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"Newlywed Adventures"

by Ina Navazelskis - Pikturna

She was a petite sixty-something lady, hair dyed a regulation blue, somewhat grandmotherly looking -- and very, very unhappy. A senior civil servant at the House of Marriages in Vilnius, she was faced with a problem she just didn't know how to deal with. So she shifted uncomfortably in her chair. She glanced nervously out the window. She picked up and put down the same piece of paper several times over.

It was Saturday, January 26th, a sunny crisp cold winter afternoon, the busiest time of the week for weddings. Half a dozen couples stood outside her vestibule at the House of Marriages, waiting to pick up their licenses before getting on with the big moment itself. With the clock showing just past 3 P.M., everything was already wildly behind schedule. And now this.

It had to do with documents. Or more precisely, the lack of them. "Where is your passport?" she asked the Groom. Together with his Bride, he was at the House of Marriages that afternoon, standing expectantly in front of the blue-haired lady. Dutifully, he handed over a green passport.

A look of distress came over her. "But it's not the same one you had when you passed in your application form," she said. "The number is different."

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Since 1925 the Institute of Current World Affairs (the Crane-Rogers Foundation) has provided long-term fellowships to enable outstanding young adults to live outside the United States and write about international areas and issues. Endowed by the late Charles R. Crane, the Institute is also supported by contributions from like-minded individuals and foundations.

That was when the trouble began. The blue-haired lady lived in one of those curious countries where a person could, at any given moment, legally possess more passports than a cat had lives. There were, for example, two types of standard red passports; ones for use inside the country and ones for private travel abroad. Then there were these blue passports, issued to those whose travel abroad was for business purposes. And then there were green passports, issued to diplomats and government officials.

So it was not all that surprising that the blue-haired lady was a little confused. The Groom rushed to explain. Exactly one month earlier, he said, when he had come with the Bride to hand in their marriage application -- the same piece of paper she now so nervously fingered -- he had only had his internal passport (the red one) with him. That was the number he had written down. Now it was who-knows-where, probably in some pile of papers at home. But because he had a perfectly legal, decent and valid green passport today, shouldn't that be enough? Couldn't he simply cross out the first number and write in the second?

"Oh, no," said the blue-haired lady. "We can't allow that. You'll have to go home and bring your other passport."

"But I don't know where it is!" he said.

"You must understand," she answered. "I am just a little person. I don't make the rules."

It was just not her day. There was nothing in her experience that enlightened her how to deal with people such as those who now stood in front of her. Both the Groom AND the Best Man were members of Parliament, that institution which had turned life upside down in her country during the past year. All these new laws, resolutions, declarations and appeals had coming streaming out of there and all they had really done was confuse everybody.

Then there was the Bride. It was bad enough that with her royal blue velvet and taffeta dress, the Bride already stood out from the white gowns being fretfully, expectantly primped in the long mirrors just outside the vestibule. But why did she also have to go around making a person so nervous? The Bride had this way of looking straight into one's eyes and asking the most inane questions, like "What does it matter which passport one has?"

The entire affair began in late December, when the couple first showed up at the House of Marriages. The blue-haired lady certainly remembered them. When she had clapped eyes on the Bride's foreign passport, she had whiffed danger immediately and had sent the couple to the director. Let him handle the whole thing.

The portly, round-faced director -- like the blue-haired lady also sixty-something -- had raised an eyebrow as he scanned the application form. "Where are the notarized documents from your embassy," he had asked the Bride, "attesting that you have never before been married?"

She had given him a blank stare. "You mean, I must go all the way to the American embassy in Moscow (over 900 kilometers away) or the consulate in Leningrad (over 800 kilometers away) before you can even accept our application?" she had asked. (Inane Question # 1.) "But it states here in my passport that I have no spouse." And she showed him the box marked with xxx's where a husband or wife's name is normally written in. "The Americans will notarize that piece of paper based on what's in the passport, and you have it in front of you now. Isn't that enough?" (Inane Question # 2).

The director shook his head. No, it wasn't enough. But he also took pity on the couple. He whispered that if they approached a certain official at the Ministry of Justice, the latter might write a letter of exemption, in which case he, the director, could then accept the application. "But whatever you do," he cautioned them as they got up to leave, "don't tell him I sent you. He gets annoyed."

The Groom did even better than that. He telephoned the Minister of Justice himself. The Minister of Justice telephoned the director of the House of Marriages. The director telephoned the blue-haired lady, who now accepted the application, without, as the Groom later indelicately put it to the Bride, "those virginity papers of yours."

