

“Proof of Innocence” by Andrés Neuman

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Yes. I like being interrogated by the police. We all need for them to verify our innocence, to confirm that we have paid our dues and can move along. That’s why I love feeling like I’m beyond reproach and demonstrating how well-mannered I am, convincing them that it wasn’t me.



*“We are here to look after you”
Photo courtesy of Buenos Aires Street Art.*

One drives without thinking about it, letting oneself go, just like others go through life unaware of it. I find peace in the obedience of the steering wheel, the naturalness of the pedals, the breathing of the gears. And while I handle them all, or rather allow them to handle themselves, I think of the police, of when they’ll stop me again and verify that, yes, I’m on the straight and narrow, that I really am a good citizen. Ah! The wide open road.

Suddenly, two officers signal me to pull over. It’s not an easy maneuver because I just started to accelerate in the left lane coming out of a curve. Making sure to avoid any sudden move that might startle the drivers around me and—Why not admit it?—showcasing my skillful driving, I glide onto the right lane and come to a gentle stop on the shoulder. The officers imitate my maneuver, their motorcycles tilting to the side as they come to a standstill. Both wear white-and-blue checkered helmets. Both wear boots that pound the pavement forcefully. Both are properly armed. One is wide of girth and carries himself upright. The other is tall and walks stooped over.

“License and registration,” says the wide one.

“Sure, right away,” I reply.

I hand over my documentation: license and registration. I identify myself.

“Aha,” opines the tall one, examining my documentation.

“Yes ...?” I ask with eager interest.

“Aha!” confirms the wide one energetically.

“So ...?”

“Yes, all good.”

“Everything in order, then?”

“Like we just said, sir: all good.”

“In other words, my documentation is free of any irregularities.”

“Irregularities? What do you mean?”

“Ah, well, officer, just asking. I understand then, or should I say, you understand then that there isn't any reason why I shouldn't be allowed to move along.”

The officers glance at each other, with a certain degree of suspicion in their eyes, I'd say.

“You'll move along when we tell you to,” says the wide one.

“Naturally,” I immediately reply. “Naturally.”

“Ok, then ...”

They seem doubtful.

“Yes? ...” I decide to be helpful. “Perhaps you have some more questions for me? Or maybe you'd care to have a look in the trunk ... ?”

“Listen here,” says the wide one, “don't tell us what to do!”

The tall one lifts his head up like a turtle contemplating the sun for the very first time, and hooks a hand around his partner's arm, trying to calm him down.

“And you! Let go of me!” says the wide one. “Or are we now going to have to inspect whatever this guy tells us to?”

“By all means, officer, by all means,” I interject. “It's clear you both know exactly what you must do. The last thing I would dream of doing ...”

“The last thing for what? What are you insinuating?”

“Nothing, officer, nothing. I'm only trying to collaborate.”

“Well, don't collaborate so much. It isn't necessary.”

“As you wish, officer.”

“That's better,” says the wide one, pleased.

"At your orders," I add.

"Ok, ok!"

"Do whatever you feel the situation calls for. I'm in no rush, so you can relax."

"We *are* relaxed. We are always relaxed, I'll have you know."

"Of course! I never doubted it."

The wide one looks over at the tall one. The tall one, his head drooping, remains quiet.

"Are you joking or what?" asks the wide one.

"Me, officer?"

"No. My paralytic grandmother."

"Heaves, officer! I applaud your sense of humor."

"Turn around," the wide one orders brusquely.

"How's that, officer?"

"Turn around, I said." And then, addressing the tall one, "I don't like this guy one bit."

"I assure you, officers, I understand your position completely," I say, a bit nervously. "I know that you are only trying to protect us and I accept that that requires you to frisk me ..."

"Hands on the vehicle."

"Yes, officer."

"Spread your legs wide."

"Yes, officer."

"And shut your mouth."

"Yes, officer."

The wide one, apparently quick to anger, knees me powerfully in the ribs, and I feel a ring of fire flare up inside me.

"I told you to shut up, imbecile."

