

Marriage of Convenience

Mark was confused. When he arrived at the Registry Office, he thought he was getting married to a woman from Shanghai called Jackie Lui.

He was getting married to Jackie Lui from Shanghai all right, but to Mark's surprise, he was introduced to a skinny, bearded, bespectacled man of about 20 wearing a traditional Chinese wedding costume. Not that it mattered, but Mark had not been briefed that he was entering into a same sex union.

Why was he called Jackie? Groom and groom had the chance for a little small talk before the ceremony and Jackie revealed his Wu Chinese name was unpronounceable to most Brits so he'd adopted the name after the famous Hong Kong born actor Jackie Chan.

Today's ceremony being a same sex union was only the first surprise. The second surprise was that Jackie wanted his husband-to-be to wear traditional Chinese wedding gear because "it would look more authentic for the photos."

Mark found himself being sent to the lavatories to get changed into a polyester costume about two sizes too small so it was not only uncomfortable, but also incredibly hot. Oh, and it came resplendent with a headpiece that wouldn't have looked out of place if it was on the head of a redneck storming the Capitol Building in Washington at the behest of Donald Trump.

The headpiece didn't cause too many problems. The small costume, however, seriously restricted Mark's ability to breathe. When the registrar asked if Mark took Jackie to be his "lawful, wedded husband" he had so much difficulty breathing he had to say "I will" twice as the registrar didn't hear him the first time.

Although today's events were at the more extreme end of what Mark had to contend with, such craziness and unpredictability was an occupational hazard when you were a groom for hire. If you needed a husband to settle your immigration status, to protect your inheritance or for some other nefarious reason, Mark was your man.

Well, that was one of his roles. He was also a stay at home dad with a two and a half year old daughter called Lucy and a one year old son called Charles. There was a wife too. She was called Jane and had a successful career as a corporate lawyer. Jane was out of the house from six am until seven pm most

days. Mark's line of work, which Jane did not know about, was both lucrative and fitted beautifully around her work hours because registry offices didn't offer marriage ceremonies late in the day.

Better still, if Mark couldn't get his young children a place at childcare, he was usually able to bring them along to the wedding ceremonies. Sometimes having children in the room added to the fake backstory given to the registrar about his relationship to the fake bride (or groom).

As you can imagine, Mark had a few interesting experiences in this line of work. This particular wedding ceremony, however, was as bizarre as they came.

The reason for that was Darya, Jackie's insanely jealous Belarussian girlfriend. It turned out that Jackie was an illegal immigrant who had overstayed a student visa. Having considered all the options, Darya and Jackie decided marriage was the easiest path for Jackie to stay in the UK long-term.

Jackie and Darya would have got married to each other, but for the fact Darya was already married. Technically speaking she was separated from her husband, although deserted would be a more accurate description. That said, no one, not even Jackie, was entirely sure whether he'd left her or the other way round.

Despite Darya's own marital status, her stupefying jealousy prevented Jackie from entering into a marriage of convenience with a woman. She could just about tolerate Jackie going through a sham ceremony with a man, although Darya was still not entirely comfortable with the situation.

Darya was a terrifying individual who would not have looked out of place playing prop forward for the Wales men's rugby team. For some reason she insisted on hanging around for the ceremony. She went out of her way to give Mark evil glares at every opportunity and had even taken him to one side and warned him about "checking out my boyfriend's ass" when he was simply walking along behind his groom.

As Mark took in the madness of what was going on around him, he couldn't help feeling that having an extra marital affair would be an easier way to relieve the boredom and tedium of his life. Sure, an affair would be exciting, but it wouldn't earn anything like as much money he was presently making.

All Mark had to do was mutter the words "I will," sign the marriage register in a false name and pose for a couple of photographs with his new spouse at a run-down three star hotel around the corner. At that

point, he would check his phone to ensure the promised three grand fee had appeared in his PayPal account (again, held in a false name) and then he would dash off home, collect his children from nursery, kill an hour with them in the park and get dinner on before his wife got home.

