

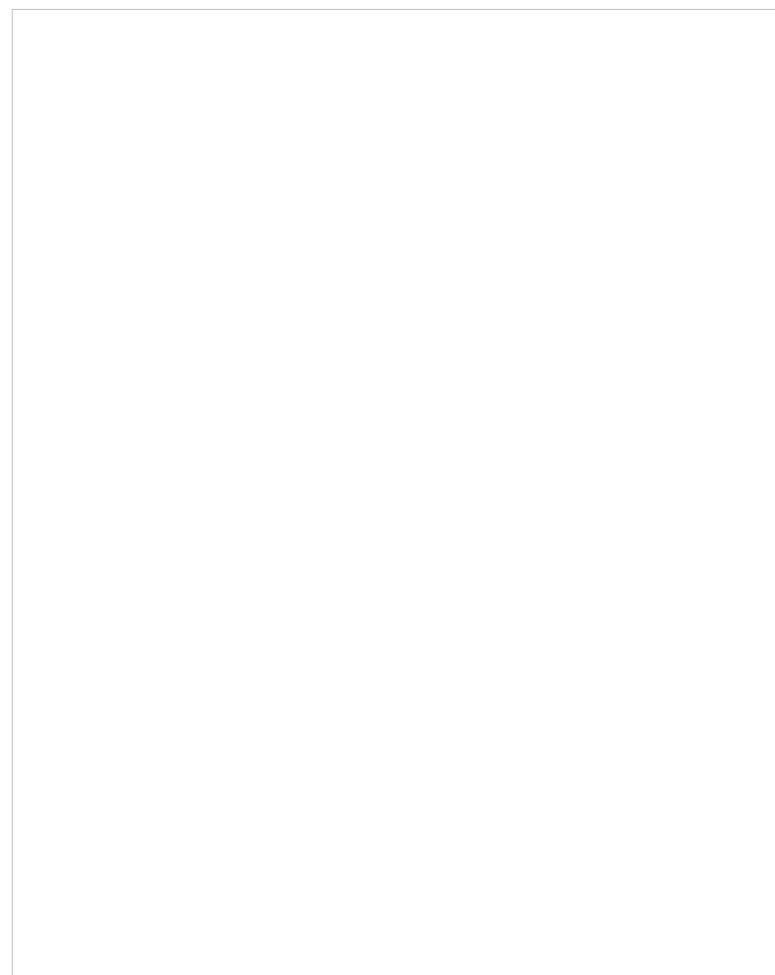
Operation Atlas

by Sharon Kwik

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PHOTO BY SHARON KWIK
MUSIC BY GOODMAN CARTER
READ BY SHARON KWIK



The Immigration and Naturalization Service at 26 Federal Plaza opens at 7:30 am. Today, my second day in line, I oversleep and am half an hour late. Four lines hug all four perimeters of the building and there is general mass confusion. I take my place at the end of the queue, roughly 250 people long.

Twenty inches of snow cover the ground and the thermometer won't budge above freezing, even in the blinding sun. Two and a half hours later I've only made it to the newsstand on the corner of Broadway. The proprietor sells bags of nuts, magazines, and cans of Coke in a redundant icebox. I open my thermos and pour myself a capful of tea. The hot liquid defrosts my lips, mouth, and throat, but fails to warm anything below my neck. Two miserable looking men in Michelin-man-sized down jackets and sandwich boards hand out flyers for immigration photos to passers-by. All conversation in line ceases as our faces and voices ice over.

An hour and a half later, thermos empty and bladder bursting, I am fifteen people away from the tent. The tent is an enclosed clear plastic structure that extends thirty feet back from the front door of the INS building. A string of rectangular heat lamps dangles from its ceiling and its interior is dirty-grey and carpeted. It was built so that once we get to the door of the building, we will be defrosted enough to remove our coats to be X-rayed on the conveyer belt. But over the weekend, the tent was destroyed by weather or vandals, and its left side lies slashed, limp, and useless on the snow.

My feet have lost all feeling and I have trouble navigating the ten steps leading down to the tent entrance. A short stocky man with a wild set of Jheri curls wearing an ugly yet expensive black leather car coat squeezes in the gap in the railing. He plants his feet and glares at the people around him.

