Immigrant for a Day

Maria Testa

When a friend asked me to help him drive from Boston to Mexico, I accepted the challenge. I’d always wanted to drive across the country, and this was my chance. I really had nothing to lose, so I thought.

The ride was long and hot. But after four long days, we finally reached our destination, the border station in Nuevo Laredo, Mexico. There were long lines of cars, trucks, and people, but mostly it was populated by heavily armed Mexican soldiers. I felt intimidated. There I was, a young, white, American female in this unfamiliar space filled with chaos and soldiers asking me questions in Spanish, which I could not understand.

The soldiers were fierce and rude; their eyes were penetrating. I’ve never felt so vulnerable. One uniformed soldier, with about the biggest gun I’d ever seen in my life, took advantage of his authority and aggressively approached me. He asked me a question in a stern voice. His ferocious eyes were locked into my own uncertain eyes, and meanwhile I could see him manipulating the handle of his gun to create an incredibly lewd sexual gesture. Another officer soon approached us, breaking his stare and redirecting him elsewhere. Thank God!

The shuttle through the border was disorganized, but we finally made it across. Although I was farther from home then I’d ever been, I felt welcomed by “Amigo’s” family. We ate a nice meal together and drank a cerveza, and then I left for the airport back in Laredo.

Once again, I found myself crossing the border, this time in the other direction. The agent asked me, “Who are you? Why are you here? How long have you been here? What’s in the bag?” I was intimidated, but I answered his questions as directly and respectfully as possible. He asked me to stand with my arms stretched out and my legs spread. Then he instructed a gigantic German shepherd, who’d rip your throat out in one bite, to walk around me and through my legs. The dog even stood on his hind legs to sniff me thoroughly. Finally, they let me back into the U.S. I made it to the airport in Laredo with not a minute to spare.

Once on the plane, the exhaustion hit me. I slept the entire flight home. I dreamed of my son and of the soldiers. Some of the dreams turned to nightmares, but somewhere in my subconscious, I knew I was safe. I woke up feeling ashamed—ashamed of myself for being so naïve. Although I have been in many frightening situations, nothing comes close to the ghastly experience of being an immigrant for a day.

Maria Testa recently received her GED through Project Hope in Roxbury, MA. She enjoyed writing this story and serving on the editorial board of this issue of The Change Agent.