Mark loved his children and loved his wife and life. Nonetheless, in tougher moments Mark admitted he found life as a stay at home dad lonely. The mums all socialised together but he was only ever a second thought at best. As for dads, as Mark spent more time at home as a caregiving dad, he had less and less in common with them and found their stereotypically masculine conversations dreary. He was a misfit and he knew it. Becoming a groom for hire was one way to have a bit of an identity and lead an independent life away from the family home.

How did Mark end up as a groom for hire? About 18 months ago Mark had one of his 'tougher moments' while drinking with a few acquaintances from the local running club. After a few drinks, Mark had explained on some days he didn't speak to an adult between six am and seven pm.

One of these acquaintances was a friend of a friend called Justin. Justin had listened intently to Mark and asked if he was ever free to do some non-demanding, flexible, well-paid work that would never involve being away from home after 4pm? Justin said Mark could even bring his kids along.

Intrigued and with a belly full of Stella Artois, Mark had swapped numbers with Justin. A couple of days later the two men met up and Justin revealed what was involved. Mark was unconvinced until Justin told him how much he'd get paid for each bogus marriage. At that point, greed got the better of him and he said he'd give it a go.

Shortly afterwards, Mark found himself getting married to a Russian woman called Antonia who was about 15 years his senior. Mark never did find out what her background story was, but she was delighted with her new English husband.

Following Antonia, Mark got married to a Brazilian called Trudy. Trudy was quite open with Mark. She was lesbian and wanted to get married in a hurry to make it easier for her to stay in the UK with her lover. Following this, Mark got married to a Lebanese tattoo artist called Nadine.

The next bride was a Turkish visa overstayer called Fatma who didn't quite understand the 'marriage of convenience' thing. Having gone through the ceremony and posed for the obligatory photos at the hotel to keep the immigration authorities happy, Fatma had done all she could to persuade Mark to join her in a hotel suite and consummate the marriage. Mark eventually managed to get away, but not before

Fatma had chased him down the street in her cheap wedding dress, screaming that she couldn't be parted from the "love of my life."

The next wedding was almost as bizarre. Mark, who was Caucasian, was marrying a larger-than-life lady called Adaeze from Nigeria. Adaeze had been disowned by her family for some reason and was living a very nice, peaceful life as a virtual assistant in Britain. She had no desire to return home, but immigration rules meant she'd soon have to.

On this occasion, Mark had brought his kids along to the ceremony. For some reason Adaeze took it upon herself to tell the registrar she was their mother. All Mark could do was smile awkwardly as the registrar started at the four of them and shake his head, clearly unconvinced that a mixed-race couple could have blue-eyed, blonde-haired, Caucasian children.

People like Trudy and Adaeze were fun to deal with. They had good reason to be in the UK, immigration law just worked against them and Mark was simply offering a service, a service he'd offered to 50 or so people since Justin had introduced him to this line of work.

It was the refugees who'd had their cases rejected that affected Mark most. Justin, who always acted as middle man, would never let Mark work for free. When it came to refugees, however, Mark would always find a quiet moment to stealthily return the fee to his new spouse in an envelope stuffed with used bank notes.

Mark was making more than enough marrying those who could afford his services. He didn't need to take money from the truly desperate, as most failed asylum seekers were. He may have got himself messed up with the criminal world, but at heart he wasn't a bad person. He almost felt under a moral obligation to help individuals in these circumstances.

Today's marriage, however, this was in a league of its own. Sure, he'd been through a few same sex unions, but never wearing national dress and not with the groom's married girlfriend sat in the back of the room tutting and hissing in jealous disapproval every time he opened his mouth. He wanted to get the ceremony over with, have the photographs taken and leave Jackie and Darya to their car-crash relationship.

Sure enough, after just a few minutes, Jackie and Mark were married. They signed the marriage certificate, Darya barging Mark out the way as she signed it as a witness using a false name and address.

It was then off to the hotel. A professional photographer was on hand to take some post-wedding photos and Mark and Jackie posed around a spread of food, all photos that the immigration authorities might ask to see at a later date.