"Yeah, I was here. I just stepped out to grab a cup of coffee. I've been here all morning," he says with utter conviction to no one in particular.

No one even glances at him. Everyone is simply too cold to do anything about it.

"Listen," I say. "I know you're cutting the line. But if you're going to cut the line you better not do it in front of me. I've been freezing my ass off for five hours and there's no way you're going in before me."

"What are you talking about?" he says, puffing out his chest.

But as the line crawls forward he joins it several people behind me. The four men in front of me and the couple behind me laugh and joke about 'la China' with the big mouth.

Ever since I arrived from Canada fifteen years ago, I felt like a New Yorker and was accepted as such. But standing in this line with people from all over the world, even though I may feel like a New Yorker, I am still an alien resident as it says on my temporary work visa.

I am four people away from the tent entrance. Three men are fixing the tent as we wait. They patch up the hole with loose plastic sheets and metal clamps and finally turn on the heat lamps. Mrs. Jheri Curl, pushing a fat child in a stroller, joins Mr. Jheri Curl behind me. The line propels forward, anxious to get into the heated tent. A black security guard calls the line to order, pushing people away from the doors.

"If anyone's here for Special Registration, please come to the front of the line," he announces.

A tall man with dark brown skin squeezes through the line and is ushered into the tent.

"What's 'special registration'?" Mrs. Jheri Curl cries out. "Is that like some special education or something? Why can't I go to the front of the line?"

"If you don't know what Special Registration is, be thankful you don't know," the security guard says. He goes back inside the tent. I imagine the Middle Eastern man being escorted directly to a nice warm jail cell.

Then the line moves forward again until I am finally inside the tent. The knots in my stomach begin to untie as I stretch my face up to the thin wave of heat emanating from the lamps. It's 2:35 pm. The INS offices close in less than an hour. The tiny tent swells as impatient people surge inside. Two more security guards come forward and force everyone back. My body is starting to thaw. I'm almost there.

In a matter of minutes the people in the tent change, going from numbness to spirited talk and laughter. We're in the home stretch, sheltered from the elements. The Latino men in front of me begin to joke and flirt with a saucy Latina, her skin caramel smooth, her sleek long hair pulled back. The men are none-too-attractive, a good twenty years older than her, their bodies padded by food and beer and indiscriminate facial hair. But she flirts back with them all the same.

Another request is made that those here for Special Registration come to the front. The Latina asks a security guard why it's taking so long and when he thinks we'll be let inside. He scratches his shaved head and smiles.

"I don't know," he says. "I just know what they tell us from upstairs. It's packed up there. We can't fit any more people inside. If I were you I'd go home. But that's just me."

The Latina shrugs her shoulders, then waves goodbye to the four men and exits out the side door. Through the thick plastic walls, they watch her curvy form walk up the steps to the street. That's one less person between the pearly INS gates and me, I think.

"Is anyone here for just forms?" a hefty security guard calls out.

Several people raise their hands.

"If you're just here for forms you can come to the front of the line," he calls. "But you may not use the bathroom or make a phone call. If any of you try to use the facilities or try to find a pay phone you will be sent back to the end of the line."

"What about just a renewal?" Mrs. Jheri Curl yells.

"I said JUST FORMS."

A new line for 'just forms' queues up inside the already-crowded tent and another line extends from the side door of the tent up the stairs to the street. Those of us not here for 'just forms' watch as 75 people file ahead of us into the building. It's now 2:50 pm.

A Greek looking man with a thick Stalin moustache and flowing steel-grey hair harangues the burly security guard. "I need to get inside! I have a flight tonight at 6 pm!"

"Is it an emergency?" the security guard asks.

"Yes, I have a flight tonight!"

"Do you have a death certificate?"

"YES," says the Greek man pulling out a bunch of paperwork from his shoulder bag. "I have a fax!" He hands a piece of paper to the guard and waves his airline ticket in front of him.

"Is this your language?" the guard asks.

"Yes!" The Greek man bounces up and down visibly agitated.

"Do you have this translated in English?"

"I just have the fax they sent me!"

"Why is the letterhead on the bottom of the page?"

"I don't know. It's just what they sent me. I told you, I have a flight at 6 PM! I have to get in there now!"

The security guard crosses his arms in front of his chest.

