

Something to Declare

by

Catherine Berry Stidsen

Nothing could possibly intimidate him. When you looked at him, but especially when you spoke to him, that was the over-riding impression. He seemed so secure, in fact, that he often intimidated others. Or, as he would have maintained, others allowed themselves the luxury of being intimidated by him.

But she who was his best friend, lover, colleague – people generally called her his "wife" – knew differently. There was one situation in which he always and all ways became unglued. It was at customs. It didn't happen at any customs crossing. They had passed with serenity in and out of Iceland, through many borders in Europe, and even blissfully through inspection in the Turks and Caicos Islands where they had visited when it announced that it wanted to become Canada's permanent sunshine province.

The angst always happened at the Peace Bridge. And it happened if they were leaving Canada for the United States, or the United States for Canada. Anxiety attacks at the Peace Bridge? Yes.

There were, of course, some grounds for the attacks. There was one New Year's Day when they were returning from a Christmas trip to Philadelphia. She had made a careful inventory of gifts. The previous August, when they moved to Canada, he to return after six years of work in the United States, she for the first time, they had made a total inventory of their things including serial numbers on appliances, dates of purchase, and so forth.

The customs officials at Lewistown-Queenstown where they crossed then had been impressed with the list and had given her landed immigrant status on the spot, surprised that she had taken the time to go to the Canadian consulate in New York and have everything in order. The household goods list had been cleared at once. This New Year's thing would be a piece of cake she told him. His agitation became more and more apparent the closer they got to the border.

"Why are you so distressed?"

"I don't know," he replied. "Perhaps it's because they're so bound by the book. They don't create. They implement. They're drones and they don't even know that. One feels impotent in the wake of all that. It is so inhuman."

"But I've got the list. It's accurate to the penny. What can we possibly be challenged on?"

"I don't know. But I know we will"

They chose a booth with an older man in it.

"Citizens of what country, please?"

He said, "Canada."

She said, "The United States with landed immigrant status in Canada."

"Let me see your card, Ma'am."

"Surely, Officer," she said reaching for the identity card.

"How long have you been out of the country?"

"We left on December 27th and are returning today," he explained

"Anything to declare?"

"Yes, some gifts from friends and family for Christmas." She handed the guard the list. Her husband was silent.

"Take this slip and pull over there," the guard said and motioned toward the main customs building.

"I knew it," was all he said and there was perspiration on his upper lip.

A senior guard at the building emerged unsmiling, took the inventory and pink slip and barked, "Open the trunk."

They did so, then on command opened their suitcases. The guard checked every item against the list and then picked up a half-eaten box of chocolate covered cherries from the pocket of her suitcase.

"Why aren't these on your list? They say 'Made in U.S.A.' How come you left them off?"

It was a gift from the old woman who had once been their neighbour. They had called her and dropped in for a brief visit and the woman was so delighted to have been remembered that she gave them the cherries from the painfully few gifts under her small plastic Christmas tree.

Although neither of them liked the candies it would have been ungrateful to refuse. They had taken

the candies to her parents' home and passed them around after dinner that evening. She thought her father had kept the box because he was fond of them but apparently he had put it in the pocket of her suitcase and she had not seen it there.

"Always the same. Think we're stupid, that's it," the guard sneered.

"The stupidity is in calling us smugglers over a \$3.00 box of chocolates," her husband began. His hand holding up the broken trunk lid was white.

"You'll see we're still under the limit, Officer," she said. "It was an oversight on my part. I'm sorry to have inconvenienced you."

"All right, lady, move it out. But next time, watch it."

They drove in silence for the next thirty miles. Then she saw the tears. He who argued with university presidents and professors, served on international committees, lectured around the world, organized leadership and management seminars for corporate executives, he was weeping.

"Why?" he said, "Why? And they are legion and they run the world. They treat us like thieves and wonder why we become thieves. And because they are unreasoning, they are inhuman. Because they think they have all the answers they have none. What hope is there for us in the face of that?"

"Perhaps he was lonely," she ventured. "It is New Year's Day and he is an older man and perhaps he doesn't want to be working today and he's only doing his job."

"Do you think he ever wonders if it's a job worth the doing?" he asked.

There was the other time on the U.S. side when the customs officer demanded that her husband turn in his U.S. resident alien card. How the issue came up was unclear but the guard maligned this most honest of men for his dishonesty in having retained it. Protestations that he had never been asked to return it went unheeded. He gave back the card.

She asked him as they drove away from that experience why he had never become a citizen of the United States since he had lived there long enough. He had replied simply that Canada had been so good to him he had promised himself always to return there one day and help that country make itself happen.

And then there was the time they had been in Syracuse for a four day marketing theory conference. They said they had nothing to declare and they were pulled over to the customs building again and the guard looked at the labels of the clothing in their suitcases and since some read Philadelphia and New York, they were called inside the building to explain.

