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“Coloring outside the Lines”

I have a very distinct childhood memory about coloring *inside* the lines. It takes place exactly 15 years ago, give or take a few days. I am 6 years old and sitting at my desk in first grade working diligently, with my nose down close to my work and my fingers wrapped tightly around my colored pencil. The February sun leaked into the room and streams of light sliced the room in half as they stretched across the space through the open windows.

I was only momentarily distracted by that scene. I *noticed* it - a diagonal *interruption* to the parallel rows of desks in the room – but I immediately turned back to more significant matters.

Confidently armed with my box of colored pencils, I started the assignment for that afternoon: coloring in one of the photocopied drawings of the Mexican flag, in preparation for *El Día de la Bandera*, the day of the flag, on February 23rd. Public school patriotism for the first-graders.

I patiently and carefully traced all along the inside of the lines first, making a *safe boundary* of color, *following* the lines, before filling the area in with deep green or strong red. The middle? I meticulously colored in with *almost perfect* tones of *eaglefeather*-brown and *lakewater*-blue, using a history book to guide me in my color choices. Careful not to succumb to hastiness (which could only result in a less than perfect final product) I continued my labor in complete absorption.

That work was soon and suddenly disturbed, however.

My teacher broke into my concentration, loudly rebuking another student for her remarkably bad coloring skills. She, “*colored the eagle purple??*” And “*look all the places you colored outside the lines!*”

I remember her reaching for my flag and showing it to the class as an example of what they *should* be doing.

Well.

I *always* was great at coloring inside the lines. I *understood* them. Lines are for *following*. They shape areas, and if you respect them you can create something beautiful.

I could follow them *meticulously*. I could color them right in, without missing a beat, neatly, correctly, efficiently, deftly, effortlessly, obediently. I could fill them with beautiful colors. *All the right colors.*

Since that day, I've encountered many new lines. One of the most poignant lines is the line that separates that place where I lived 15 years ago to the place where I live now. I keep wanting to cross it though, and that's quite the ordeal. You better have a very good reason for crossing over *this* line.

Lines are for following. They shape areas. And they're for respecting. When we get to the point of crossing, we are met by an immigration officer. He asks the routine questions: where are you coming from? Where are you going? What will you do there? Can I see your passports? Do you have anything to declare?

We're used to the questioning. Dad has our passports in hand, opened to the pages with our American visas. "Good evening, officer. We're coming from Hermosillo. We're headed to Tucson. We live there. I work there. Here is my worker's permit. Here are my family's documents. I have nothing to declare."

The officer looked at our visas. He asked once more: are you sure? If you say you have nothing to declare and I find something in your car, I have the power to fine you *thousands* of dollars. You have to declare plants, food, anything you may be carrying."

"I have nothing to declare, officer. "

The officer insisted once more. "Are you sure? I have the power, and I *will* use it. I can fine you five thousand dollars the moment I find something I don't like. Any vegetables, fruits, anything. You *know* what a plant is right?"

My eyes shot to the officer's face. His arrogance was, unfortunately, familiar.

Then I looked up at my dad through the rearview mirror. The lines of expression on my dad's face were subtle. The coloring of his face, however, was manifest. As was all of ours. It was a dark color, strongly penciled in with *foreigners' skin*-brown.

I admired the patience and serenity of his demeanor, yet felt such impotence in that forced interaction between the officer and us. Or rather... between residential status, and us? Or is it between the lines and us? And choosing when to cross, what to cross, and knowing what you *better not cross*?

It makes no difference to that officer that my father is a biologist, that he can not only tell what a plant is, but can differentiate every plant that he saw in the biome that surrounds him, can give him the family it belongs to if not its exact scientific name, and can name all the different parts of the organism, as well as explain to him the chemical reactions that are at work inside of it, what they're composed of, how they may nourish livestock...

"I have nothing to declare, officer."

In the end, he sent us to be searched anyways. We wasted close to an hour just in search. He found nothing. We left the border again, going home again, after countless times...

It is a shame how perfectly we pick up on these lines, structures, expectations, norms. The officer who inspected us acted in that manner because he was able to follow those lines as well. We reward those who follow the lines. They are welcomed into the community. The rules make things orderly.

But sometimes, we must learn to interrupt those lines. Yes, know and respect the rules, but so that you can know *when* it is that you should break them. There's a time for everything. Lines are important. They can be beautiful. They give shape and form. They inform. They create order.

But, should we always stay within those lines?