

From New York to Paris: Part 1 – “Sorry, I won't be able to make it to our wedding”

It was late Sunday afternoon and we were on our way back to the city after spending a nice, relaxing weekend in Montreal. The weather had been sunny and pleasantly cool for early August, which was a reprieve from the scorching summer, and since most Montrealers were bilingual *and* friendly, practicing my rudimentary French had been far less intimidating and actually, fun.



As we stood waiting in line, I contemplated what we should do for dinner. Was there any food or leftovers in the kitchen? Or, should we do what is innate to almost every New Yorker who needs to eat and can't be bothered with waiting – order from your smartphone just before arriving home?

“Next,” a voice roared in the booth to the far right. The woman had a heavy set shape with short chestnut brown hair that curled up obediently just below her chin. A look of irritation seemed embedded into her forehead and stretched into her eyes. We walked over and greeted her with a smile and our passports, one American, one French.

“Were you traveling for business or pleasure?” she asked in an automatic tone.

“Pleasure,” we both said in unison.

“What is the nature of your relationship?”

“We're married,” my husband said.

She examined our passports, shuffling back and forth through the pages.

“Do you have any papers documenting your status?” she asked my husband. As if he had anticipated her question, he already had a copy of our marriage certificate in hand and slid it confidently through the teller-like window.

After scrutinizing the document and seeming a bit unsure, she said, "I'm going to have to ask you to step aside and speak with one of my colleagues."

Step aside? Our flight was boarding now. A few moments later, a Custom Border Patrol officer signaled us to follow him into a waiting area in the back and have a seat.

"Don't worry, they're just being annoying and trying to give us a hard time. Worst case, we miss our flight and jump on the next one," my husband reassured.

Trying to relax, I replayed our meeting with the immigration attorney in my head.

Three weeks ago, we were sitting in his downtown Broadway office. The room was small with cream colored walls. It had the right amount of messiness, with files and folders spread across the dark wood stained desk and adjoining table. It looked busy yet welcoming. To the left was an oversized bookshelf filled from one end to another. On the opposite side, facing west of City Hall Park, two windows provided a decent amount of light which warmed up the room and made up for the fact that there were no plants and barely a picture on the wall.

The lawyer was friendly with a family of his own. Being an emigrant himself, we felt fairly assured that he could help us navigate the immigration system, although we paid him on a consultation basis with no retainer.

Since Nicolas had been in the US on a tourist status, we wanted to make sure we were doing our due diligence. After letting our lawyer know that we planned to marry later in September, he recommended that we go ahead and have our legal ceremony at the Office of the City Clerk. Afterwards, we would go to Montreal so he would not overstay the standard limit of ninety days, which was fast approaching. Upon our return, we would file for an adjustment of status and proceed with the required paperwork. No one would have to know we were actually married until our September wedding ceremony and reception and we wanted to keep it that way.

"What are the risks?" we asked.

"If he overstays, then he becomes illegal and there could be complications which may interfere with your September wedding plans," he replied. "If

you get married and go to Montreal before the ninety days is up, just make sure you have a copy of your marriage certificate with you. The Custom Border Patrol officers could, technically, give you a hard time but they're not in the business of separating families. You should be fine."

A loud voice abruptly summoned us.

There were two Custom Border Patrol officers standing outside the center of one of five offices assembled in a row along the back of the waiting area. As we walked in and took our seats, it seemed more like an interrogation room. The ceiling was mounted with a long rectangular fluorescent light, and even though it was overly bright, it felt cold and sterile. We sat across the L-shaped metal desk where one of the officers was staring at his computer. The other stood in the corner looking away stoically, his arms half crossed. Towards the back of the office was another door which led to a hallway with uniformed personnel going back and forth. Was this the official border between Canada and the US, guarded by good cop, bad cop?

"Thanks to the two of you, I have about three hours of paperwork ahead of me and I'm supposed to be on vacation in fifteen minutes," replied what appeared to be the primary officer from behind the desk.

There was an awkward silence.

"So, you're married?" the officer asked in a rhetorical manner.

"Yes, we were married last month," I said.

My surprisingly cheerful tone was met with his unapologetic reply, "Well, congratulations, you've just invalidated your husband's visa status."

Another silent pause.

"So, what does this mean?" my husband asked.

"This means that you previously entered the US as a tourist but when you left, you were married to a US citizen which automatically changed your status and your intent. At this time, you cannot enter the United States, and will not be able to, until you have a valid visa. Furthermore, you will never be able to set foot in the

US as a tourist. If you should attempt to enter the US without a valid visa, you will be arrested.”

My husband proceeded to tell the officer about our meeting with the attorney and how we were in the process of filing the necessary paperwork; the problem was, we *hadn't* actually filed anything yet so there was no record in the system of this. Although both officers seemed to become more understanding, and even empathetic, I soon realized that they were not going to let us go with just a slap on the wrist – too many things had been set into motion and it was no longer a decision they could make. As they continued talking, I could feel my calm façade start to deteriorate and the color steadily evaporate from my face. My pulse started to elevate so quickly that it felt like my heart was beating in my throat and with each breath I took, my stomach sank deeper.

“Just for the record, ma’am, you’re free to go whenever you like,” said the second lowly officer from the corner as if he was offering some sort of a consolable lining. After some discussions, the second officer said he would need to contact their superiors and alleged that, hopefully, they would be able to offer some ‘guidance’.

As we waited for the final verdict, I looked over to my husband and grabbed his hand. He didn’t have to say a word; I felt what was written on his face. We’re not going to just miss our flight. Finally, he said, “I’m sorry, I don’t think I will make it to our wedding.”

When the officer returned, he said, in an unexpectedly remorseful tone, there was nothing that could be done. Supposedly, if we had filed for a spousal visa and had that on record, it would have been useful, but a marriage certificate alone was not acceptable and would not allow my husband to come back into the US.

Somewhere, in this ubiquitous chain of command where, seemingly no one wanted to take responsibility for what would change the course of two people’s lives, the trigger had been set and was now irreversible. I guess if all is fair in love and immigration, there should be a warning clause: marriage may cause forced separation.

The next hour was filled with documented questions and responses between the primary officer and my husband, “repeat-after-me” sworn testimonies and fingerprinting. The entire process was, in itself, *criminal*, especially for a system that was not in the business of separating families.

As agonizing as each minute was, I held on to every single one, for I knew, in the trenches of my gut, that our time together was now limited. Our separation would be inevitable. In this moment, I knew my life was about to change. What I didn't know at the time was that it would lead me to Paris.