

SAVED BY THE ROO

Stella Pulo

Whenever I tell anyone about the saga of getting a ‘Green Card’ everyone says the same thing, ‘Why didn’t you find some American bloke, give him some money and get him to marry you like in that movie ‘Green Card’. (Australian director, by the way.) It would’ve been cheaper.’

Cheaper. Definitely! But simpler? There were all these stories about how spies from the Immigration and Naturalization Service here in America would break into your apartment to check and see if you both shared the same underwear drawer. Or they’d get you and interview you separately without prior notice and ask you if he had any distinguishable marks and objects, such as tattoos and other things, on his private parts and, of course, if you weren’t really really married, or at least in a relationship, you wouldn’t know.

I didn’t marry anyone for my ‘Green Card’. I missed out three times in the ‘Green Card’ lottery, when Australia was finally one of the countries in the ‘Green Card’ lottery. Didn’t buy a ‘Green Card’ from the little Russian shoemaker on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Didn’t do anything illegal. Didn’t pretend I was a student, a model or a nanny. Neither did I pretend I was a nun so that I could get a Religious visa. They exist too. I got something called an ‘Alien of Extraordinary Ability’ visa, an EB1.

After Immigration and Naturalization approve the petition you have to attend an interview at the US Consulate. I’m from Melbourne but the US Consulate I had to go to was in Sydney.

I sit in my hotel room at the Koala Travel Lodge in Oxford Street, Sydney, triple checking that I have everything: current passport, two passport size colour photographs, ¾ angle, no earrings, birth certificate, health clearance, police clearances from all the countries I’ve lived in for six months or longer, easy enough to get, except when one of the countries is Japan! Bank statements. Letter of Intent. Somewhere to live. Somewhere to work. Somewhere to die. Blood! They want blood. And they want even more money.

‘Where’s the health clearance?’ she asks in a sugary sweet voice.

‘What? It’s there! It’s there! I checked everything a thousand times.’

‘Oh! Here it is. Naughty. Hiding behind the big fat clip,’ she giggles.

‘Phew! You nearly gave me a heart attack. No! No! I didn’t mean that. My heart’s in really good nic,’ I exclaim. ‘Well, health-wise, anyway.’

‘The Consul General will be with you shortly,’ she says.

Please God(ess). Make him greet me with a big friendly smile. He greets me.

‘Miss Pulo. Your ‘Alien of Extraordinary Ability’ visa has been approved and all your documents are in good order. Congratulations. In two weeks you’ll receive a package. Carry it with you in hand luggage. Don’t lose it. Don’t forget it at home. And whatever you do, don’t open it!’ he warned. Have a safe trip Miss Pulo.’

Oh my God! This package. What’s in it? You’re not supposed to carry anything on an aeroplane if you haven’t packed it yourself.

I arrived at JFK, package in hand. My EB1 testimonials as it turned out. But I’d forgotten my chest X Rays in my father’s wardrobe back home in Melbourne and I was supposed to carry them in hand luggage too. Luckily I’d packed a tin of Australian hard candy which I’d bought at Melbourne Airport, silly little wombats, koalas and kookaburras. I frantically pulled out the tin of candy, opened it and started offering them to the Immigration Officer hoping to distract him so that he didn’t ask for the X Rays, and it worked. He painstakingly examined each piece of candy and then said ‘Next time don’t forget ...’

My heart felt like it had stopped.

‘...the kangaroo,’ he said menacingly. ‘May I see your passport, Miss?’

‘Sure. Can’t keep it though,’ I chuckle excitedly.

‘I don’t want to keep it Miss. Just want to stamp it.’

I knew of a comedian back home in Australia who could speak for hours without moving his face. This guy could do it too except he wasn’t making anyone laugh.

‘See Miss. Stamping passports is my job and I gotta do my job. That’s a mighty good photograph of you Miss but it don’t look like you. Are you sick today or tired or something? I’ve been sitting here for thirty-three years. Don’t know if I’m sick, tired or dead. Had a wife and six kids to feed. Now I’ve only got the wife. Food bill’s the same though. Hey, you wanna take her back to Oustraylia with you? She’s always saying she’s gonna leave me. I’d like to try and make it a little easy for her. So, you’ve come to live in the States.’

‘New York! I’ve come to live and work in New York. It’s like a dream come true.’

‘A dream come true, ha? Just watch you don’t get drugged, mugged, catch some weird disease or get thrown down the subway tracks. Those trains move pretty fast Miss. Before you know it you’re hamburger meat. I’m not kidding. Happens every day. You can read about it in the *New York Times*, *New York Post*, *Daily News*,

Newsday. Any place you want. Gotta be tough in the Big Apple. Don't let anyone mess with you. You know what I'm saying? Welcome to the United States of America Miss.'

I get out of the airport and into a cab.

'New York's got very expensive Miss. Ever since the Bloomberger. Everything expensive. Ever have to bury your mother in New York? I tell you that was expensive. Not like in the Dominican Republic where I come from. Everything cheap. Food cheap. Funerals cheap. Don't know what she thought she was doing just going and dying like. In New York! No warning. Nothing. Bloomberger!'

The cab driver complains about Mayor Bloomberg all the way to midtown Manhattan.

I get to the apartment building I'm staying at. The elevator's packed. A woman stands next to me shoveling potato chips into her mouth. Just as many land onto the ground. She catches me looking at her and assumes that this is an open invitation to tell her life story.

'Do you like my badge?' she demanded.

It read 'Make dog walking easy. Breed 'em siamese.'

'That's funny,' I replied.

'It ain't funny at all,' she snapped. 'It's practical! My doctor says I'm obese. That's why I went and got two dogs. I knew I'd have to walk 'em and that would be my exercise. But I had difficulties bending over and picking up after them. I started to develop real bad ingrown eyelashes. Not just one but a whole field of 'em. The doctor said it was from the stress of the dogs. I was doing real dumb stuff like sticking the cotton sticks too deep into my ears so that the stick came out but the cotton didn't,' she continued.

A man with a thick Irish accent who was standing in the corner of the elevator decided to throw in his two bob's worth.

'Only the Good Lord knows how much cotton's lodged in her head by now,' he laughed.

'No one's talking to you asshole. Why don't you go back to Ireland where you came from and grow more potatoes!' she retaliated.

'Why don't you stop eating them? You're going to explode if you're not careful. Can't imagine anyone making love to you. He'd have to fight the flesh to find anything.'

The elevator stops on the twenty-sixth floor. The woman gets out. I get out too. Dump my stuff inside the apartment and catch the elevator on its way back

down. Another woman enters. She's got crimson hair, aqua snake skin sunglasses and a dog. An enormous dog with that look of ecstasy on its face that all New York dogs have when they're descending a skyscraper and going for a walky poo.

'I suppose you're wondering where my pooper scooper is,' she says. 'With a dog this big I'd need a wheel barrow. Much easier to keep it constipated'.

I started to laugh.

'Don't laugh! My dog may be big but it's sensitive and strangers are expected to know that. Where do you come from anyway?' she asked.

'Australia,' I answered humbly.

'Oh! That figures. That's why you don't know about dogs. You guys got them hopping things. Well, this is New York and New York's got dogs. Lots of them. You have to like dogs if you're gonna live in New York or you just gotta go back to where you came from.'

I kept a straight face till I left the building and then laughed all the way to the pretzel stand on the corner of 42nd Street and Eighth Avenue.