In the intervening month, the blue-haired lady had happily forgotten this couple. But now they were back, like a bad dream. "I can't allow you to be married if you don't have the right passport," she repeated, by now completely miserable. "I am just a little person."

At this point, the Best Man interceded, suggesting that perhaps the director should be contacted. But it was Saturday, the director's day off, and where oh where, was his home number? The hunt to find it began.

Minutes ticked by. Wedding parties outside the vestibule, already standing on that great conveyor belt of marriage, were getting restless. (Production was slowing down, and they didn't know why.) Finally the telephone number was produced and with hands shaking, the blue-haired lady dialled it.

"It's about the Navazelskis-Piktorna wedding," she told the director in a trembling voice. "The Groom doesn't have the right passport. What should I do?"

The answer came through so distinctly that even the Bride, standing several feet away, heard it. "Marry them!" barked the director, slamming down the phone so hard that the blue-haired lady winced.

But she quickly regained her composure. "What will your last name be?" she asked the Bride sweetly, as she began filling out the marriage license. "Navazelskis-Pikturna," came the answer.

The look of distress returned. "You are only allowed to have one last name," said the blue-haired lady. "If you want two, you must get special permission from the Presidium."

Now both the Best Man and Groom spoke up. "There is a new law," they told her, "which states that such special permission is no longer necessary."

"I don't know about any new law," she replied to the two law-makers, unhappier than ever. "I haven't seen it yet. I am just a little person."

By now, the Bride had begun to catch on to how things were done in this country. She quickly began thumbing through her address book. "I have Vytautas Landsbergis' home number," she said. "If you call him up, I sure he will say its OK."

The blue-haired lady stood firm. "You must choose," she told the Bride.

The Bride muttered. The Bride grumbled. The Bride chose. Three weeks later, she wrote that letter to the Presidium, the highest governmental body in the land. She was later duly informed that the Presidium had unanimously granted her double surname request.

I knew it, thought the Bride to herself when she found out. Why didn't the blue-haired lady believe me? (Inane Question #3). But the Bride, sighing, no longer expected an answer. She realized this was simply one more example of what mystified her about this country. Indeed, the whole marriage process had been a series of mystifying moments. Each episode became fixed in her mind as an adventure -- "The Adventure with the Blue-Haired Lady", "The Adventure with the Presidium", etc., etc.

There was, for example, the "Adventure with the Rings." The Bride discovered that buying wedding rings was not such a simple, easy thing to do.

There was only one place in the entire capital city where wedding rings could be bought at all (officially and legally, that is). That was in the Newlywed Salon -- a one-room operation in the center of Vilnius. (This was not to be confused with the Newlywed Grocery Store, also a one-room operation located in one of those charming new concrete neighborhoods on the outskirts of the city. The first time she had gone to the grocery store, the Bride saw a long long long line of grumpy people waiting to get in and a few rather happy smiling people -- carrying large plastic bags bulging with sausages -- coming out).

These two stores were set up to ensure that the most basic needs that a special celebration such as a wedding requires -- having something to eat and having something to wear -- would be met. At both places the Bride found things -- choice cuts of meat, Stolichnaya brand vodka, cheap patent leather plastic shoes, pure cotton underwear, not very fragrant Soviet deodorant, garishly colored shirts (only in small sizes), sheets, pillowcases and towels -- which hadn't been seen in open stock in normal stores for quite a few years.

For a limited time -- two months for the Salon, one month for the grocery store -- each stamped and certified betrothed couple were part of that exclusive set of shoppers who parted with their rubles at the Newlywed facilities. They could happily stock up on food for their wedding feast -- just as long as that feast would not require more than, among other things, eight kilograms of flour, two kilograms of sugar, 10 kilograms of pork, five kilograms of beef, 10 kilograms of poultry, 10 packets of mayonnaise, one liter of ketchup, 6 liters of dill pickles, 20 bottles of champagne, 15 bottles of vodka, and one jar of imported instant coffee.

But back to the rings. Exactly one week before the wedding -- the only time the purchase of rings was permitted -- the Bride and Groom purposefully strode across the one room of the Newlywed Salon to the counter where two trays of plain gold bands, in varying weights, widths and sizes, were in a display case.

"We would like to look at some rings," said the Bride.

"Where is your receipt from the House of Marriages with your wedding date on it?" asked the clerk in a monotone voice, making no move to take the trays out of the case.

