

Featured story:

SOMETHING HAPPENED ON THE WAY TO HANK'S WEDDING

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Every once in a while you start along a path thinking you are safe and have a fair idea of what is in store for you. Then something unexpected happens that shakes up those comforting foundations and your familiar world is in jeopardy. When you get through it, one way or another, you realize your perspectives have changed and that it is a good idea to appreciate the value of some things while you still have them.

I had a good friend who was getting married. We got to know each other well at university and I was happy for him and this new development in his life. Although I didn't know her all that well, they seemed to make a good couple. I was looking forward to being present and part of that very special celebration. I spent some time choosing their gift, putting together the appropriate clothes, checking the times of the routes of the bus. Their wedding was to take place in Ontario and the trip wasn't so far by Canadian standards. Accommodation was reserved, bags packed, all in order.

When the time came I went to the bus station early to buy my return ticket and have a relaxing sit waiting for the bus to pull up. Upon boarding I found a nice window seat at the back. At that time smoking was still permitted on long distance (not city) buses, but restrained to the last half dozen or so rows. I contently watched the various neighbourhoods and areas roll past the window until we were well out of city limits, with longer views of farmland taking their place.

After a long comfortable piece of daydreaming sprinkled with some intermittent dozing off, we were abruptly informed through the PA system that we were to get our passports ready. Still feeling groggy I thought I misunderstood. Since when do we need a passport to travel between cities in the same country by bus?

The bus pulled into a special lane and a couple of customs agents entered, checking people's identification, occasionally asking them questions. I was still disorientated but waited patiently until one of them got to me. When asked to produce my identification I politely responded that when I had bought my bus ticket a mere couple of hours ago, I had had no idea that the bus was going to take a quick shortcut through the States and back up again into Canada. Hence, I didn't think to bring any picture identification. (In Canada you don't need identification to walk around in the streets, or to accompany you if you want to take a bus, for example. I didn't have a credit card and wasn't expecting to do anything official requiring such documents.)

The agent looked me over, asked me to take all of my bags and luggage off the bus. There are some people who blush easily and I'm one of those in some situations. When an authority exerts itself, I get red in the face and feel & act guiltily. Once I'm aware that this reaction is settling in, it gets even worse. Very self-consciously, with my brilliantly red face displaying my great guilt to all those staring at me, I went up the aisle to the front of the bus. I picked up my travel bags and followed that officer to a brightly lit office just to the side of the parked bus with all the passengers peering through their windows.

When confronting authority figures, particularly those like a guard or agent representing a greater authority, I'm fully aware of the need to conduct myself in a normal calm manner demonstrating my respect for the system and a solid sense of responsibility. It's difficult to do that, though, when your face is this burning bright almost fluorescent red, and your eyes and a host of assorted body gestures are chaotically moving about, seeking to hide the obvious discomfort eschewing forth.

I was politely asked yet again why it was I couldn't produce the identification they had asked for. In my trembling voice I answered them. The contortions they witnessed directly was not one struggling with the ends of one's

patience at their ineptitude or however else they might be perceiving the spectacle before them. The facial contractions and strained intonation was me struggling in my attempts to keep calm and deep within, the desperate searching for a solution.

I repeated the explanations a number of times as they occasionally interjected with more questions or comments. They asked me to open the wedding present and I reluctantly unwrapped it, thinking I would now have to get some new paper to make it presentable once more. They wanted to see what I had in my pockets. I emptied them and they looked at the objects on the table. They wanted to have a closer look at what I had in my luggage and I maneuvered it around to better open it.

I have to say that until that point they weren't excessively abusive in their treatment of me. They were firm, sometimes testing me, but nothing you could call particularly unfair.

Then I opened the bag. They told me to move things around, take a few out, then to step back as they went through it more thoroughly. It didn't take long for them to uncover my transparent zip-lock bag with something appearing like marijuana. There was a healthy quantity of it in that bag as well as a full pack of rolling papers. This stirred them up no less than if they were the bees and I was foolishly twirling a stick deep in their hive. More agents entered, more questions asked and before I could answer one, another one was already well on the way.

Sometimes I have a bizarre sense of the absurd, with a compelling impulse to do something very clearly not appropriate for the situation. Here I was torn between laughing very loudly at all this activity, or deciding to 'play along' with the importance they were placing on this whole scenario, and I would pretend to not be a suddenly discovered international drug dealer (not unlike the scene from the later Mr Bean movie when he got into the role of acting suspicious at an airport). Then I thought it wouldn't be good to even entertain these thoughts that had so suddenly entered my consciousness. Wisely I decided against pretending that they had indeed found an illicit cache of drugs and began to appeal to their more rational sense of judgement. Perhaps when tension mounts so quickly and so intensely, many people experience inappropriate feelings and thoughts. If I was susceptible to it, so might they be. If they were privately entertaining some of their own, all the more reason to encourage a calm reasonable approach to this comedy of errors. I shudder to think what would have happened if things had continued to go badly.