I'm frisked. Then the two officers distance themselves a few meters. They converse. I hear a phrase here and there. The chassis of my automobile begins to burn the palms of my hands. The sun beams strike me like spears.

“What do you think?” I hear the wide one say. “Should we check the trunk?”

I’m unable to make out the tall one’s reply, but I deduce that he responded in the affirmative because, almost immediately, I see, out of the corner of my eye, the wide one open the trunk and begin to roughly rummage about inside. He throws my backpack to the ground. My toolbox, too. My warning lights. A football that bounces down the highway. The officers carry out their duties with meticulous thoroughness.

“There’s nothing here,” says the wide one with a hint of annoyance. “Should we check inside?”

Immediately, they both enter my vehicle and inspect the seats, the upholstery, the glove compartment, and the ashtrays. They make a mess of it. I dare, for the first time, to interject a timid objection:

“Excuse me, officers, but is such emphasis necessary?”

The wide one crawls out of the car, shoots me look and then jabs his nightstick between my shoulder blades. For an instant, I feel like I’m floating. I fall to my knees.

“What do you have to say now, eh? What do you have to say?” the wide one barks in my ear.

“I assure you, officer,” I stammer, “I have nothing to hide.”

“Oh, no?”

“No.”

“No?”

“I said no!”

“Don’t talk back to me, then!” the wide one screams, giving me a sharp kick to the buttocks. “I know all about scoundrels like you: I have a sixth sense that never fails me. You pretend to be all proper but you are nothing but a fraudster.”

“Officer, I assure you in all honesty ...”

“Shut up, you son of a bitch!” the wide one yells again. This time, though, he doesn’t hit me .

Automobiles continue to speed by us like the wind. All the while, the tall one continues going through my car silently.

“Aha!” the tall one suddenly calls out enthusiastically; his voice sounds oddly high-pitched to me. “Check this out,” he says, handing his partner the briefcase with the company’s monthly bills.

“Where did you find it?”

“Under the front passenger seat.”

“What is it? Open it. Can’t you? Give it to me. It must be one of those with a combination.” And, after trying to force it open, he exclaims: “Like I said. You think you’re so smart.”

I would more than gladly tell him the combination; inside there are simply routine accounting documents. But at this point, I’m too terrified to open my mouth.

“Let’s arrest him,” suggests the tall one. “We’ll open the briefcase down at the station.”

The wide one begins to slowly handcuff me.

“Officers, you’re making a mistake!” I say in a last ditch effort. “I don’t have a prior record. I’m not up to no good. I’m inoffensive. I’m like anyone else.”

“We’ll see about that, smart guy,” says the tall one.

They force me into the backseat of my car. They remain outside and call someone on their radio. My shoulders hurt. My head aches, also. There’s a burning sensation in my ribs. A nasal voice is heard over the radio. I don’t like this at all. The automobiles continue zipping past like the wind. I’m unsure if I should say something. In the distance, I hear the sound of my football bursting.



Translated by Dario Bard from “La Prueba de Inocencia” as printed in Alumbramiento, published by Páginas de Espuma, 2006, available from [Amazon](#).

Andrés Neuman is a writer, poet and translator born in Buenos Aires in 1977 and presently residing in Granada, Spain. He has been recognized by the Hay Festival and Granta magazine as one of the best young Spanish-language writers of his generation; he also contributed several English-language columns for [Granta](#). He has written several short story and poetry collections, as well as a number of prize-winning novels, the latest of which has been translated into English and is available from Amazon.com under the title [Traveler of the Century](#). The blog Work in Progress includes a translation by Richard Gwyn of a Neuman short story, “[Mother Backwards](#).”

More information available at [Andrés Neuman’s official website](#) and on a [Facebook fan page](#). He also frequently posts new material at his blog, [Microrréplicas](#).

In addition to Gwyn's translation, the blog Work in Progress includes an interesting English-language interview with Neuman in which he discusses his latest novel, Traveler of the Century, and which I have taken the liberty of reposting below:

<http://youtu.be/DB-qHwvHSsw>