"Are you giving me attitude?" he asks. "Because I'm trying to help you here. And I'm telling you that if I send you upstairs they're going to ask you why the letterhead is at the bottom. And if you don't have a good answer you know who's going to get in trouble? ME. And I have a little girl to support. I can't go losing my job. And who do you think's more important, you or my little girl?"

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," the Greek man says, "I just have a flight--"

"I know. I heard you the first time. Let me see what I can do." The security guard goes back inside the building. More people shove their way inside the tent.

Two black men--one stoic and muscular (a real Muscle Man), the other, small with a young child in his arms--squeeze their way further up the line.

"Hey! Go to the back! You're jumping the line!" someone behind them calls out.

The two men just face forward as though they hear nothing. The hefty security guard returns with an older Caucasian man dressed in a spiffier version of the security

guard uniform.

"Show him the fax," the security guard says to the Greek man.

"Why is the letterhead at the bottom?"

"I don't know. I told you I don't know. It's just what they sent me. It's from the hospital. You have to let me in!" The Greek man looks about to break down in tears.

"Listen, I went back inside and got my superior for you and you keep giving me this attitude. I don't have to do anything. So cool it or I'm sending you to the back of the line." Hefty Guard and his superior turn around and confer quietly while Greek Man worries his fax between his wrinkled hands. Muscle Man turns back to look at Greek Man and sneers.

Greek Man jumps up and down and grabs Muscle Man's shoulder.

"You jumped the line!" he shouts.

Muscle Man whips around and pushes Greek Man in the chest.

"Hey, HEY!" Hefty Guard yells. "What did I tell you!"

"But he pushed me! And he butted in line!" Greek Man whines.

"YEAH!" "SI!" yells the crowd. "He pushed to the front! He was behind!"

"Who did?" asks Hefty Guard.

"He did!" Several arms raise and point at Muscle Man.

"And so did he!" Someone else points at the small man with the child.

"But he has a baby," protests another.

"So what? I have a baby too," yells Mrs. Jheri Curl. "Go back to the end of the line!"

"QUIET DOWN!" the Hefty Guard hollers. "Did you cut the line?" he asks.

Muscle Man ignores him.

"I'm talking to you," says the guard. "Now if one person said that you cut the line I might think they were lying. But when six or seven people say you did this, it must be true." The guard turns to the crowd. "Is this the guy?"

"YES!" "SI!" More fingers point towards Muscle Man. This is the most fun they've had all morning.

The guard turns back to Muscle Man.

"Do you believe in democracy?" he asks. "Because this is democracy at work."

Muscle Man continues to stare straight ahead with his hands in his pockets. Hefty Guard and his superior walk back towards the building. Muscle Man turns and gives the crowd the finger. The crowd goes crazy shouting in Spanish and broken English. Greek Man rushes forward and pushes Muscle Man again while several others cheer behind him. Hefty Guard runs back and grabs Greek Man and Muscle Man by the jackets. "That's it! Do you want me to send you two outside? Because I will."

"He pushed me! And I didn't do nothing!" Muscle Man says.

"He cut the line!" the crowd screams. "He gave us the finger!"

"Is that true? Did you give them the finger?" Hefty Guard asks.

Muscle Man scowls silently.

"I've had it with you," shouts Hefty Guard. "You're OUT!"

Hefty Guard signals for back-up and he and another guard escort a struggling Muscle Man out the side door of the tent. The crowd cheers. The two guards speak to him outside as we watch from behind the plastic wall. They point towards the street. He scowls at the crowd, crosses his arms in front of his chest, and refuses to move. The guards give him a push towards the street. He takes a few steps, glaring at the tent, before he slowly moves up the stairs. He doesn't take his eyes off of us. At the sidewalk he stops, perches on a cement post, and glares.

"He's waiting to beat us all up when we leave!" someone says gleefully. And the crowd laughs. By the time we've gotten inside the building and been processed, Muscle Man will be long gone.

A different guard enters the tent.

"I'm sorry but the INS offices are closed for the day," he says. "Go home and come back tomorrow."

At first the crowd is silent, then they are outraged. The guard opens the side door. I'm the first one out, running to get to my first day of work at my new job on time. Many of the others linger, still trying to find some way of getting inside.

