

Marriage Across the Sea

Throughout my life, it has been the stories that I remember most. Walking by Papa's office in the back of the church, I would hear Mama speaking to him softly saying, "Well dearest, the young Panckiv girl is moving to America. The family has asked for our prayers." Their names would then be added to the small list kept in the altar, and Papa, the priest at St. Vladimir's Church, would pray for them. Often, Mama would receive word from the family, and a name would be taken off the list in a prayer of thanksgiving. Other times, it would remain, and I would see the tears well up in a mother's eyes when her daughter was mentioned during the procession on a Sunday liturgy. America is a long distance away from Ukraine.

I grew up in Hlukhiv, Ukraine, with the given name Irina, meaning peace. My childhood was wrapped in the comfort of the Orthodox Church, where my father was a priest. I was confused when my friend, Natasha, asked me what I would do after finishing School. I was just nearing adulthood and responded casually that I would probably get a job working for Papa in the church. She laughed. "I knew you would say that." Natasha informed me that she was considering marrying an American through AnastasiaDate.com, a dating website that connects Ukrainian women to foreign men. She was nervous to tell me because there were mixed views about the "mail order bride" in Hlukhiv. Some marveled at the courage the young Ukrainian women displayed, and they saw their ticket to America as a wonderful opportunity. The elderly contradicted it though, displeased with the girls for their ungratefulness and lack of patriotism for their own country.

Years passed. Having graduated from the local university, I worked as the church secretary. Every month, more young women were leaving for America. Hearing stories of the wonderful lives they now possessed, I felt a tinge of jealousy. What was my future in Hlukhiv, Ukraine? There is a shortage of men in Ukraine and alcoholism is a widespread problem that leaves many young women looking overseas for a husband. Furthermore, there is political unrest stirring within Ukraine. I felt war was about to break out and could feel the tension growing every time I turned on the news. Our government is making decisions without the say of the people. Half the population in Ukraine wants to make a deal and become "European," while the other half wants to join with Russia. Our town is very small and unconcerned with troubles outside of Hlukhiv. I knew, however, that if the protesting continued on, it would affect everyone, and I had no desire to be in the midst of it. I knew I could not live in fear of our passed communist days, and needed to leave Ukraine. I now understood the desire to live in America.

Following Natasha's example, I got on AnastasiaDate.com. Applying for the website required applications and interviews, but I was accepted. I checked the website every day, growing tense whenever I received a message. One day, I received one from a man named Peter Johnson who was living in Boston. He was looking for a wife with traditional views of marriage and motherhood. Here was my chance. After hours of correspondence and a visit from Peter, I made my decision to marry. I tried not to think about it too much as packed my bags. I was going to a safer place full of opportunity! I thought of Natasha and her luck. I tried to see the same hopes for myself, but I could not help but come across stories of "mail order brides" while I was on the computer. There were horror stories of young women who were abused and even killed by their husbands. I thought of the conversations I'd had with Peter. Surely he would never do such a thing. I ignored my doubts and prayed to my patron Saint, Irene, for protection.

"God be with you", Mama whispered as I embraced her. "He always is," I responded,

trying not to cry. One look at Papa and my efforts were in vain as tears streamed down my cheeks. I did not bother to ask if they would come to America because I knew Papa would never leave the church. I clasped the three barred cross around my neck as the plane rose into the sky.

Our wedding was small and only a few of Peter's family members attended, but I did not mind. We were married in his church. The flat ceilings, the small stage with a pedestal, and the dark walls were far from the elaborate paintings, the gold leafed dome, and the candles of the Orthodox Church.

I found it difficult to adjust at first. The culture in America is remarkably different and the language is confusing to learn. In addition, to get to know someone new, especially when you are their wife, is slow and sometimes difficult. It took many months to feel settled, and it was not until I could speak the language that I started to feel at home. After some months, I visited Holy Trinity Orthodox Cathedral in Boston. It is not Russian Orthodox, and I did not know anyone. Finishing the Anaphora, I waited for The Lord's Prayer, hoping to recognize it when suddenly, "Our Father, who Art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name." I looked up and saw a few rows in front of me, a couple people reciting the prayer in Russian. I joined in. "Now and ever and unto ages of ages. Amen." Warmth filled my heart knowing that I was not alone in the church or in America.

My first years were so different from that which I knew from home, but I have grown accustomed to the culture and my husband. I watch Ukrainian news and pray for my parents and my native country. I now understand the courage it takes to give up a way of life and move to another country, but America is safe and full of possibilities. I have made close friends with other ladies from my church who are also from former USSR countries. Many were also "mail order brides" who immigrated the same way I did. We laugh silently at the expressions we get from other Americans when they find this out. I miss Hlukhiv, and hope very much that someday I will be able to return and visit, but I thank God for all he has blessed me with.

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