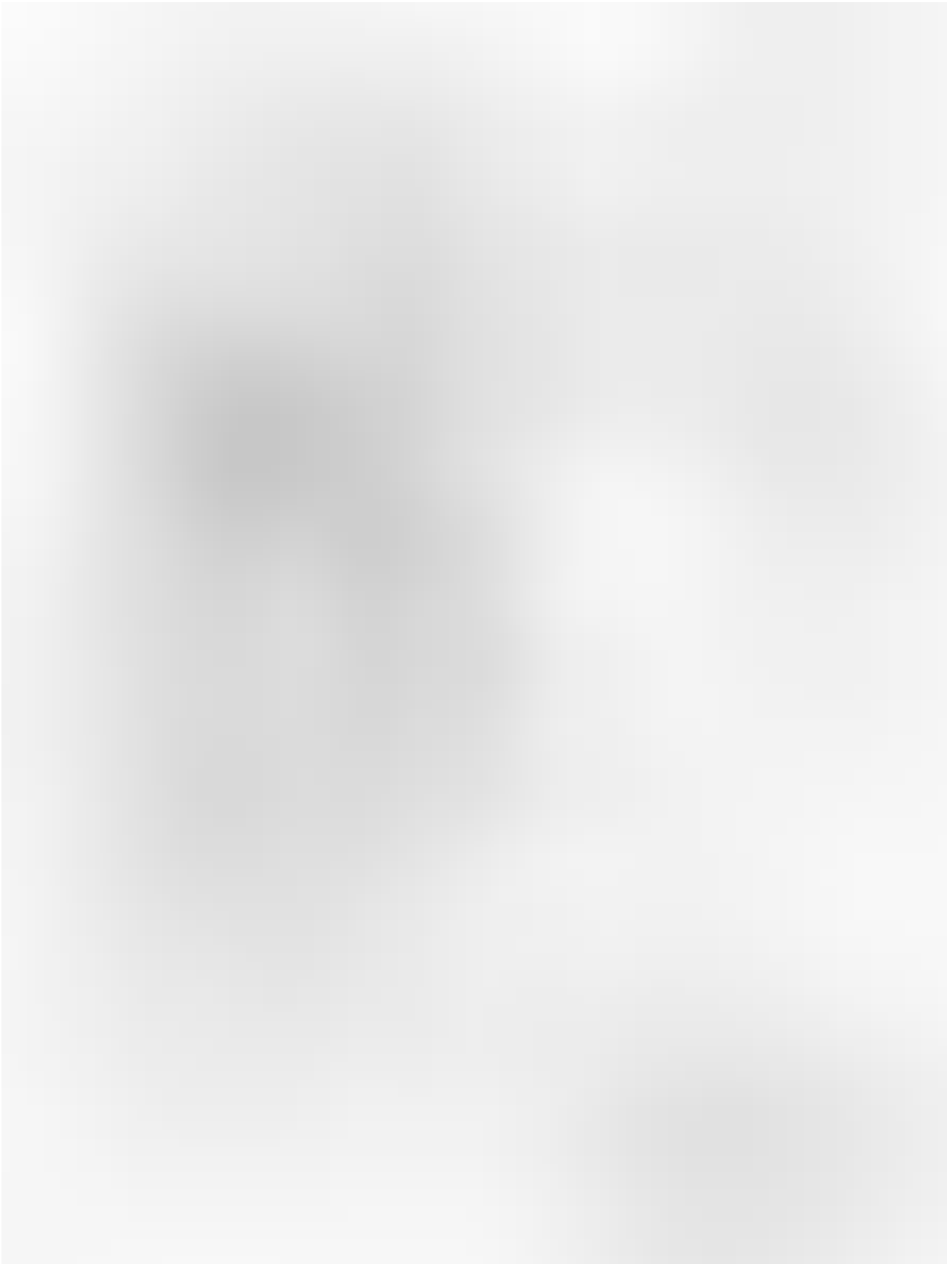
Back of fingerprinting document.

I was deposited in a holding area with a young Dutch woman who had raised suspicion with her Australian passport. The room was dark, dirty, and poorly kept. An older woman at the front desk pulled herself away from her celebrity magazine long enough to grumpily take our luggage to a holding room. She had us take our purses off as well because their straps could “be used to cause harm.” Mine had a detachable strap, so I insisted on keeping it. Realizing we would be in this dark, dour place for some time, I politely asked if I could gather my art supplies from my backpack. She shouted at me as though I had asked for something unreasonable. “There are art supplies in the room.”

