

The officer did not look up when I approached the booth.

This is the first thing you learn about border crossings: the person deciding whether you belong somewhere will often not look at you while they decide. They look at the document. They look at the screen. They look at the stamp they are about to press into the page. You stand on the other side of the scratched plexiglass and you become, for that minute, entirely the sum of what your passport says about you.

Mine said: born here, citizen, right of entry. It has always said this. I have crossed this particular border eleven times, and eleven times the officer has looked at my document, looked at their screen, and handed it back with the brisk indifference of someone returning a parking ticket. Thirty seconds, maybe less. A small nod that means: you may continue existing in this country.

The man in the line ahead of me took longer.

I do not know where he was from. I know that his passport was a different color from mine, and that the officer looked at it, then at him, then at the screen, then at him again. I know that he was asked to step to the side. I know that he lifted his bag without argument, with the particular economy of movement of someone who has performed this action before and knows that stillness is the correct response. A second officer appeared. They led him through a door that had no handle on the outside.

I was waved forward.

Thirty seconds. Small nod.

I have thought about that door many times since. Not with guilt exactly guilt would be too simple, would imply that I had done something I could undo. What I feel is closer to what the philosopher Iris Murdoch called "moral vision" the discomfort of seeing clearly something you would have preferred not to see, and understanding that the seeing itself is a kind of responsibility. I had done nothing wrong by being waved through. I had also done nothing to deserve being waved through faster than the man with the different colored passport. The thirty seconds were not a reward. They were an inheritance.

Descriptive writing, I was taught, is the art of rendering the physical world with enough precision that the reader inhabits it. But there are moments when precision itself becomes the argument when the job is not to interpret what you saw but to refuse to look away from it. The scratched plexiglass. The screen the officer consulted. The door with no handle on the outside. The bag lifted without argument.

I collected my luggage from the carousel and walked out into the arrivals hall, where families were waiting with handwritten signs and children were climbing on the barrier rails and everything was loud and ordinary and bright. A man was selling coffee from a cart near the exit.

I bought one and stood for a moment in the middle of all that noise, holding something warm, trying to decide what I was carrying.

I am still deciding.

