

**Escaping *From*, Not Traveling *To****Nonfiction*

People do not migrate illegally because they hate their jobs or resent their government; nor do they arrive somewhere illegally with dreams of utopia or wealth. Instead, they're fleeing profound poverty, starvation, violence, or loss of human liberties and are in search of safety. These are truths I've had to haul continually into mind as I've considered countries where I'd seek asylum if I were forced to leave the United States. The crucial word here is *forced*: white, middle-class, cis-gendered — I haven't yet been threatened or forced by my government into anything dire. Even as a female, I'm relatively secure — so far.

Without much thought, then, I came up with two countries suitable for asylum: France and Canada — specifically, Paris and Vancouver, British Columbia. Paris is a sentimental choice: at twenty, I studied there through my university's education abroad program. I have warm memories of interesting coursework, magnificent culture, and coffee and pastries in cafés. I was aware of French discrimination against Algerians, but it was not happening to me.

Vancouver is a practical choice: I live in Alaska, where Canada is separate from me by a land border but connected with the wildlife and climate I love; plus, Vancouverites are friendly to Americans (so far) and speak my mother tongue. What's more, Canada accepted men escaping the Vietnam War draft in the '60s and '70s. So there's a precedent for granting asylum to Americans. Incidentally, I also have fond memories of visiting Vancouver and Victoria when I was a child.

Thus I decided that seeking asylum in either of these two countries would be easy. Besides being white, cis, and middle class, I own my condo and car outright and have no outstanding debts. I'm single with no dependents and suffer from no serious health problems. I'm retired, so I don't even have a job to quit. Plus I have a current passport. I'm ready to go, by land or air. I choose not to go by water because I find cruise ships claustrophobic.

Then I remembered the all-important word, *force*. Being "forced to flee" involves speed: the faster I get out, the more likely it is I will be safe. I wouldn't have time to sell my condo and car for extra money. Although I have income and savings, both are small and wouldn't get me far — especially if I had to rely on planes or, unthinkably, human traffickers. Being forced to flee involves chaos and violence: jammed



roads and persecution from people who want me to conform or disappear. It certainly wouldn't involve choosing my mode of travel.

My cat (although her safety may seem negligible in comparison to human life) is important to me and to my well-being. Cats are territorial; they don't travel well. Even if I decided to take her with me, I wouldn't have time to research French or Canadian rules for entry to these countries with an animal. Veterinary documents would certainly be required, and my cat is an Animal Control rescue with incurable and communicable feline herpes. I would have to leave her here, but with her illness, I'd have trouble finding someone to re-adopt her. I'd also have little time to search. If I had to emigrate illegally, human traffickers would not let me bring a pet.

Then there's me: despite my advantages, I'm over sixty. Most of my skills are connected with the liberal arts. I've had temporary jobs as an English teacher in universities, freelance jobs in editing, and full-time jobs in the clerical and service sectors. But my computer skills are limited and out of date. None of this makes me a likely job prospect. I might be able to get work teaching in Vancouver while studying for a credential, but with its overcrowded and expensive housing market, I'd have no place to live.

With regard to Paris, I doubt my French is fluent enough for me to teach English there or to translate English works into French. The work I'd get would be low-paying, like dishwashing or housecleaning. So much for café au lait and croissants. Besides, like an increasing number of European countries, France might be unwilling to accept any immigrants; if masses of Americans were suddenly to seek asylum in Paris or Calais, they might be turned back.

Perhaps I should seek asylum in countries of my heritage: Hungary, Wales, and Germany. Surely they'd accept relatives by blood — however distant. But I don't speak or understand Hungarian, and the CBC recently reported that the government there regards immigrants as “invaders.” I can read some literary German but not much else. (*Zeitgeist*, *Weltschmerz*, and *Ding an sich* aren't really of use in everyday communication.) Meanwhile, Germany's current coalition government is battling within itself over immigration issues. There's Wales, but as part of the United Kingdom, it might be caught up in the “Brexit” anti-immigration mood.

All these calculations of mine would become minor details if I were in a horrific situation (as many of the South American migrants are who've crossed into the United States). Whether it were legal or practical, I'd have to get out, and I'd have little chance to prepare for my journey, to say goodbye to those I cared for, or to land in a country of my choosing.



In the end I've answered only half the question: *where* I would choose to seek asylum, not *how* I'd deal with problems once I got there. That's because the two countries I've chosen — Canada and France — are ones with which I'm comfortable. They are my fantasy asylums. Right now — today — I'm angry, ashamed, and worried about where the United States is headed, but unlike all those migrants crossing all those dangerous borders all over the world I'm not yet desperate to leave. By the time I do become desperate it will likely be too late, and I will have to survive on the streets or in whatever camp I'm placed — this is an ugly reality that the twenty-first century threatens to accept as the norm. Still, I love my country; I want to believe “It Can't Happen Here.” So, unlike those plans I've made for earthquakes, heavy snow days, and sub-zero temperatures, I defer preparations for exile.

What I've written sounds hollow. Much of it deals with trivialities. But it's the security within the trivial that forced migrants are missing. I can feel sympathy, but without experiencing that life — with its grinding routine alongside terrifying unpredictability — can I internalize it? It's a question I must ask myself as I read the news and witness crying emigrant children on YouTube.

There's a bench that straddles the border between Alaska and the Yukon Territories in Canada. Perhaps if I drove there, sat on the Canada side, no one would notice. If I were reading a novel by Atwood or Ondaatje I might be taken for Canadian and allowed to get up and walk on through. More likely, I'll continue to put things off. By the time I make it up to the Yukon, there will be walls all around America, keeping *us* in rather than *them* out, and I'll be sitting on half a bench with automatic weapons pointed at me from my side.

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