*Then she demanded our phones.*

“We can’t allow any pictures to be taken of this area. There’s a phone in the holding room you can use to make any calls,” she snapped when we both voiced concern about parting with our only means of outside contact. I protested; she shouted. I relinquished my phone.

This meant no contact with the various organizers, speakers, and attendees who had been following this ordeal on Twitter. Later these people on the outside would tell me that it was as though I had gone dark, disappeared. They worried for me.



Your world class accommodations.

The woman shuffled us into a dark, grim room with only one working light

at the far end and shut the door, returning to her magazines. There was a non-European woman in there sobbing already. Later she would manage to communicate in just enough French I could understand that she came all the way from Mauritius, but for time being, the Dutch/Australian woman and I spoke enough English to make each other's acquaintance. She was coming to London for an unpaid internship for school. Her Border Patrol officer, a bright young man with a hopeful disposition, was in communication with her professor.

There wasn't much to do in the room. Every so often the woman at the desk would ask briskly if we were hungry. I declined, unable to eat anything. The promised "art supplies" turned out to be a disorganized pile of children's coloring pencils that had never been sharpened and were mostly unusable. There was no paper, but there were some small post-its. After a long time, the Australian/Dutch woman and I began a game using the last few colored pencil nubbins and post-its: she would write a saying in Dutch and I would illustrate its meaning. We posted them on the back of the bench we sat at, under the only working light, in a circle of gloom. I tried to use the pay phone in the room, but it required payment in a form I didn't carry. All the phone numbers I needed were on my phone anyway.

*"I don't understand why they are doing this to us," my cell mate repeated, "We aren't criminals!"*

I looked over at the darker woman from Mauritius crying in the corner, and I thought perhaps the Dutch/Australian really meant, "we don't look like criminals." I hadn't seen another white-skinned person in the holding area or the Corral of Shame. I wondered. We were both women. Neither of us had the backing of a Big Employer to come running for us. Where were the chatty American businessmen I stood next to in line at immigration? Perhaps they had companies like IBM and Microsoft backing them, legitimizing their travel and threatening big trouble for anyone interfering. Two women, a student and a self-employed web developer... Who would step up for us? A professor? A conference organizer? These thoughts raced through my mind as time wore on and I grew more and more tired. The adrenaline kept me awake. It was 8:25am.

*I had been 22 hours without sleep.*

My eye was twitching uncontrollably when my officer showed up for our “interview.” It didn’t feel like an interview. He was curt and seemed upset about something. If I had had some sleep, I may have thought to ask for a different officer to perform the interview, one who seemed less distressed. Instead, I tried to please him.

He took me to a closet of a room with a bright, working light, and a thin layer of dust and grease on the small table between us. He set to work with clenched fist, furiously writing down our conversation, word for word. From the interview room next door, I could hear the woman from Mauritius shouting “my father, my father!” in French into a speaker phone.

The officer asked if I was “willing and happy to take the interview.” I had trouble responding. He tersely repeated the question, visibly annoyed at my confusion. I tried to explain I’d been 22 hours without sleep and was worried it might affect my ability to answer coherently.

This did not feel like a friendly chat. I wanted my wits about me.

*He smirked and said if I didn't feel up for it then, he could come back later... The implication being he could leave me to tough it out in that dark, dirty room sans sleep for a few more hours without contact with the outside world.*



It was the back of this form that I wish had been read to me.

I agreed to continue the interview, although after I got home I would learn that I had the option to request time to rest in a hotel. Also, there was a phone number for legal counsel that he omitted when reviewing documents with me. I surely would have used it.

I began to feel like a mouse being played with by a cat who became increasingly annoyed that I wasn't running or scampering for its pleasure. My mind was fogged with sleep deprivation, and I just wanted to tell him what he wanted. But somehow that wasn't enough. He tried to play games to prove something, but I didn't seem to play along the way he hoped.

He had opened by asking who had paid for my flight. I replied truthfully that I had, thinking he, like the woman officer I had met on my first visit to

the UK, was concerned about the providence of my ticket. Later he attempted to “catch me lying” by asking if I was getting reimbursed. I replied truthfully I was.

“Ah ha! So why did you tell me *you* had paid for your flight?”

Because it was on my credit card.

He asked why I hadn’t said anything about it because I was “so chatty now.”

I told him point blank: there is nothing I can tell you to make you happy. I have to be very careful what information I volunteer, because if I talk too much, you get angry. And now if I don’t talk enough, you get angry.

*I asked, “What can I do to make you happy? You’re inconsolable.”*

He didn’t write much of that conversation down. I think his hand was getting tired.





