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Flashback to Bruges

Perspective

BY DEAN NELSON



Bruges

SITTING IN THE THEATER with my wife on the opening weekend of the movie *In Bruges* should have been fun. It should have reminded me of our 25th wedding anniversary in that beautiful city. The actors, hit men who were hiding out there after a killing, were despondent over their bad fortune to have to stay in Bruges, because it was so boring. The movie should have brought back fond memories of our 10 days in that boring but wonderful city known as the cultural capital of the European Union.

But I couldn't shake that gnawing in the pit of my stomach. It was chilly in the theater, and winter on the screen. Still, I was drenched in sweat. All I could think about was being in a notary public's office when it dawned on me that my marriage, in that very moment, might be ending.

We were planning our first international trip without our kids. We wanted to take it easy, though—no hiking, climbing or cave-dwelling. A little sightseeing, maybe. We wanted interesting, beautiful, relaxing, outside the United States, alone. And a place we hadn't been before.

Someone mentioned Bruges, so we looked it up on the Internet. It had lots of art museums, was beautifully preserved from the medieval period and even had one of the few Michelangelo sculptures outside of Italy. It sounded like Florence with breweries.

We found an apartment for rent, just off the Bruges city square, that was bigger and better furnished than our house in San Diego. Other things soon fell into place. Even the airline had frequent-flyer seats on the dates we needed.

Just to be sure, though, my wife suggested we revise our will. She's a planner. She saw this anniversary coming during year 23. For any overnight trip, the suitcases come down from the attic two weeks in advance. If people stop over and see stacks of clothing and suitcases in the living room, they say, "Did we catch you just as you were leaving?"

"No," I say with a sigh. "We have a few weeks yet."

For the will to be official and legal, my wife felt it needed a notary's stamp. She made an appointment for the Friday afternoon before our departure on Wednesday morning. "Please stop by the safety-deposit box and get our passports on your way over," she said. I was glad she had suggested this, because I couldn't find my passport anywhere in my desk or briefcase or garage.

While waiting for the notary to ask for my signature, I began looking at my passport, starting at the back, admiring the beautiful stamps some countries put on those pages. India's is colorful. The visa from China brought back lots of memories. Tanzania, Macedonia, Spain, Austria, the Netherlands—all magnificent reminders of what an eventful few years it had been. When I got to the front of the passport, my eyes wandered down the information lines.

"When does your passport expire?" my wife asked. I could have sworn cold air came out of her mouth, just like Bruce Willis' wife at the end of *Sixth Sense*. Suddenly I could see dead people. They all looked like me. I handed her my passport and put my head in my hands. She handed the document to the notary. No one spoke.

I called the passport service agency in Los Angeles. Yes, they have a same-day service, but they do it by appointment only, and the first available time was in a week. I called the airline. The cost of buying new tickets at this late a date was prohibitive. The apartment was booked through the rest of the year. The gods suddenly hated our marriage. They wanted it to fail.

While contemplating whether we would indeed see our relationship to year 25, I looked at the back of my passport. The service I had used to get visas for China and Tanzania had put its stamp and phone number on the passport's plastic casing. I called them and explained my situation. I did what I was told, feeling like I was talking to hostage-takers telling me where to drop off the money if I wanted to see my baby again. Name the time. Name your price. Add some zeroes to it. I won't call the authorities. Just give me back my marriage, I beg you!

Things seemed okay between my wife and me on the surface. We told the kids about it. My daughter would pass me in the house, pause and hug me unsolicited, as if I were about to smoke my last cigarette before the execution. I caught my son staring at me from another room. "What?" I asked. He slowly shook his head. "You are so screwed," he said.

The passport service called on Monday afternoon. Bad news. I had forgotten to sign the back of one of the forms. Passport rejected.

My wife saw my body language and stood behind the chair I was sitting in while I discussed my options on the phone. She reached down and began to massage my shoulders. I tucked my chin at first, hoping she wasn't actually feeling for my windpipe, but when I realized she was getting the picture that our anniversary trip was not going to happen because of me, after two years of planning, and she was still willing to share this shameful moment with me, I understood the concept of grace.

"There's still a chance this will work," the bored voice in Washington said. "Sign the form now, fax it to me, and we'll take it in first thing Tuesday. We'll get it on the earliest overnight, and you might have it by 8 a.m. Wednesday."

The airport shuttle was coming at 9:30 a.m. It was the only option left.

I woke up at 3 a.m. and turned on the television to see if there were any storms or accidents on the East Coast. I woke up again at 5 and saw that Marcia was already up, staring out the kitchen window into the darkness. At 7:30 a van pulled in front of the house. The driver had an envelope. I signed for it before he was completely out of his vehicle. Two hours later another van arrived and took us to the airport. Within a day we were riding bikes along canals in Bruges, playing in the North Sea, enjoying the art and sights during the day and the jazz clubs at night. I massaged Marcia's shoulders a lot.

In the movie, one of the assassins likens Bruges to hell. Another considers it like being in a fairy tale. Guess which one I agree with.

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