I pointed out that I smoked Drum tobacco typically bought in a big can. As I was going to be spending the weekend in the next province I had emptied the can into the baggie and threw in the extra papers. I invited them to smell the contents or run any tests they wished to make. Even though I knew they would find it to be only tobacco, a lot rested on the here and now, and how they felt about me, about all this. They would be making decisions long before any testing would or could be done.

A friend of mine was a customs agent herself. Recounting this story to her months later she told me a few of the criteria they use in singling out a suspicious person.

- One, is the person under 25? ✓ Check. I was.
- Two, is the person a man? ✓ Check.
- Three, does he have long hair? ✓ Check.
- Four, is his appearance in any way scruffy or non-mainstream?
 ✓ Check. I didn't look like a hippie but there was a casual ethnic air to my clothes.
- Five, is the person sitting at the back of the bus or in some darker, less public area?
 ✓ Check. I was sitting in the smokers' section.
- Six, is there anything suspicious or seemingly incorrect about the person?
 ✓ Check. My plastic bag of tobacco and my guilty behaviour accentuated by my brilliantly red face.

Well, you get the idea. I was scoring high points in many of the criteria. Actually, there was another one, one that got me into all this trouble in the first place.

- Seven, is there anything suspicious about the person's identification?
√ Check. I didn't have any identification.

In my favour maybe they thought that I was just stupid. That, and I hadn't been resisting or talking back to them.

Different people handled that bag of mine. A couple went into the hallway to talk it over. They came back with the declaration that they were probably going to send the whole bus back with all the contents, including the passengers. There wasn't much I could say or do. It was better than me being held indefinitely for further questioning and checking out my story. But it wasn't fair that just because I was regarded as a suspicious character that everyone else had to pay for 'my crime'. I didn't put it in those words, of course, but I did put in a similar appeal.

They talked it over, more interrogation, and eventually decided to let me go. Even though they were through with me on this end, they let it be known that I'll be going through a similar routine very shortly.

You see, we were still on the Canadian side of the border. Once I was let back on the bus, we would all travel a few more metres to become available for the American inspection. Getting through that successfully would lead to a very short ride in American territory (without any stops I'd like to add) and then we'd approach the border once again. After going through the American customs, there was the check at the Canadian side before allowing us to enter the country. Four customs checks that morning.

Wow.

And then. And then after the wedding, should I ever get to see it, I'd have to take the same bus back home again the following Monday.

Sometimes the memory blanks some things out which is gratefully appreciated by the holder. I can't say I wasn't concerned about each of those 7 crossings waiting for me, but I don't recall many details other than that first interrogation. Miraculously over half of the potential interactions with customs agents just didn't happen. For some reason our bus was shooed on past, arbitrarily saving me from further interrogations. I know I was questioned more, but fortunately nothing more than strict warnings came of it.

Many years later my wife and I were on a return bus ride to Barcelona after spending a few days in Andorra. The Spanish Civil Guard entered the bus when it was stopped at the checkpoint, looked at all of us, then singled out an elderly man with brown skin. He was formally dressed in a nice but well-used suit sitting next to what appeared to be his wife. He was told to leave the bus with his belongings and we all waited for about 15 or 20 minutes. He returned with his bags and calmly walked up the steps and sat again next to his wife. He carried himself with quiet dignity and even though I didn't know the man, I felt for him and respected how well he could conduct himself in this situation.

If I was the wrong colour or the wrong religion or the wrong whatever it was according to the current criteria and was frequently 'asked' to submit to interrogation, I am sure I would not always get miraculously through it. I would probably try my damnest to be rational and calm but I feel that there would be times the provocations would be just too much. Even in times of peace there can be trials, but without those filters of peace time..... I just can't imagine what so many people have gone through.

My experience was a humbling one but a light one considering. It gave me much to reflect on. But not all of it was contemplating individual rights, democracy, duty, etc. It was my friend's wedding, after all. I put much of that away for a later time, including my trip back home. I danced at my friend's wedding, toasted him and his bride, brushed a teardrop hidden behind my glasses, and enjoyed the moments I had. Perhaps all the more because I was a free man. A free man who could enjoy his freedom. And later, much later that evening and other evenings, I had my story to tell about taking a bus that unexpectedly took a short cut through the States.

AFTERWORD:

We can't always hold onto our naïveté, even if we want to. Life seems to have a way of throwing a wrench into the works every now and then. This incident was a minor one, but it awakened my perspectives on just how tenuous freedom is. The threat to it was only potential, but one or two more arbitrary ingredients thrown into the experience could have made it much more real.