Yes, I feel I could tell you anything.

He was also concerned that the company paying me was German. “Don’t you find it odd, a German company, taking British pounds, quoting you British pounds?” I didn’t see the problem. The company was paying VAT and were wiring me USD after the conference. The only reason we were using pounds in correspondence was so officials like him could make out the sums. Maybe Euros would have been more clear?



If you need legal advice, there are helplines?

He told me that the honorarium and letter of invitation only applies if the company inviting you to the UK is based in the United Kingdom. This clarification was not on the gov.uk site I and the organizers poured over. As an event in the UK, organized by UK citizens, it didn't occur to me that a German company paying a speaker an honorarium to make that possible would be an issue, especially when the size of the sum was not that large.

Perhaps that realization stung the most. Here I was, having the worst time of my life, and it wasn't even for an amount of money that made my life worth living. No one would come for me. No paycheck would be waiting for me when I got home in spite of it all. All that time spent preparing, creating, honing a talk for an audience that would never see it. Was I really out here,

on my own, risking a helluva a lot just to *share*? With a nation whose border patrol is looking for *any excuse* to put me through the ringer? I thought, what the hell am I doing with my life?

*“We will have to send you back because of this.”*

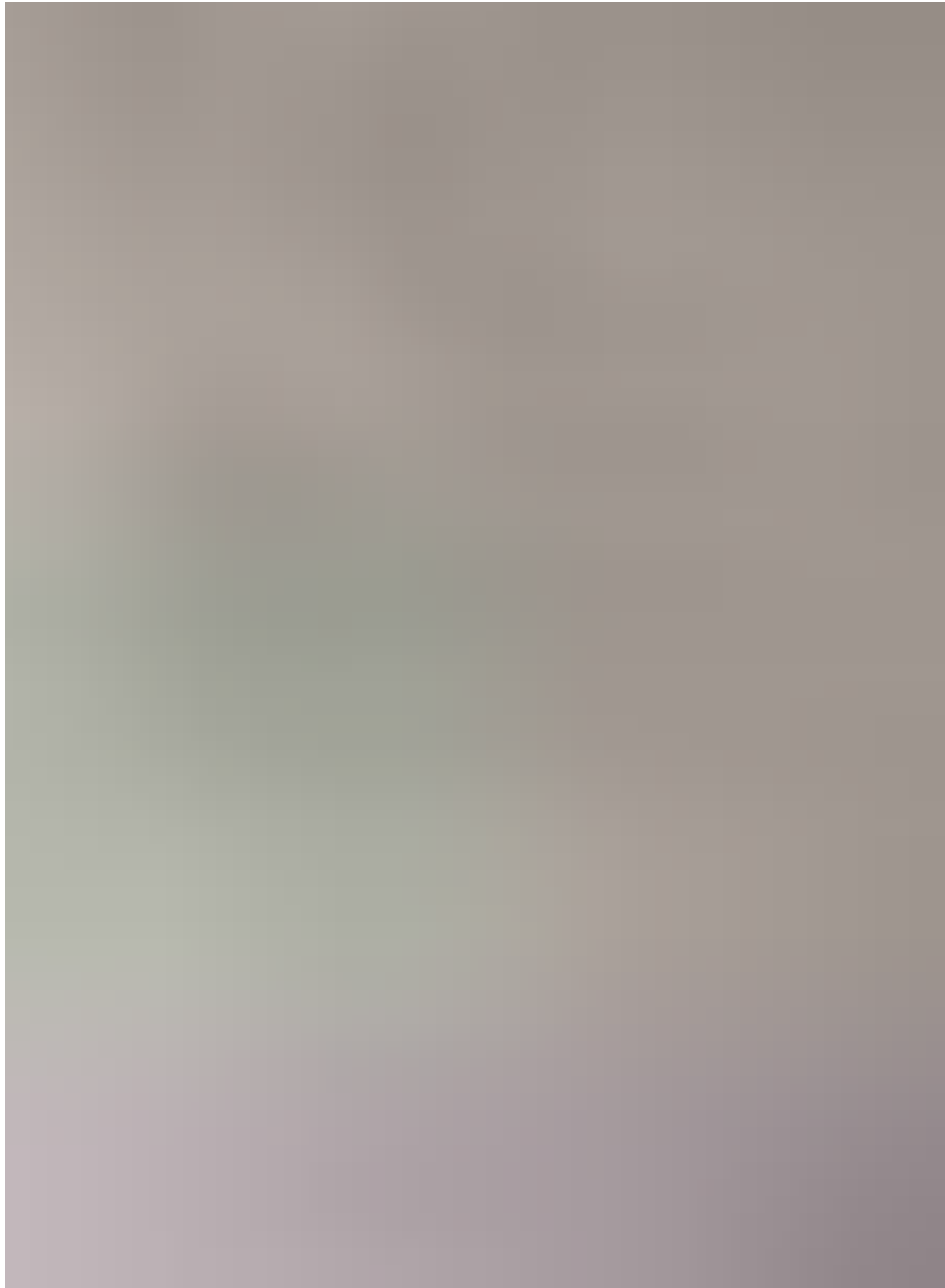
Now that I knew the verdict, I immediately sought an amenable solution: was there any kind of VISA I could get, currently or in the future, that would let me do what I came to do?

