

Love American Style (Or How Pop Got his Green Card)

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My pop, Nigel Pepper, came to the United States in 1971. He flew here illegally, using a network of bribes. When Air Jamaica touched ground in Queens, New York, Pop must have imagined endless nights of disco dancing, wearing his white Nehru suit and matching white leather platform shoes. Instead, the INS stalked him at the restaurants where he waited tables. The immigration officials didn't care that he was half English or that he went to a fancy prep school in Kingston up to the age of eighteen. To the men in gray flannel suits, Pop was just another nigger loose on the streets of New York.

Mom says he married her for a green card. After they'd been together for years, she found out that he'd tried and failed with three other women: a Swede whom he mistook for an American, a black militant, and the seventy-year-old land lady of his apartment building. "The bastard didn't want to be deported," says Mom. "Only I was too dumb to know it then." They met on a street corner in the East Village. Mom was crying because her fiancé had just ended their engagement; Pop gave her a handkerchief. "Stupid," she says. "I was just plain stupid."

Throughout their fifteen-year marriage—Pop's sexual relationships with other women and his alcoholism—Mom seemed to resent his immigration status more than anything else. I'll never forget the evening Mom, my brother and me watched the movie *Green Card*

together on the living room couch. It was the year before I graduated from high school, married the first man that smiled at me and ran screaming from New York. Mom sat on the couch, saying, “Bullshit!” again and again, more to herself than to my brother or me. In the movie, Gérard Depardieu plays a Frenchman who has been offered a job in the U.S. But to get the job, he must obtain a work permit, green card, and the easiest way is to marry an American. Andie MacDowell plays a New York horticulturist who has just found the perfect apartment with its own greenhouse. Unfortunately, the building is for married couples only. A marriage of convenience seems the ideal solution for both of them. To convince the INS that their marriage is for real, they move in together, and over the next hour of the movie, they fall in love.

“Bullshit!” said Mom. “In real life, she would have fallen in love, but he would just be pretending.” She wagged her finger at the TV screen: “Don’t you believe him!” she warned Andie MacDowell.

I believe in the identity of the soul, and I think that if my parents hadn’t gotten together, I would have ended up somewhere else, maybe with people who were high school sweethearts or at least citizens of the same country. Yet I’d like to think that their getting together was no accident, that my father saw my mother crying on that corner in the East Village for a reason.

Pop’s day began like any other since he’d arrived in New York. The hot water ran out halfway through his shower; he shaved, conked his hair and dressed in his black slacks and bright red, Chinese jacket—the kind of jacket David Carradine wore the following year in Kung

Fu, except his was drab white. Before Pop left his apartment to take the subway to Chinatown, he looked in the mirror and winked. "I'm so pretty," he might have said, imitating Mohammed Ali as he did often when my brother and I were kids. I never heard him mention Ali's stance on Vietnam or his conversion to Islam; I think he liked the champ because he was fine-looking, caramel-colored, never backed off from a fight, and basically reminded Pop of himself: "Rumble, young man, rumble."

He was at the Chinese Palace, picking up an order of egg foo young when Helga stuck her head through the kitchen door. I imagine her with creamy white skin, sparkling blue eyes and shiny yellow hair in two pigtailed—like the naughty Swedish maid character featured in strip clubs.

"It's the men again," she whispered through pouting pink lips. "They want to know if we have Jamaicans working here."

It was the immigration officials. Pop dropped the plate of egg foo young and made like Tommie Smith at the 1968 Olympics. He pushed through the back door and sprinted down the Chinatown alleyway. Back in Jamaica, he'd run track and field. When he was drunk, he repeated to my brother and me that he would have made it to the Olympics if it hadn't been for a torn hamstring three days before a qualifying race. The hamstring healed, and although he had no medal to show for it, he was still fast. Running from the INS, he covered a half-mile in a few minutes. He looked down at his bright red waiter's jacket and realized that he might as well be racing down Broadway with a deportation schedule on his back. He pulled off the jacket and tossed it into a dumpster. Glancing over his shoulder, his

chest relaxed at no sign of the men. He eased into his stride. Helga probably stalled the suits back at the Chinese Palace, he thought. By the time they tore their watery eyes away from her cleavage, he'd be halfway to Little Italy.

