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# THE GOOD MEN PROJECT

## You Came from Canada, eh?

July 13, 2010 By [Jon Papernick](#)



*Jon Papernick is an immigrant. From Canada. It's not as easy as it sounds.*

In the middle of one of his age-appropriate tantrums, my 4-year-old son said to me: “Daddy, I don’t like you. You’re an alien.”

I imagine my son had in mind a creature from the deep reaches of outer space, bent on world domination—a bad guy, for sure. But, as a new immigrant to this country, it struck me that my blond, blue-eyed son, born in America, may actually be speaking a greater truth than he could possibly know.

When I tell people that I am a newly-minted American citizen, they laugh as if I’ve made a joke—I don’t look like a new immigrant, I don’t speak with an accent, and I don’t like soccer. When I respond that I was born in Canada, the inevitable reaction is generally: “Well, that doesn’t really count.”

Trust me, it counts.

Like my forefathers a century ago who came across the sea in steerage in search of greater opportunity, I was in search of something that I felt I could not find in my native land. I may have spent most of the first twenty-seven years of my life living just a hundred miles from the U.S. border (watching American television, listening to American music), but when it came to getting a job and setting up a life here, as far as the U.S. government was concerned, I may as well have come from another planet.



When I crossed the border at the Peace Bridge at Buffalo, New York in late August 1998, my father’s Jeep Cherokee stuffed to the rafters, a futon and second-hand bicycle on the roof, and a folder of duplicate bank statements showing that I had twice as much money as I really had, I knew I was setting out on the great adventure of my life.

I felt like I was leaving behind a home that was gradually slipping into the Second World—Canadian identity, if not its very sovereignty, was in question. The Canadian dollar had just dropped to \$.62 US (with no floor in sight), one quarter of Canada’s beloved NHL hockey teams had just moved south, and a referendum by Quebec separatists on the future of a unified Canada had narrowly failed.

I was attending one of the best MFA programs in creative writing in the country, and I was determined to find a way to leave behind my family’s home for four generations and stay and succeed in America. My father had even hyperbolically said, “There’s nothing here for you. You don’t need to come back.”

Aside from all my friends, family, beloved Toronto Blue Jays, and a healthcare system that would take care of me no matter how impoverished, my father was absolutely right. I was determined to become a successful published writer on a larger scale than was possible in Canada.

I wanted something much more than to simply become “world famous in Canada.” How many people below the 49th parallel have actually heard of the Tragically Hip, Stompin’ Tom Connors, or the Trailer Park Boys? They may be gods in Canada, but I wanted at least the possibility of something more.

Over the next few years, I worked hard and wrote a book that landed me an agent and a book deal. I did everything I could to remain in the country with legal status. I had an advanced degree, and I took a job as a fourth grade assistant teacher at a private school in Brooklyn, making \$24,000 a year, living “the dream” in one of the most expensive cities in the world.

I was granted an H1B visa, which allowed me to remain legally in the country as long as I stayed at the same job. Poverty, be damned. Then, like a lightning bolt, I met the love of my life in a bar on the Lower East Side, the woman I would soon marry. And that’s where the story ends—most people, including myself, assumed.



I don’t feel the need to enumerate the many Kafkaesque mishaps that occurred to Alien #095937224 over the next ten years, as the INS was absorbed by the massively dysfunctional Department of Homeland Security. Harrowing tales of an impenetrable bureaucracy are nothing new, except that to every question I had regarding my immigration status I was regularly told by officials that citizenship was a privilege, not a right—basically, to suck it up and deal.

On a brutally frigid December day more than eleven years after crossing the Peace Bridge, I sat in Boston’s historic Faneuil Hall, the cradle of liberty, to recite my oath of citizenship. I was struck by the different faces of all those around me, surely many of whom had far more harrowing tales to tell than mine. Some were refugees, some were lucky lottery winners—all were seeking a better life.

The presiding judge of my citizenship ceremony eerily resembled Sandra Day O’Connor, and she proclaimed with her patrician Mayflower accent, “You are equal to, and as important as all Americans. In some ways you are more so because *you have made the choice* to become a citizen of the United States.”

I remember being told as I handed back my green card that one of the benefits of being a citizen is that nobody on the street has the right to ask for my citizenship papers—this isn’t Russia after all, someone beside me quipped.

And yet, it seemed I could not have picked a worse time to become a citizen. If the 20th century was America’s century, marked by innovation, worldwide leadership, and a deep-rooted belief in American exceptionalism, then the 21st-century is starting to look like America’s days as a shining city upon a hill are coming to an end.

With the attacks of 9/11, Hurricane Katrina, two seemingly endless wars, jobs disappearing overseas, the financial crash, loss of faith in government, the ongoing oil disaster in the Gulf, and increasing xenophobia, the American dream is under attack.

Now, just six months into my life as an American, I feel equal parts pride and shame to be part of this great experiment in freedom and democracy. It seems that the traumatic events of the last decade have done so much damage to Americans' psyches that the very nature of American values and the republic itself is changing.



As someone who struggled to become a legal citizen of this country, I have my own strong feelings about illegal immigration, but I could never support overturning the 14th Amendment, meant to target children of those here illegally, which lawmakers in Arizona are attempting to reverse—a law that grants citizenship to anyone born within the United States.

Other measures being taken by the Arizona state government in which US citizens are required to prove citizenship are equally distressing. What is shocking is that 70% of Arizonans support these new show-me-your-papers measures. A frightening conflation of legal and illegal immigrants puts even the most law-abiding new citizen in the crosshairs.

Senator Joe Lieberman has gone so far as to propose a bill that would strip U.S. citizens of their Miranda rights if they are *accused* of terrorism: no presumption of innocence. This ascendant anti-immigration climate has even created a congressional candidate in New Mexico who has proposed using land mines to defend the US-Mexico border.

More shocking still is the Birther Movement and the state of our presidency. Polls show roughly half of Republicans still believe that President Obama is not actually an American citizen. He is the president of the United States, yet his legitimacy is in question.

Indeed, change has come to America. But what does this kind of change say to people like me who, unlike our president, really weren't born in this country? Emma Lazarus' famous lines of verse *give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free*, now sound sadly quaint as many would-be immigrants migrate from alien to alienation.

I will continue to do my small part in helping to form a more perfect union, and I can only hope that my sons grow up in a country in which they can be proud.

—Jon Papernick's new short story collection, [\*There Is No Other\*](#), has just been published. *Y'all should buy it.*