“No.”

How about if I agreed to do it for free? I was already there. I was taking a huge loss regardless. His mood lifted ever so slightly and he left to speak with his manager for some time. When he came back he told me she had given him the order to deport me within 24 hours. I could get on the last flight back to the USA they could fit me on, or I could stay overnight at the detention center. For once, he made a helpful recommendation: to not stay at the detention center.

*The flight back was to New York City—not my home of Portland on the opposite coast of the USA.*

“Oh. Well, we only have to drop you off at your nation’s nearest port of call.”



A woman of less means might have found having to make a last minute cross-country flight and/or stay in one of the most expensive cities in the world bankrupting, but the organizers honorably offered to pay for it.

The interview was deemed over. I remember emerging from the Interrogation Closet, turning to the Dutch/Australian woman, and bursting into tears, “They’re sending me back.”

Looking back, I don’t even understand why this caused me so much sorrow. My diary entries from my first visit to the UK indicated I had early on resigned myself to whatever fate had in store for me as soon as I had entered the Corral of Shame. So why was I floored by this? All I can think is

that the lack of sleep and the stressful treatment I received had broken me in a way I hope to never be broken before.

. . .

Turned back at the border. Sorry, Oxford. Heading home.

— [@rachelnabors](#)

How did I get my phone back long enough to tweet this? Read on to find out!

I was to be moved to a different location, one closer to my flight's gate. My flight wouldn't leave until 5pm.

*I would go 9 more hours without sleep before I would get on that plane to New York, putting my total length of sleep deprivation at 31 hours.*

A burly, chatty woman came to fetch me. She was boisterous and loved to make small talk. With. Everyone. Where the first woman was a screeching tabloid aficionado, this one was a congenial gossip-monger more intent on making friends than doing things by the books. Having lived in America for a long period, she was eager to engage me, but unfortunately for her, I was fading fast. The first thing to go was my sense of humor. By the time I got on the plane, I would barely be able to grunt in reply to her repeated attempts to make small talk.

As this woman guided me out of that dark place, the woman from Mauritius looked at me with tears in her eyes and opened her arms for a hug. I was not ready to hug someone I barely knew. I am bad at hugging. My mother did not teach me the etiquette required for hugging. I don't know when it's appropriate. When I ask my husband if he needs a hug, he always say no, even when I'm really sure he needs one. But in this moment, I finally realized: the right time to hug another human being is when you see the tears coming into their eyes.

*We both had tears in our eyes. There was hugging. Then I was pulled away.*

I had a two-person escort to the new gate. All along the burly woman told me how this wasn't her fault, how if it was up to *her* she'd let *someone like me* through in a heartbeat, that "they let plenty of other people through that I would never, but it's beyond my control. I just follow the rules." I almost missed the scary man from Kiosk 22 who at least didn't try to dodge his complicity in this dehumanizing system.

*"We treat everyone the same here," she said.*

*You treat people like animals, I replied.*

(See, I told you my sense of humor fell off and died in a corner.)

"Actually, we treat people quite well," she corrected me. Yes, and farmers with the worst animal husbandry will be the first to tell you that their animals are the happiest. I wondered if she'd feel the same if her country's Prime Minister had to go through the same things I was.

They put me, alone, into a heavy, metal van that looked like it was built to house inmates, not travelers. I sat there, alone, as they chatted in the cab, their voices muffled by heavy plexiglass preventing me from interacting with them. When we arrived at the terminal, they lead me, one in front, one behind—and heaven help me if I stepped out of that order—to a new, bigger holding room. One with lights that worked.



Right, taking a person's phone from them totally prevents information about your containment areas from being leaked. Admit it: that's not really why you want our phones.