Pop smiled. Helga was a good friend, always willing to help out. If he was late making it to the restaurant, she covered for him, waiting his tables until he showed up. He knew she would have helped him with his green card, if she could. Every time they screwed, standing up in the restaurant supply closet, he was positive that he'd found his blonde, blue-eyed ticket to permanent residency. Sure, he noticed her accent, but being new to the United States, he couldn't tell the difference between a Brooklyn accent and a Swedish one. Then, one day, while she was pulling down her underwear and trying not to knock over a stack of toilet paper rolls, she mentioned that she was looking forward to going home for winter break. She was a film student at NYU and the semester had been a challenge.

"And where's home?" asked Pop, hoping he'd be invited to meet the parents of his potential wife.

"Stockholm," she replied.

"Is that in the Midwest?" He hoped that she meant New Stockholm. He imagined a farming town with big black and white spotted cows like he'd seen in the dairy commercials on TV.

"No, silly boy," Helga shook her head, blonde pigtailed swaying from side to side. "It's in Sweden."

Pop realized that marrying Helga may have guaranteed him safe passage into Sweden, but would be no help whatsoever in securing his place in line to American citizenship. Hence, when she came back

from winter break, Pop played nooky with her in the supply closet a few more times, but he lacked his former enthusiasm and when a box of chopsticks fell on his head, he took it as a sign to direct his energies elsewhere.

With his caramel-colored skin, wavy black hair, toothpaste commercial smile, and plantain-sized penis, how difficult could it be to find an American wife?

People stared at him as he ran by. He looked at the small yellow men and women and forced a smile. "Exercise!" he shouted, as though raising his voice would improve their English comprehension. "I'm exercising!" He pumped his arms back and forth for emphasis. The seat of his black slacks had wedged itself up his ass and he wondered if he would ever be able to stop running.

After discovering that Helga was as Swedish as meatballs in lingonberry jam, Pop started dating Maude, a drug store cashier. He went to People's Drug in Greenwich Village every payday to buy toiletries, including toothpaste, cologne and hair conk.

"Forget this stuff," Maude said, picking up the jar of blue conk. "Love yourself, brother," she lifted her dark hand and patted the Afro on top of her head. "Go natural, baby." She winked.

Pop thought that Afros made people look like savages. But he liked the way Maude winked at him, and she had a nice figure, a slim waist, and perky breasts not restrained by a bra. He could see her nipples, poking through her tight black t-shirt.

"Why should I love myself, when there are beautiful women to love me?" He returned her wink.

Maude opened her mouth wide and threw her head back in laughter. "Brother," she said, "you sure is corny." She put her hands on her small waist. "But you sure is fine."

She got off work in twenty minutes. Pop waited outside the store, trying not to gloat to passersby. When Maude walked through the door of People's Drug, she looked even better than she had behind the register. Her figure was a perfect hourglass, and on top of her nice body, she had a long slender neck and a pretty face. It was only the hair that Pop didn't like; maybe he could convince her to relax it.

She took him to a soul food restaurant, where he forced down some collard greens and corn bread. Pop thought that the food black Americans ate was bland, but he didn't want to ruin the evening, so he forced a smile and swallowed bite after bite. After dinner, Maude invited him up to her place. It turned out that she rented the apartment over the People's Drug.

Once inside, she was a tigress, pushing him back on the bed and straddling him with her strong thighs. They had been at it for hours when she rolled over and looked at him.

"Nigel," she said.

He hoped that she didn't want to go again, because he knew he didn't have it in him.

"There are some folks I think you need to meet."

He imagined her parents—black Americans from the south, who'd feed him peach cobbler and fried chicken. He would show them what a gentleman he was by asking the father for Maude's hand in marriage.

"You heard of the Black Bullets?" she said.

Pop hadn't heard of them. "What kind of music do they play?" he asked, yawning; she had worn him out.