The Bride produced the booklet, given to her at the House of Marriages, which entitled the couple to buy 1 (one) wedding gown, 1 (one) man's suit, 1 (one) set of underwear each, 1 (one) pair of shoes each, 2 (two) shirts, 1 (one) pair of stockings and 1 (one) pair of socks, and of course, 2 (two) wedding rings.

"That's not it," said the store clerk. "I need the separate receipt with the date and time of your marriage."

"We didn't get one," said the Bride.

"That's impossible," said the clerk. "Of course you got one. Everyone gets one. You probably lost it."

"We didn't lose it because we didn't get it," repeated the Bride evenly, her temperature rising. She pointed to the back of her booklet. "See, our wedding date is written in here."

"That's not good enough," said the clerk. "I need the receipt."

"But we didn't get one..."

And so it went for another fifteen minutes, before the saleswoman, exhausted and spent, decided that if anybody already knew how to argue that much, they probably should be married.

Later, the Bride asked why there had been all this fuss. The workers at the Newlywed Salon smiled knowingly. Getting engaged, explained one woman, was one of the most popular pastimes in Lithuania. Some people liked it so much they got engaged in several different cities at once. (By law, one could get engaged -- that is, register to marry -- in the place one was born, or the place one currently worked, or the place one currently lived.) Yes indeed, said the saleswoman. Some people kept on postponing the date. In fact, only about a third of all couples who applied to get married in 1990 actually did so. The rest were -- well, still engaged.

How curious, thought the Bride. It certainly was a mystifying phenomenon. But what did this have to do with making it almost impossible to buy wedding rings? she asked.

A good question, said the saleswoman. The longer one is engaged, she told the Bride, the longer one has the right to shop at the Newlywed Salon. If one registered in several different cities, that meant several Newlywed salons. And it also meant being able to buy gold wedding rings at low state prices and reselling them at black market ones -- generally triple or quadruple the original cost.

So that's it, said the Bride, finally enlightened." Of course. But that's not the case with us, so we'll take our rings now and go."

Not so fast, said the saleswoman. "You'll pick these rings up next week at the House of Marriage. They will be there when you are."

And so they were. Before the ink on the marriage license had even dried -- the blue-haired lady was eager to get through her backlog of couples -- the rings were handed over.

Thereafter, all went smoothly. The wedding party was ushered into a great hall where glass icicle chandelier stretched from the ceiling to the floor. A serious young man in ill-fitting tuxedo stood before them and conducted the marriage ceremony. An organ began to play, a woman from a hidden balcony to one side of the chamber began to sing. The Bride and Groom giggled, exchanged vows, exchanged rings, kissed and sipped champagne. There were flowers and smiles. Fifteen minutes later, they stood on the front steps of the House of Marriage, about to embark on one of the biggest adventures of all...

On their way out, the Bride and Groom passed by the vestibule where other couples now stood waiting to receive their licenses. It seemed to the Bride that she saw the blue-haired lady look up. It also seemed to her that a look of relief came over the lady's face.

But if so, it was premature. Four days later a description of the wedding, tangled procedures and all, appeared in the largest daily newspaper in the land.

The Sun Shines on Wedding Day

"On Saturday, January 26th, at 15.00 hours, our compatriot, Ina Navazelskis, who writes for such newspapers as Die Zeit and Lithuanian Morning, married parliamentarian Virginijus Pikturna from Samogitia. One wedding witness was member of parliament Algirdas Kumza. Both members of Parliament belong to the liberal fraction. At the House of Marriages in Vilnius, they learnt first-hand of the difficulties that still exist in applying laws that they themselves pass. It seems that it is almost impossible to get married without a Soviet passport. Having found no solution to the situation, one worker at the House telephoned her director at home. His answer was very short. "Marry them."

The groom wore a light grey suit, the bride - a blue dress. The newlyweds postponed a honeymoon to quieter times.

On the day of celebration, the weather was clear. The sun shone. According to old people's proverbs, the kind of weather that you have on your wedding day is the kind of life you will have together..."

The Bride and Groom were as surprised to see this as the blue-haired lady must have been. Later, they showed the newspaper to a friend from abroad. A mystified look -- one the Bride knew only too well -- came over his face. "Why is it," he asked, "that the description of your wedding is under the Weather Forecast Section?"

"Don't ask me," the Bride said, shrugging her shoulders. "I'm just a little person."

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