They wanted my phone back, but I told the burly woman that I needed to arrange a second flight from JFK to take me home to Portland, on the other side of my country. How could they just leave me so far from home? I needed to make arrangements. She bent the rules and allowed me to stay in the office area to use my phone under “watchful eye” as she gossiped with the office workers.

As I furtively plucked away at various flight arranging apps, I couldn't help but look up through the observation window into the second holding area to see a white man, the only white man I'd seen in a holding room, standing there, staring back at me every time I looked.

“His wife refuses to see him,” I overheard.

“So is he going back?”

“No, he refuses.”

“WHAT? He's *choosing* to go to the detention center? What's wrong with him?”

I broke into a cold sweat. Please do not put me in a room with a crazy eyed man whose wife refuses to see him.





I could no longer perform the math needed to buy a flight, so I gave up and began tweeting and emailing furiously.

Eventually I had to be put back into the room when the office got too crowded. The room's only other occupants were men. I do not feel comfortable in rooms full of men I do not know with the door closed. I went into the children's room and tried to calm down by reading the spines of the books.

Eventually they admitted an old Middle Eastern couple whose nationality escapes me along with the title of a book about a lost duckling. They joined me in the children's room, perhaps also feeling uncomfortable in an open room full of men they do not know, preferring the brighter, less despairing colors of the children's closet. Their admission was my ticket back into the office area—and my phone.

“Did you get your plane tickets yet?”

“No... Have to clear it with the organizers first!” But I couldn't buy anything. The numbers were all mixed up.

The office workers resumed their idle conversations and ignored me as my sweaty fingers tapped on the keys as hard and as fast as I could. Periodically they asked us all if we wanted fruit or sandwiches, which the other inmates accepted regularly. I did not. I could not.

My network came through: I had numerous offers for places to stay in NYC from friends and colleagues. I could take my time finding a flight home after I could read numbers again. A small relief. Other messages poured in:

“That’s never happened to me before!”

“I always tell them I’m on vacation when I’m really coming to speak.”

“Did you do anything suspicious to make them think you’re a terrorist?” (I kid you not.)

“Never tell them you’re coming for anything but tourism.”

One colleague offered to invite me as the guest of her UK company. I asked my handlers. “Too late.”

It was no use. Hours passed. Waiting. The boredom was the hardest part.

The Walk of Shame to the boarding gate for my flight back to the States was upon us. I went back into The Room to use the toilet one last time. When I came back, my handler had her back to the door window, leaning over in conversation with her desk mate.

I lifted my hand to tap on the glass, to get her to turn around and let me back into the room with my phone, but stopped short.

I remember thinking,

*“What right have I to expect special favors, camaraderie, from this person while no one else in this room receives it?”*

My hand fell back to my side, and I stood there, staring at the door window, waiting in silence. I steeled myself for the awkward march through the airport. I hadn’t eaten in over ten hours. I hadn’t slept in more than twenty-four hours. There was nothing left of me to keep it together. Every

fiber of my being was bent on just making it through this.

The door opened.

“Oh, I didn’t see you there. You should have tapped on the glass!” she bubbled.

And we were off. It was a long walk. I was making clumsy trips and stumbles, the kind I made on my last attempt at a 24 Hour Comics challenge, the one that made me swear off stupid all night shows of bravado. My handler kept trying to engage me in conversation.

“If it were up to me, I’d let you through in an instant, but what can I do?” and other useless things people tell themselves to salve that aching feeling that Something Very Wrong is happening. Seeing I had no words left, she began instigating conversation with my other handler who seemed only slightly more inclined to engage than I.

This was it. No going back. No old friends in Oxford. No spa date in Chippenham. No Ladies That UX in Brighton. No Shoreditch flat and duck fat fries for Easter with colleagues.



The first thing I learned as a waitress way back when: never let them see you cry.

They lead me to the seat closest to the gate where I was allowed to catch my breath.

*In front of the other passengers my passport was handed to the crew who were instructed not to return it to me until after the plane's wheels had left British soil.*

“Because if they had to de-board the plane for some reason, you might take off with it.”

I could not imagine myself wanting to be in this country any longer than necessary.

I was to board twenty minutes early, before the other passengers. She made one final attempt to reach me as she walked me to the gangplank: “You’re a strong woman.”