Maude laughed. "They ain't a band."

"Oh," said Pop, his eyelids feeling heavy.

"Just meet me here tomorrow, and I'll take you to a meeting."

She smiled. "It's about time you done had yo' consciousness raised."

The following evening, Pop brushed his teeth, shaved his face, and applied extra hair conk. He figured that Maude was taking him to a party, maybe even an orgy. He dressed in his white Nehru suit with matching white leather platform shoes. Before he left, he threw a quick combination punch in front of the mirror: "The greatest of all time!"

He met Maude at her apartment in Greenwich Village and the two took the subway up to Harlem.

"The Bullets changed my life," she told Nigel when they walked out of the subway at 125th Street and Lenox Avenue. "I never used to be political," she said. "I permed my hair, wore the latest styles," she ran her eyes over his suit and platform shoes. "I used to be a lot like you, Nigel." Her eyes widened as though she had thought of something exciting, "Until I decolonized my mind!"

Pop was certain that she was talking about drugs; maybe some of that psychedelic stuff that made you hear colors and see sounds. He'd never tried anything like that before and was looking forward to the new experience.

"I hope they open your mind, like they did for me," she said.

"Right on!" said Pop, getting into the groove of things.

They walked a few blocks to an apartment building, where someone buzzed them in. Going up the stairs, Pop thought that they must

be early because he didn't hear any of the usual music or laughter associated with a party.

"Here," said Maude, out of breath. She knocked on an apartment door and someone answered.

Pop looked inside and saw a group of black people, wearing uniform black t-shirts and black berets perched on top of Afros. They were sitting in folding chairs, forming a circle around a man dressed like the rest of them; he was holding some papers in his hand and looked like he was about to begin reading aloud.

Pop looked at Maude. He'd noticed that she always wore black, but he hadn't realized that it was a uniform. "What sort of party is this?" he asked.

"It ain't a party," whispered Maude. "It's a meeting."

"Oh," said Pop as his date guided him by the elbow to two empty folding chairs in the circle.

A ripple of black berets turned in unison to look at him.

"This here is a meeting of the Black Bullets," said one man with a particularly tall Afro beneath his beret. "Brother, you must have got lost on your way to the disco."

Everyone laughed.

Maude stood up. "Cut him some slack, man," she said to the guy with the big Afro, "He jus' need to have his consciousness raised!"

"He sure do," said the man standing in the middle of the circle, holding the papers. "Brother," he looked at Pop. "Ain't you tired of living like a house nigga?"

A comment like this would have infuriated Pop. He didn't see himself as a nigger, house or otherwise. He didn't even see himself as

black. He thought of himself as brown, and damn good-looking. When African-Americans talked to him about living in the slave master's house or evils of The Man, Pop always laughed. He would say that his father was white, an Englishman who sent him to prep school, paid for his uniforms and his running shoes. The only disservice that Man did was to die and leave all his money to his legitimate children in England.

He looked over the group of black people, wearing drab black clothes. He didn't come to New York, the fashion capital of the world, to wear the same outfit everyday.

"Indeed, I should go to the discotheque," he said in the English accent he affected when he wanted to demonstrate his superior class and breeding. "There I may encounter people with a sense of style, as it is apparent that not a one of you here has the tiniest bit!"

The man in the center of the circle looked at Maude. "Are you going to show this low-class mulatto gigolo the door, or should I?"

"You needn't bother," said Pop, looking at Maude. "I'm on my way out." He walked across the apartment to the door, the heels of his platform shoes clunking against the wood floor.

Pop was still running. He left Chinatown and crossed over into Little Italy. A burly Italian man wearing an apron was sweeping outside a bakery.

"Hey, jigaboo!" he yelled at Pop. "What's the hurry?"

Pop didn't shout that he was exercising, as he had in Chinatown. If he said that here, a bunch of goodfellas with pipes and bats may

have decided to give him a real workout. Instead, he looked straight ahead and picked up the pace.