All the while this was going on, Darya was drinking, despite it only being eleven in the morning. By half past eleven, as the photographer was wrapping up, she'd polished off half a bottle of vodka and was getting very obnoxious.

Mark didn't like the way this was going. He turned to Justin and said: "Are we done?"

"Check your PayPal account, money should have landed in it."

Mark did as he was told and sure enough, his fee had been paid.

"Right, I'm off to get changed and then I'll leave these two to, well, get on with their really odd existence," said Mark.

He retired to the bathroom, Darya shouting something after him in slurred Russian. Mark assumed she was shouting something rude as her tone of voice wasn't pleasant.

Once Mark had changed, he stepped out of a cubicle to come face to face with Justin.

"Hey mate, you looked cool in that hat thing."

"Nice of you to say so," Mark replied.

Justin, who had clearly had a drink or two himself despite the early hour, asked if he could try the costume on.

"Be my guest, but stay away from Darya in case she thinks you're after her husband," Mark said.

Justin threw the clothes on, over the top of what he was already wearing. Luckily he had a more svelte figure than Mark so it wasn't such a bad fit. Mark helped him put that hat on and then the two men left the lavatory and went back to the sham wedding party where Mark was going to say his goodbyes.

It was then Mark noticed something out the corner of his left eye. Two people, a man and a woman in smart casual clothing sat at a table in the hotel's reception area suddenly stood up and walked over to the wedding party.

He looked to his right and saw two uniformed police officers guarding the front door of the hotel. Realising trouble was afoot, Mark quickly stepped back towards the lavatories. Sure enough, the couple in smart casual clothing pulled out warrant cards and shouted something about being police officers.

The whole operation had been rumbled. Luckily for Mark, they mistook Justin for being the false groom as he was the one wearing the Chinese wedding outfit.

The two police officers weren't the only ones to wrongly identify someone. Darya mistook one of the hotel's female waiting staff for being a police officer and threw a punch at her, which missed. As luck would have it, the waiter happened to be Ukrainian. The rivalry between these two rival former Soviet nations instantly bubbled to the surface.

The waiter swore at Darya in Russian and threw a harder, more accurate punch which connected with the drunk Belarusian's jaw. Daryan flew backwards, landing on her back, her skirt riding up and revealing she wasn't wearing any underwear.

Jackie, meanwhile, made a run for the hotel's fire exit. He managed to get out the door, one of the uniformed officers chasing after him.

Justin was apprehended by the two plain-clothed officers. They threw him over the hotel's reception desk, the impressive headgear flying off his head as they did so.

Justin looked up to see Mark. Justin had a simple way out of this. The wedding photos would prove he wasn't the groom. He simply had to say he'd found the costume in the hotel's toilets and put it on for a joke. The middle man flicked his head back and mouthed the word "run" to Mark.

Mark gave a brief nod in reply and quickly walked back towards the lavatories. He came across a door marked "staff only." It was unlocked so he went through it to discover himself in the hotel's kitchen.

Chefs were so busy preparing for lunch so they didn't even notice him. It was hot in the kitchen and to his right, a door was propped open with a huge canister of cooking oil. Justin quietly made his way to the door, poked his head out and looked outside. It was an access road to the rear of the hotel leading to a busy street about 20 metres away.

Justin knew this was his chance to get away. He crept out the door and walked swiftly towards the busy street. In less than a minute, he was simply another person on the busy pavement.

Ever the dad and main carer to his kids, various thoughts were racing through his mind about his family. If he'd been arrested, he'd have been in a lot of trouble. He'd probably have received a custodial sentence and a Disclosure and Barring service check would do just that: Bar him from joining a school PTA, helping on school trips or anything like that. Mums would gossip about his behaviour and say it proved that caring for kids was "woman's work."

Knowing he'd just had a very close shave with the law, Mark's instinct was to collect his kids from nursery and give them a massive hug. As he headed down the road, he decided his "groom for hire" days were through. He'd made enough money, perhaps now he should now concentrate on his family.

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