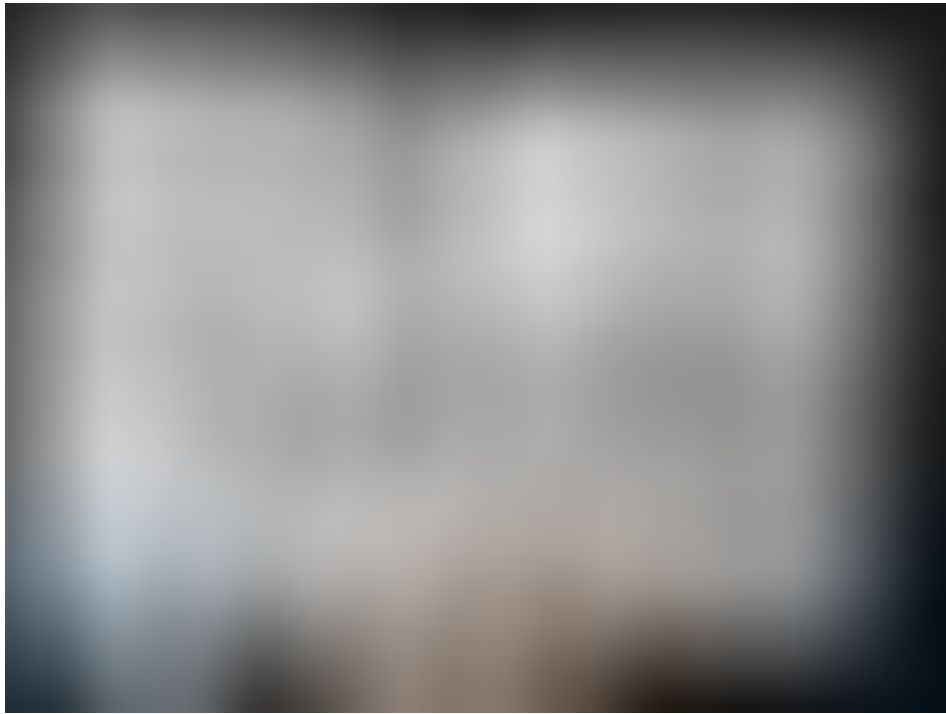
I gave her a hug because I had tears in my eyes and gritted out, “It’s taken every ounce of strength I have not to cry in front of you today.”

And then I was alone for twenty minutes in my chair, sobbing as the flight attendants prepped the cabin.

*I had never cried in front of so many people before. I loathed every minute of it.*

## **Afterward**

When I was finally able to talk to my husband again, one of the very first things he told me was, “Don’t blame yourself for being truthful.” These days, when it feels there’s some shooting or bombing happening every other time you turn on the radio, there’s increased pressure for Border Patrols and TSAs to make us feel safe: increasing security theatre, upping deportation quotas. But in an effort to make ourselves feel safer, we’re setting up situations where good people are punished for being honest, from public toilets to airports.



This mark in my passport shows I was denied entry to the United Kingdom. I will always have to travel abroad with the documentation explaining why. Could be worse. I could have been banned. But I may as well have been.

The Australian/Dutch woman down there with me thought that because we didn't *look* like criminals, we shouldn't be treated like criminals. What she didn't realize that was we were both playing the part of "criminals" in a shadow puppet play to appease terrified citizens, fearful of attack from the Other, of theft of jobs and currency. It didn't matter what we looked like because no one else would see us. It didn't matter who we were because no employer would come running to our rescue. We had ceased to be people and had become numbers, convenient and disposable. For lack of anyone more suspicious to bully, we were pulled aside, our rights suspended, and then cast away with only the thinnest of excuses.

*This is the system we asked for. We thought it wouldn't apply to "us." We built it to keep Them out, to keep Us safe. But how quickly that system turns and engulfs the ones we love.*

*Then it's not "Us vs Them." It's Us vs Ourselves.*

In the time since this happened, I have heard terrible, similar tales from

fellow Americans traveling to the UK: young women banned from the country when VISA guidelines changed six months after applying. Wives who waited with children on the other side of emigrations for their husbands who never came.

And it goes both ways: a colleague I immensely respect will no longer speak or hold workshops in the USA because he was denied entry at our border in a similar process. This man is a great teacher and his very reasonable abstinence from visiting my country is an immeasurable loss to our professional community.

Canada. Australia. The United Kingdom. The United States. Each one of them will treat an honest citizen from their neighbor like a common criminal under the right circumstances. Sometimes they'll even persecute *their own citizens*.

*Think this is a fluke? Think this won't happen to you?  
Think again.*

With international tensions rising and tit-for-tat border aggressions escalating, we can only expect border authorities to grow more bold, more aggressive, in their search for "the bad guy." And you, my fellow traveler, are just a number in a quota that needs filling.

. . . .

