The borders I crossed

I wanted to become a respected scientist, maybe not a Nobel Prize winner but someone who is capable of making a decent contribution. I started by studying biochemistry at the University of Bucharest. I graduated less than a year after the end of Nicolae Ceaușescu’s dictatorship. Free to see the world for the first time, I was eager to get a Ph.D. in the United States. My father, a biology teacher who referred to all trees by their scientific names and often explored the neighboring Măcin Mountains with his students, encouraged me to go.

When I was young, borders were serious, scary things. Crossing the first border required a passport—banned during the dictatorship—a student visa, and a one-way ticket that cost the equivalent of my father’s yearly income. I bought my ticket, Bucharest to New York, using three bricks of devalued Romanian currency provided by the Soros Foundation. I waved goodbye to my family at the airport. The first border was the hardest; for the rest of my life, I just pushed my way across them.

I became a graduate student at the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey. For 6 years, I studied relentlessly—signal transduction in yeast—and adapted to a new culture. Crossing the boundary into another discipline, I became a postdoc at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center (MSKCC). It was—an extraordinary place, full of enthusiasm, sharp minds, and state-of-the-art resources focused on understanding and curing cancer. There I met Amore, the postdoc from Rome with pistachio-green eyes. We got married, had a baby, and became permanent residents.

I left Australia more than a year ago to return to City of Hope for a job I could not refuse. Most of the projects I started in Melbourne had achieved their goal. My family fell apart, but that’s another story. I left Amore behind and resettled with my daughter in Los Angeles.

Looking back from midcareer, those borders seem much less scary.

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