

Welcome to My Country

BY MARY ELLEN COLLINS

We climbed into the van and greeted Samantha and Mado, the guides who would accompany our 14-member group into Zimbabwe for a visit to Victoria Falls. When we arrived at the border, Samantha collected the paperwork we had just completed and headed into a small stucco building. Within minutes she returned and said, “Mary Ellen Collins?”

I raised my hand.

“You wrote down that your profession is freelance writer, and because our country is very political, the man would like to see you.”

The man? I followed her off the bus and when we approached the smirking bureaucrat he said, “You are a journalist. You write for a newspaper.”

My heart sped up. “No, I write personal essays and brochures and magazine articles.” I stumbled over an explanation of trade publications and nonprofits, but he held my gaze and replayed his comment whenever I paused.

“You are a journalist. You write for a newspaper.”

Sam stood beside me, occasionally contributing a quiet, “They are just coming to see the Falls.” After the man and I spent five minutes playing, “Yes, you are,” “No, I’m not,” I turned up my hands and said, “I don’t know what else to tell you.”

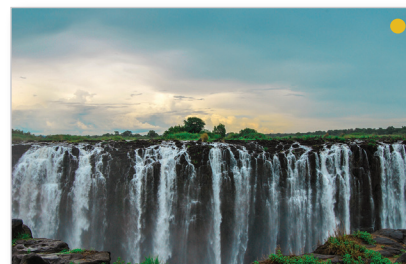
With one last smirk, he stamped the paperwork and handed me an extra form to present on my way out of the country. Once I was back in with my anxious husband and fellow travelers, we agreed that the word *freelance* had piqued suspicion. I considered the flurry of suggestions that I start identifying myself as something less likely to raise alarms, such as a children’s book author, romance novelist or cookbook writer.

But professional stubbornness won out over fudging the truth.

“I shouldn’t have to lie about what I do.”

We resumed our trip with a sense of relief that lasted until the armed policeman stopped our van in downtown Victoria Falls. This scowling public servant got onto the van and silently stared down our group: three grandparents, three kids and eight baby boomers who were straining to look law-abiding. Finally satisfied that we weren’t planning to do anything more dangerous than traipse along the edge of a waterfall, he waved us on. Mado said that President Mugabe’s presence in town had prompted a significant ratcheting up of “normal” suspicion and security.

Later in our hotel room, I caught a glimpse of my journal. “Oh my God! John! What should I do with my journal? Should I hide it or throw it away?” It contained nothing but a list of animal sightings and observations about my travel mates, but I was freaked out by thoughts of an invisible enemy waiting to catch me committing words to paper. Meanwhile, John wasn’t responding because he was repeatedly



flushing our toilet.

“What are you doing in there?”

“Getting rid of my business cards.”

He wasn’t ditching his corporate “Vice President” cards—he was destroying the “Photographer” cards that identified him by his hobby. “I didn’t want anyone to get the idea that we were a photographer/journalist couple.”

The contagious paranoia made us feel itchy and unsettled until I handed over that extra departure form 24 hours later. The exit bureaucrat smiled and said, “I hope you enjoyed our country.” Ignoring the irony, I put on my best happy face and counted the seconds until we were off the ground. Nothing puts a damper on a once-in-a-lifetime adventure like unwarranted accusation, but slice-of-life writers know that memorable experiences always have a takeaway: Everything is material.

Mary Ellen Collins is a freelance writer who has been a columnist for *The Arizona Republic* and *Angie’s List Magazine*. Her essays have appeared in *The Christian Science Monitor*, *Notre Dame Magazine* and *Tampa Bay Times*.

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