I have received many apologies from citizens of the United Kingdom on behalf of their government. And while I appreciate their concern, apologies don't make things right. I'm sure some people reading this will feel compelled to apologize as well.

*Don't apologize to me.*

Your apologies will not make *me* feel better. Apologies are things we do to make *ourselves* feel better. Nothing less than a written apology from the Border Patrol the removal of the black mark from my passport and my



fingerprints from EEA databases would make me feel better. That's not happening.

What *would* make me feel better would be to hear that people are sending this article to their representatives and taking them to task.

*Write to your representative. Send them this post.*

A proper VISA for international, independent speakers would have helped me, but honestly, I don't think there was any bit of paper I could have showed the Man from Kiosk 22 to prove I had a right to be in his country. For truly, rights are things we grant each other. And at the border, the officers are the ones who bestow them.

*We take our rights for granted, from our right to our property to freedom of movement. We only notice them when they're taken away.*

The next time a politician starts talking about "cracking down on the borders," remember that they are asking to gamble with your own rights and the rights of good well-meaning people.

## TIL

**Never let someone take your phone from you.** Do whatever you must to keep it on your person. When someone takes your phone, what they're really doing is taking your agency, your ability to reach out for help and advice. They're putting you in their power. If they hadn't taken my phone from me, I might have had a chance to clear this up. But that would have meant knowing my rights, having outside help from other UK citizens, and also, having hope.

**There is no VISA you can get to receive an honorarium for speaking in the UK (if the conference isn't owned in the UK. Or something.)**

Seriously, where was this fine print hidden? I would have stayed home. This

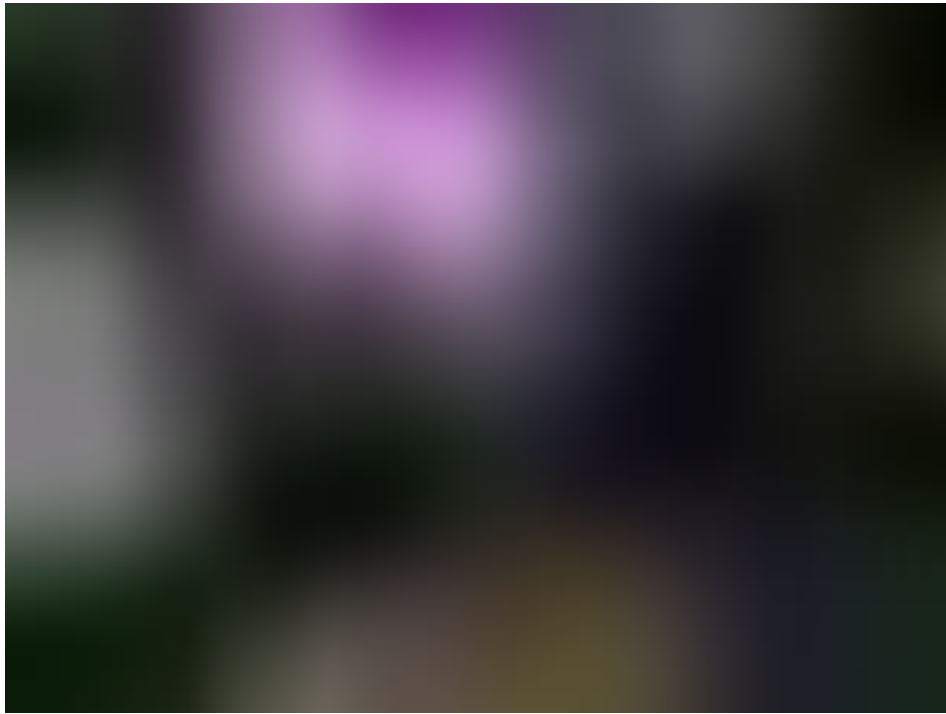
is particularly scary because the wording on sites like gov.uk make it sound like it's ok to come speak, but the reality at the border is not so much. Even with the advice of an Immigrations lawyer, when it comes down to it, it's the Border Officer's call. This means a lot of tech speakers eagerly flying to the UK to give talks are doing so illegally and probably slipping through more by accident than by design. And it was more than a bit galling to be on a plane back home and see the tweets of other Americans on stage in the UK with no more documentation than my own.

**Border Patrol doesn't pursue the events or other speakers at the same event.** I know so many speakers who go abroad. Some, like me, run into trouble, but most don't. Most events I've asked about VISA issues have told me, "this isn't a problem, you're just a visitor, never happened before." I'm surprised that the Border Patrol doesn't hound the conferences inviting us and deport the rest of the foreign speakers. But no, it's just the speakers they catch at the gates who feel the burn. Why is that?