Would this ever be his country? he wondered. To white America, he was just another nigger who came over on the banana boat, although he'd actually flown on a plane. He was an illegal alien, a parasite to be plucked from the pink flesh of the land. To black America, he was an Uncle Tom for not expressing an interest in their causes, for conking his hair and screwing white women as readily as he did black.

Yet, he'd had little choice other than to immigrate. By the time he turned eighteen, he'd exhausted his possibilities in Jamaica. He'd run over every inch of the island and hadn't made it to the Olympics. When he graduated from prep school, he worked for his father, Frederick Pepper, collecting rent from the tenant farmers on his banana plantation. Pop's mother was one of the tenants, and although Mr. Pepper excused her from paying rent, she would sometimes send a message instead: "Tell your fader that me hope he choke on one of him banana!"

One afternoon, Pop stopped by the old man's house with the bag of cash he'd collected that month, only to find him lying dead on the kitchen floor with half a banana sticking out of his mouth. Pop thought he'd choked, but the doctor said he'd had a heart attack while eating the banana.

Within a week, Mr. Pepper's attorney arrived from England. He was a small man with a comb over, and a three-piece suit in the one-hundred-degree weather. He put up for sale Mr. Pepper's land and his

two hotels. Then, after taking his cut, he took the rest of the proceeds back to England to distribute among Mr. Pepper's legitimate offspring.

Pop was out of a job and his mother had to start paying rent. Around that time, he started receiving letters and packages from his cousin Felix, the son of his mother's sister. Felix, in the United States illegally, worked as a valet at a fancy New York hotel. He wrote that life in America was good; he sometimes made as much as twenty dollars a day in tips, and he got to spend most of it on himself since American women were "liberated" and liked to pay their own way.

He sent old issues of *Playboy*. Pop looked at the glossy photos of buxom, pink-skinned women rolling around in the grass with their boyfriends or underneath the office desk with their bosses. He wanted a slice of the joy.

Pop stopped running once he reached the East Village. Damn the INS! He thought. What right did those bastards in gray flannel suits have to stand between him and endless nights of lovemaking? He walked through Tompkins Square Park, trying to think of his next move.

His thinking process, however, was disrupted by a group of Puerto Ricans standing around a park bench, speaking Spanish. I recall Pop expressing on more than one occasion his belief that the Spanish language sounded like unholy gibberish. For this reason, he disallowed my mother from speaking it in his presence.

Furthermore, Pop especially resented Puerto Ricans, more than other Spanish speakers, because although many of them appeared uneducated and uncouth, they could come and go as they pleased from the United States. While he, a well-mannered, prep-school-educated snappy dresser had to resort to outlandish schemes.

Once Pop's phony tourist visa expired, the INS started to sniff around like bloodhounds on the bunny trail. A couple of suits showed up at his apartment building one day, asking the landlady, Miss Eugenia, if she harbored illegal aliens. She popped her dentures out of her mouth and told them that a space ship had recently landed on the roof of the building. Would the INS consider the little green occupants illegal? The space men had promised to help her grow new teeth.

Later that day, Miss Eugenia grabbed Pop by the elbow as he walked through the front door of the building, returning home from his shift at the Chinese Palace.

"You got some problems, boy," she said, spraying him with spit.

"What sort of problems?" he asked.

"Boy, what you think?" Still holding onto his elbow, with her free hand, she adjusted the curly blonde wig she was wearing, "With the immigration service. There was men here to-day!"

"Damn the INS!" Pop stamped his feet. He looked down at Miss Eugenia's face, dark and shriveled as a prune. "What should I do?" he asked.

Her black eyes sparkled; there was a constellation of tiny moles beneath each one. "Boy, you has got to marry an American citizen!" she said.

"I know! I know!" said Pop, disappointed that she suggested something so obvious. "I've been trying, but I haven't found the right woman."

"No shit, boy." She let go of Pop's elbow. "Well, you is in luck because it so happens that Miss Eugenia is single and available." Pop

looked at the woman old enough to be his grandmother.

“Available?” he said.

“That’s right, boy.” She nodded and her wig slipped forward on her head. “For a fee.”

“A fee?”

“Yeah, boy. I ain’t gonna do it out of the kindness of my heart, you know.”

