How do academics choose what they study? Many of my political-science colleagues will offer professional answers: what they work on is “at the core of the scholarly debate in the field,” or alternatively, the subject has been “undertheorized” and there is a “gap in the literature”; or they will give the increasingly common response, “there is a great data set to work with.” Usually that’s where the conversation stops. Push a little more, though, and some will confess that the initial spark of interest may have been more personal — a particular life experience or event that left a lasting impression. But for the most part, professors strain to depersonalize what they do, maintaining the veneer of professional detachment and scholarly objectivity.

For most of my career, I carefully followed that academic script. When asked why I study border policing, I would dryly reply that it provides analytical insight into how states cope with the stresses and strains of territorial control in an increasingly globalized world; or when asked why I’m interested in cross-border smuggling, I’d reply that the illicit side of globalization receives too little attention from international-relations scholars despite its growing importance. Those sorts of safe answers helped me get funded to do dissertation fieldwork on the U.S.–Mexico border, secure a good job at a research university, win grants and fellowships, and ultimately, get tenure.

The answers were truthful, but they conveniently obscured as much as they revealed — so much so that I myself didn’t dwell much on the deeper, personal truth, which I perhaps subconsciously feared might make me professionally suspect.

My childhood was defined by a chaotic life of clandestine border crossings. My mother, a traditional 1950s Mennonite housewife who became a ‘60s radical feminist and Marxist revolutionary, abducted me when I was a young boy during a bitter custody battle with my father. We fled across state lines and national borders, constantly moving and hiding. Between the ages of five and eleven, I attended more than a dozen schools and lived in more than a dozen homes, moving from the comfortably
Gambling that the soldiers would overlook the innocent-looking eight-year-old gringo at her side, my mother had hidden this poster in my belongings, determined to smuggle this political memento out of the country as a last little act of defiance.

I did my best not to look nervous. While the soldiers patted my mother down and rifled through her luggage, I held my breath, avoided eye contact, and stared at my feet. They simply waved me through. I had no idea what they would have done if they had caught me, maybe just confiscate the poster, but I was glad to not find out.

Later, my mother used me to help her smuggle large wads of cash into Mexico as we headed south to evade an arrest warrant for my kidnapping. She had sewn extra pockets inside our pants to hide the money and keep it safe. As we walked across the border bridge from El Paso into Juárez, I was flattered by my mother’s trust in me, but the bulky pile of crisp $100 bills in my pants, poking out around my waist, made me self-conscious. Could the Mexican border guards standing lazily to the side as we went through the metal gate tell I was moving awkwardly? Fortunately, there was no inspection of any sort going into Mexico.

More than a decade later, right after graduating from college, I bummed around Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia for four months with my girlfriend. During that trip, I became a smuggler’s accomplice. As we crossed from Peru into Bolivia, a friendly old lady sheepishly asked me to store a bag full of toilet paper under my seat. I didn’t understand until the border guards began confiscating smuggled toilet paper from the passengers. The toilet-paper demand came from the Bolivian cocaine industry, where it was commonly used to dry and filter coca paste that was then transported to remote jungle laboratories to be refined into powder cocaine. Most of that would eventually end up in the noses of American consumers.

A few weeks later, we caught a ride on a cargo boat traveling down the Amazon River from Iquitos, Peru, to Leticia, Colombia, a bustling jungle town at the convergence of Peru, Colombia, and Brazil, which owed much of its existence to smuggling. Late at night before our departure, I watched as several dozen drums of chemicals were quietly loaded onto our boat; they were offloaded in the middle of nowhere before we reached Leticia.