I'm back at the entrance of the tent, once again with freezing fingers and toes, an empty thermos, and a full bladder. But the tent is closed today for renovations. Six workmen--two on cell phones--bustle around the tent with power drills. The line runs along the periphery of the tent with no relief from the cold, but it moves quickly and I'm inside in just under two hours.

In Room 301 I get a number and sit down on the emptier square of seats to the right of the line. A Russian model and her agent (father? lover?) squeeze past me into the two empty seats to my right. They talk quietly in Russian. I see her passport. It says Poland, not Russia. And people look at me and think I'm Chinese. Japanese. I hear Spanish from the family behind me and I assume, Mexican. But perhaps they're Dominican. At any rate, it doesn't matter, our individual backgrounds. Not here. Here we're all the same. Outsiders. Foreigners. With one face and one color, dancing around the chairs in hopes that when the music stops we'll claim a seat for our own. Half the announcements over the loud speakers are repeated in Spanish. Occasionally a call is made for someone, anyone, to step up to various windows and translate in German, in Arabic. Miniature surveillance cameras bolted above each window shaped like oversize electronic eyeballs scrutinize our every move. I wait. Finally, my number is told to go to Window 19.

I pass my ticket under the glass window to the ebony-skinned girl with glasses in the tight uniform. "I never received my greencard and the stamp in my passport expires in six days." I hand over the year-old letter which says: "You are deemed to be a lawful permanent resident of the United States and your new alien registration receipt card will be mailed to you within six months." It is creased and slightly yellow with a few grease stains. I'd had it stuck on the side of my fridge, proving my right to be here, to work and play with impunity.

She glances at my alien number and types it into the computer. "It was sent to 732 Turk Avenue, then returned to the INS office, held for three months and destroyed," she says in a flat monotone as though she's reading an old shopping list rather than my death sentence.

"Turk Avenue! It's 732 Tenth Avenue. Everything else was mailed there without any problem. Why wasn't I notified? They destroyed it?"

"You never picked it up." She glances at her watch. Waiting for her coffee break.

"I didn't know!" I can barely breathe and my eyes are hot.

"Fill this out and send it here." She circles the Vermont address with a blue ballpoint pen. "You don't have to pay the fee. They'll notify you in three months with an appointment and you'll have to come back down and apply again." She looks over my shoulder. "Next?"

"Wait! What about my passport?"

"Just don't leave the country," she says. "Next!"

I take my paperwork and stumble into the hallway. I step into an elevator, then run out of the building without even putting on my coat. I march down Broadway towards the subway like I have pistons in my ankle boots.

On the subway home, my anger dissipates. This is just another part of the process. At least I'm still here. At least I didn't have to go in for Special Registration. At least English is my first language and I'm better off than half the other baffled immigrants there.

I send out the form the next day, Certified Mail. Two weeks later a big envelope arrives for me postmarked Vermont. It's my application, unprocessed, and demanding a check for \$135.

I send it out again, check enclosed. A week later, another envelope arrives. I have to return in person to the INS.

I get up the following morning at 3 am. I'm going to get in line by 5:30 am, get in by 8 am, and get out before 10 am. That, anyway, is the plan.

I turn on the radio and listen to the BBC as I get dressed and fill up my thermos with tea. It's the first day of the war. The U.S. has been bombing Iraq for six hours straight, surprising everyone with their unprecedented daytime attack. Terrorist alert in New York has been pushed to full throttle. 'Operation Atlas' has gone into effect.

Tomorrow is the deadline for Special Registration for all males age 16 and older from Iran, Iraq, Libya, Sudan, Syria, Bangladesh, Egypt, Indonesia, Jordan, Kuwait, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, Algeria, Bahrain, Eritrea, Lebanon, Morocco, North Korea, Oman, Qatar, Somalia, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen. The list grows daily, divided into four groups each with their own fluctuating deadlines. Soon it will encompass all countries outside of the United States. My mother called me yesterday to tell me to be careful: the Prime Minister of Canada has joined France and Russia saying that he, too, is against this war. She tells me Canadians are afraid of how the U.S. will retaliate against them.

I speed-walk in the dark towards the subway. The line is bound to be over the Brooklyn Bridge by the time I make it down there. If I wait long enough I can probably step into line right outside my front door.

