Canada Customs - the front line of funny Col. #7

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They're getting tricky at the border these days, asking odd questions way beyond citizenship, destination and purpose of your trip. Headed for the racetrack at Saratoga Springs, New York this past summer, I entered the United States with my buddy Dan. After the usual flash photo and passport exchange, the female customs officer said to me: "How do you know him?"

"Well," I said, first looking at Dan and then the officer and laughing nervously, "it's kinda complicated."

Wrong answer. Now the woman with raised eyebrows and the holstered gun is looking at me like she's expecting an answer that involves either a gay marriage or a very strange adoption arrangement.

"Well, a long time ago I was married to his sister but I'm not now but he still thinks he's my brother-in-law so once and awhile I take him on a road trip just to keep him happy."

That broke her up. She was still laughing when she handed me back the passports and added: "Probably been easier to stay married."

And off we went to the races. That's how it's supposed to work. They ask questions, you give good answers and lickety-split, you're through. According to Bob, a retired customs officer and the source for the following border exchanges, it doesn't always go smoothly. Some of these answers and questions came from people entering Canada for the first time and others from Canadians returning home. (Bob has already denied knowing me.)

Officer: "Where do you live?"

Young tongue-thickened man: "Fishhook."

Officer: "Fishhook?"

Kid: "Yeah, Fishhook. It's at the end of the line, stupid."

Officer: "Okay, pull over. Secondary inspection."

The childishness of today's kids is appalling, obviously unable to handle their alcohol. Why, when we were coming back from over the river, ripped and underage, our standard response was Balls Falls. (This actually exists in Niagara!) Balls Falls? Yeah, it's near Pecker's Point. Okay, pull over. And back then, they would also call your parents.

A young man once explained to Bob why the floor of his car was covered with marijuana seeds: "I had the window down and they blew in from the expressway."

On another occasion Bob's female colleague found several hunks of hash in the underwear of a woman returning to Canada. Explanation: "I don't know how they got there. These aren't even my underwear!"

An no, that man and that woman were not travelling together.

Sometimes Americans entering Canada are confused about the questions. Officer to an American who said he was coming over to his cottage in Canada: "What's the length of your stay in Canada?"

American: "Not too big. Maybe thirty feet by forty."

All officers ask the standard question: "And the purpose of your visit to Canada is pleasure?"

Man, immediately and straight-faced: "Oh, no. I'm on my way to visit my mother-in-law."

Sometimes it's a bit of an accent that causes the problem.

Inspector: "What are you bringing into Canada?"

Driver: "Some poo."

Inspector: "Some poo?"

Driver: "Yes, some poo."

Inspector: "And that's for fertilizer."

Driver: "No it's for washing hair."

Woman: "Excuse me, are you a Canadian?"

Officer: "Yes."

Woman" "No, I mean a Royal Canadian."

A good rule of thumb is that customs officers are normally sitting down and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police are usually on horseback.

Customs officials also get a lot of questions over the phone. Believe it or not, the most common is: "What is the most satisfactory method of smuggling goods across the border?" Hey, you might as well give it a shot!

Question: "How fast do your speed cops go? In Celsius?"

Answer: "If they're using wind-powered anti-radar detectors, they can do 200 clicks an hour."

Question: If I bring my dog into Canada, do I need a birth certificate for him?"

Answer: "Heck no. A driver's licence and two pieces of photo I.D. are fine."

Question: "When may I be sure the customs officials are not on duty at the border?"

Answer: "July 1, Canada Day. We close the whole damn country down."

Do customs authorities meet some strange characters in their line of duty? Well, that depends on your definition of strange. In his 30 years of service, Bob has stopped and questioned: King Edward VI driving up in the middle of the afternoon and buck-naked. A 200-pound, four-foot-tall gogo dancer named Twiggy. A guy with a carload of snakes on the loose that he assured Bob, were non-venomous. Bob took his word for it. Saint Peter on a freezing night in January wearing only a robe and carrying a bedroll. (They turned him back when they found a loaded .45 in the bedroll.)

A long time ago they had a woman show up at a Niagara Falls bridge claiming Prime Minister Brian Mulroney was the Agent of Satan and she was going to Ottawa to do God's work. Back then she was a nutcase. Today she'd be a visionary.

So the next time you pull up to the customs booth at any border, remember, the officer has probably had a very long day. Be nice, be clear and you'll be gone.

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