Her attempts to make clear that they bought Canadian on principle were met with laughter. "Everybody" who goes to the States buys there. She explained carefully, slowly that her husband was, in fact, a professor of marketing and knew the Canadian economic scene well, and they bought Canadian. The clothes involved were obviously used and if necessary she invited the guards to check their 1971 declaration when they moved to Canada. They would find such items of clothing listed on them. A vein in her husband's temple was throbbing and she put her hand into his. Finally, they were allowed to leave.

That time in the car he used four letter words she had not heard from him before. No wonder Canadians thought of themselves as a second-rate power! Who, what encouraged them to do otherwise? Why was the quality of Canadian life not apparent to Canadians? "Everybody" Canadian did NOT buy in the States.

There were many more instances. It seemed to her that something always went wrong at the Peace Bridge. And now she had to cross that bridge on her own. Well, not exactly. But she sat at his desk, remembering his tears and his rage and the intimidation of that great heart, a heart that sought only to enable, never disable, a heart as Canadian as only an adopted son of a country can be, a heart that three days ago, suddenly, unexpectedly had stopped forever in the forty-seventh year of his life and the twelfth of their marriage.

In front of her, at the picture window, was the bag that contained the urn with his ashes. It was a wooden urn, the simplest she could find. Tomorrow she was taking what was left of him in the flesh across the border at the Peace Bridge.

When they had talked of this possibility just a few months before – why had he done so? – he had said he wanted to be cremated. The ashes could be spread around his vegetable garden. But she couldn't. She was taking the ashes to Philadelphia where they had met.

"I'll get those customs guards for you, Hon," she vowed. "For every time they hurt you with their lack

of faith in you, in Canada, in Canadians, for every time they brought you grief, I'll get them. It will only be two of them but I want them to hurt, the way you did – the way I do now. "

The next morning she put the urn in the car and headed for Buffalo. There was a tiny Canadian flag on the bag with the urn. For some reason that delighted her.

The U.S. guard was gigantic, red-faced, and pot-bellied.

"Citizen of what country?"

"Canada."

"Destination?"

"Philadelphia."

"Purpose of your visit?"

"To bury my husband's ashes. Want to see them? They're in the back seat of the car."

"Uh, no, uh, that's not necessary. Uh, have a good trip – I mean, yeah, uh. Just go ahead, lady, just go ahead."

She smiled in spite of the weight on her heart that wouldn't move. "One down, Hon. I left him speechless. It was cheap and beneath me, I know, but I don't care. I hope I ruined his day."

On the long trip back from Philadelphia she pondered what she would do at Canadian customs. She had nearly fifty condolence cards in her suitcase including contributions to the Royal Botanical Gardens in Hamilton in lieu of flowers. She had Polaroid shots of his coffin at the service for him in Canada and some of his gravesite where the local funeral director had put that gorgeous wooden urn into an ugly stone "over box" with a cross on top of it. She remembered thinking at the time that he would have said, "Damn Catholics. They'll prostitute anything to their own ends." She had made an inventory of all these things that seemed to celebrate death more than life.

She wanted to be asked to open her suitcase and to show the guard the photograph of the Danish flag on his coffin, a small one, put there at the request of his family to which she had affixed a button that said "I Shop Canadian." She had his rings there, too, the one from his mother that he always wore and his wedding ring, the ones they had had made that signified that marriage was not two becoming one but two individuals who were now more than two. And she wanted to lecture that fool on the stupidity of his being alive when her husband was dead.

She chose the booth and was three cars back, two and then at the booth, left side of the car higher than the right. The guard looked all of about twenty. His face was red with the unseasonable cold or with fright, she wasn't sure of which. His hat was too large and was almost on top of his ears. The coat was too big for him and she could hardly see his face above the collar of it. His voice was barely audible and he looked so vulnerable.

"Citizen of what country, Ma'am?"

"Canada."

"Where do you live?"

"Cayuga, Ontario."

"How long have you been gone, Ma'am?" "Five days."

He was intimidated by her. She didn't know why but she could feel that he was and she ached for him. She could feel again what intimidation had done to her husband and all the evil things she had planned to say and do left her and when he asked "The purpose of your visit, Ma'am?" she replied, "To attend a family funeral."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Ma'am. Under the circumstances I'm sure you have nothing to declare so just pass on and have a safe trip home to Cayuga."

She smiled and said, "That's right, Officer. I have nothing to declare. Thank you."

As she turned onto Highway #3, she said aloud to her best friend, lover, colleague, guru, laugh-mate, whose life she hoped, believed had been changed but was not taken away, "No, Hon, that's wrong. I do have something to declare. He was not unreasoning, not unthinking. He looked like the last person in the world who might understand what you were, and I hope I am, all about. And that's our hope, yours, mine and Canada's – maybe even the the hope of our universe."

Then the tears came and for the first time in her ten years of crossing it, the Peace Bridge seemed aptly named.