

Stories of crossing into Canada: The wedding

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When I cross the border into Canada, there's almost always a story. Rarely is there an uneventful crossing.

In 2007, I attended a wedding in Vancouver, BC, and here's how the conversation went at the border crossing into Canada:

Me: Good morning. (As I hand over passports and green cards for everybody in the car.)

Border guard: Hello. What is the purpose of your visit?

Me: A wedding.

Border guard: How long will you be in Canada? (Looks over the documents and compares the faces against the people in the car.)

Me: Just one day.

Border guard: Bringing any gifts?

I didn't bring any gifts (in the traditional Western sense), but maybe the other guests did. I look to the passenger sitting next to me.

Passenger: No.

Border guard: No gifts?

Passenger: Just hong bao. Red envelopes with money.

The border guard is by now completely confused and gives us a look like, "Didn't your mother teach you anything? You're showing up at a wedding empty-handed? Well, it's too late now. I'm certainly not going to try to teach you proper manners. You're on your own."

Border guard: (Hands us our papers and waves us through.) All right.

Vancouver has a large Chinese community, the largest in all of Canada. About ten percent of the B.C. population is ethnic Chinese, and Mandarin and Cantonese are the mother tongues in 30 percent of Vancouver homes. This was a relative young person, so who knows, maybe the border guard was new on the job. But you'd think that even after just one summer working the Canadian border near Vancouver, the guard would have encountered at least a few red envelopes by now.

Bonus chatter: One of my friends often visits her family in Canada for birthdays and other family events. When she does so, she buys the gift in Canada or has some other plan that avoids having to carry the gift across the border. The conversation at the border is similar to the one I described above, where the border guard asks if she is bringing any gifts, and she answers that she isn't. My friend figures that in a database somewhere in the Ministry of Public Safety, they have a record on her that simply reads, "Cheapskate."

[Raymond is currently away; this message was pre-recorded.]



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