Pop had heard of women who promised to marry illegal aliens in exchange for money. But he’d also heard that most of them were scam artists, who took the cash and then didn’t show up at the courthouse.

“How much?” he asked.

Miss Eugenia adjusted her wig. “Two hundred.”

Two hundred dollars was an entire month’s earnings at the Chinese Palace. “How do I know you won’t run off with my money?” he asked.

She laughed and the top row of her dentures fell out. She grabbed them as they slipped onto her chin and stuck them back in her mouth. “Boy, I’m seventy years old. Where am I going to run to?”

“Two hundred, you say?”

She nodded. “Or you can pay with nature’s currency.” She winked.

“Two hundred sounds reasonable.”

Pop stood panting in Tompkins Square Park, his white undershirt and black slacks sticking to his body with sweat. He walked past the Puerto Ricans, and kept walking until he saw an empty park bench. It felt good to sit down. He rubbed his fingertips against his temples in a circular motion. Immigration must have rejected his marriage

to Miss Eugenia, because of her age. He had paid that greedy buzzard two hundred of his hard-earned American dollars for nothing. Now what? Where would he find a young, single, American woman willing to become the next Mrs. Nigel Pepper?

"I will not marry you!" shouted a one-armed man. He looked Puerto Rican.

"But Poncho!" cried a slender young woman. "I waited all this time! I saved myself for you!"

"Woman, can't you see that things are different now? I lost my fucking arm in that jungle!"

"But —"

"But nothing." The one-armed Puerto Rican walked away, leaving the woman crying on the street corner.

Pop looked at Mom, with her head lowered, sobbing. She was about twenty years old. When I think of my mother, I visualize the gray-haired, thick-waisted woman familiar to me. She's looked the same way since my brother and I were kids. When I was in second grade, my classmates would ask if she was my grandmother. Yet, I know from looking at old photos that it wasn't until she was about thirty that her hair turned gray and she started gaining weight. Before that she was thinner than Twiggy, with long black tresses that she wore parted in the middle, like Cher.

Pop looked at Mom and he may have seen the answer to his troubles in the United States. She was pretty, young and single. He probably also thought that she'd be easy to manipulate, since her fiancé had just dumped her. However, I like to think that he saw her crying, looked at her slight frame and wanted to protect her.

He approached. “Excuse me, Miss...” He pulled the handkerchief from his slack’s pocket.

“Oh, thank you. How kind.” Mom blew her nose.

“I couldn’t help but notice. . . you and the one-armed man.”

“Yes. That’s Poncho. My fiance—well, ex-fiance.” She sniffled. “He just came back from the war and doesn’t want me anymore.”

Pop thought she looked cute when she sniffled with her tiny nose, like a bunny rabbit. And, yes—considering that he’d been running from the INS all morning—it was not only her cute nose that he noticed. Mom had some sort of accent, but he couldn’t tell whether it was a New York accent or an accent from some foreign land. After all, he’d made that mistake with Helga.

“What a pity,” he said. “You came all the way to a new country only to have your heart broken.”

“What new country?” Mom asked, raising her thick black eyebrows.

“This country,” said Pop. “The United States.”

“Oh!” Mom laughed. “I was born and raised here in New York City!”

Pop smiled. He felt new hope stirring in his immigrant breast.

“But you look so—exotic,” he said.

Mom wrinkled her nose and her forehead, the way she still does when she’s embarrassed. “Me? I’m a mutt, a mixture,” she said.

“My father is from Ecuador, and my mother is Polish-American.” She smiled and shrugged her slender shoulders. “But I was definitely born here.”

Although they’d just met, Pop grabbed Mom’s small hand and squeezed it. Mom says that he married her for a green card, and maybe she’s not all wrong. Yet I think at that moment of their

meeting, he felt a connection with a fellow half-breed, someone else caught between worlds. Maybe he imagined their children—
American super mutts with olive skin, black hair and brown eyes.
Maybe as Pop stood on that street corner in the East Village,
squeezing Mom's hand, he thought he'd found a home. □