There's a delay on the train, a police investigation at Wall Street. Clusters of heavily armed men in bulky head-to-toe camouflage roam the underground tunnels. I keep thinking that a skirmish will break out, that some Latino kid will get a round through his chest for reaching for his CD player. They'll say they thought it was a gun or a bomb and they'll get medals from the mayor. A man with blue-black skin leans against the door in a mustard Carhartt jacket with the American flag sewn on its sleeve. He's a patriot, despite the strong possibility that his country of origin is on the list of people the government is madly fingerprinting and keeping close tabs on.

I arrive at Chambers Street at 6:30 am and I sprint towards Broadway. I'm out of breath by the time I get to Worth Street but there are merely 150 people waiting. The line seems like it's moving more quickly than usual. At the entrance to the tent, the wind picks up to a hearty gale. I start shivering, violently. Two tall dark-skinned men behind me tell me to move by the wall. They stand in front of me buffeting the bitter wind with their bodies. I start feeling warmer immediately.

We make it inside the newly repaired tent, the ceiling heaters blasting hot air over our heads. In the three weeks that I've been away they've made improvements. Now instead of a random crowd, there are four lines. One of my protectors asks me where I'm from. His voice is deep with an English accent. I like his face: taut maple skin, cheekbones like jutting cliffs.

"Canada," I say.

"Canada?" he repeats in disbelief. He shakes his head.

"Where are you from?" I ask.

"Pakistan," he says with a smile. "If I may ask, why are you here?"

I give a brief summary of all my previous visits.

"And you?" I ask.

"Special Registration."

"Aren't you scared?" I blurt. I think how I'd put off my visit until the very last minute.

"No. It's just for all those illegal immigrants. It's a good thing."

He seems convinced that the system will take care of him, or maybe he's trying to convince himself of it.

The line moves forward. He talks to his friend in Pakistani as we move through the revolving glass doors. The security officer on the other end of the metal detector tells me to take out my thermos. They've never stopped me for it before. But now the long silver bullet-shaped thermos looks like it could be carrying plutonium. I haven't touched my tea this morning and the thermos is still full.

"Open it up!" he orders.

I unscrew the top. He looks inside and sniffs.

"Drink it!" he says.

I pour a little into the shaking lid and I take a sip. It scalds my lips.

"Drink faster!" he says, and I let the liquid burn my throat and he commands me to close it up and move out of the way.

Then I'm back on that familiar route to the third floor. The Pakistanis I met announce to the security guard at the door that they're here for Special Registration. They're sternly sent off in the opposite direction. I worry about them before I get my number, and then I just worry about myself.

Room 301 is strangely empty. They call me to Window 17 in only 35 minutes. I begin to explain my situation to the pasty-skinned clerk, showing him my rejected Vermont applications.

"Vermont?" he says. "Why'd you send it there? All I-90 forms are processed here in New York."

"When I was here last month, the clerk I spoke to told me to send it there."

"Who told you that? Nobody here would tell you that."

I never got that clerk's name. Not that it would matter since she'd only deny she said what she said. It would be my word against hers. And here, like the Vatican, I'm sure they look after their own. Mistakes are only made by people on this side of the Plexiglas window.

He fills out a new form and passes it to me with a photocopied sheet of instructions.

"Fill out the form and mail it in. No need to pay the fee," he says, his gaze already moving on to the person behind me.

"But I have filled it in. It's all ready to go. Here," I say, and I push the paperwork back at him.

"No. You have to mail it in. I can't take that," he says.

So I leave, reading the photocopied instructions as I get on the elevator.

I go to the Peace Rally in Times Square. People are crammed onto the sidewalks under scaffolding. They carry dripping placards and sagging banners. Cops in riot gear and on horseback--practically one for each protester--herd the crowd behind metal gates. And yet the mood is buoyant, electric. A mini-parade of dancing protesters wind their way down Broadway beating time with spoons on plastic buckets. I stop to watch. A cop yells at me to move along. Commuters push past me, angry that the protesters are making their journey home more difficult. It seems fruitless and yet we are still here.

ABOUT SHARON KWIK

Former service industry peon, Sharon Kwik is June Cleaver by day, [citizen journalist](#) by night. She lives on the edge of Bed-Stuy, Brooklyn, New York.