**There's a lot of racism in the UK.** I feel like a lot of Americans look up to the Brits as being somehow superior, or at least quaint and twee. But people are people everywhere you go. And sometimes you get to see citizens at their ugliest. I was more surprised than I should have been to find levels of racism in the underbelly of LHR I used to see in the deep south. The handlers, they talk like you aren't listening.

## Epilogue

I'm grateful to the people of New York City for their hospitality and understanding in this crushing turn of events. I gave my talk at the New York Public Library. It wasn't Oxford, Alice's birthplace, but it was a large audience for twenty-four hours' notice. I was able to stay on for a bit in the spare rooms and couches of the wonderful people of the NYC web development community.



NYPL events organizer [mgiraldo](#) on the left and my friend and host [Pablo Defendini](#) on the right.

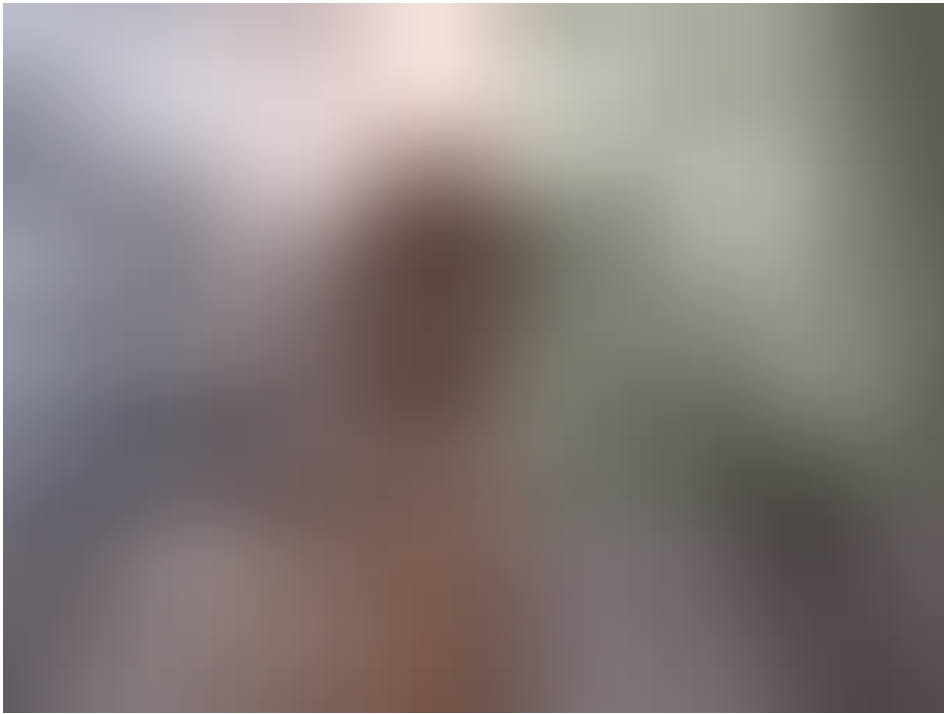
I know there are many good people in the United Kingdom who do not wish that this would happen to anyone. I cannot blame them for what happened anymore than they can blame me for the actions of George W. Bush. Countries often do stupid things that their constituents don't like. Mine does it all the time. Speaking of, I will send this to my representatives every time border issues come up. Let it be a reminder: you get treated how you treat others.

Someone once quipped that I would look back on this experience and laugh. I can tell you now that I do not.

I can look back on being stranded in Manila for a week after the Paris Shootings, and I can laugh at the cockroach infested AirBnB I was lucky enough to find and the pneumonia I contracted during my extended stay.

I can look back at the time I was foolish enough to try to learn to surf only to have the ocean pull me away from the group and try to drown me, and I can laugh at how happy I was to see wet sand for once.

I can look back at having corrective upper and lower maxillofacial surgery, and I can laugh because I was so proud for making it through that I wanted my picture taken first thing.



The first thing I asked for when I woke up was for my husband to take a photo with my Nintendo DS. The quality is terrible, but the spirit is there.

I didn't volunteer for this. I didn't have a choice. I was told what to do, where to go, and had my belongings and ability to communicate taken from me.

*This made the top two worst experiences of my life, and you don't want to know what the other one was.*

My husband and I were planning a 2017 trip to Scotland to see his mother's birthplace. It is canceled. I will not go back to the United Kingdom. People from the UK can come see me when I speak in continental Europe, where I'm wanted.

I will not risk a third worst experience of my life.



