Mark and Mary

A Short Story from Times Past

By Maryanne Peters

It came from one of those misunderstandings that you hear about, but it was to shape our family in a most unusual way.

Widower Marek Janski stood in the queue in Ellis Island, and with him were his two sons Pavel and Radek. His English had been improved on the trip over, but he was still feeling his way. He knew to say his surname first.

“Janski, Marek”, he placed some papers before the man in the booth, who was checking the manifest against the forms and issuing accommodation vouchers. “This one Janski, Pavel. “This one Janski, Radek.”

The stamp crashed down and he hardly noticed the figure behind step forward.

“Marijonski, Wit”.

“With them? I understand.” The man in the booth pulled the voucher back as Marek was to take it and made the changes. Marie Janski. Marek and Marie Janski. Mark and Mary Johns. My ancestors.

When Marek looked at the person whose name had been added to theirs to share family accommodation on the Lower East Side, he also may have assumed her to be Marie, but that was not her name, because she was not even a woman. This was Wit Marijonski, from Poland, an artist and teacher. He was not tall, his blond hair was long, and is face was young and fresh, and he wore a long cloak that could have been taken for a woman’s garment.

“Please, if you will let me stay with you just until I find my feet,” Wit said to Marek, in near perfect English, not that Marek would know. “As a man alone, I would have no chance except in some crowded dormitory”.

Marek understood not one word, but what he knew was that this was good English. That proved that he, Marek, was at a real disadvantage, and this person was not. Wit, as his name was, could be of use to the family.

“Okay,” It was his favorite word of his new language. “You come with us. You talking English. Maybe you be my wife, for now. For one day or two.” Marek smiled. He was renowned for his humor. It had got him through a lot, and for his sons it was the fire that warmed the family.

It seemed like a good arrangement. Wit would stay at home for a few days while Marek went looking for work. He could take the place of his wife who had not been a Marie, but it was a common name in Bohemia as well as Poland. Wit could teach the children English and American history and geography, and they could share the 1 room apartment for a few days until something better could be found.

The accommodation that had been arranged was in a five storey block. The rent was low because it was limited to families, and the rule was that this meant parents and children and no more than two grandparents. That meant that that when it came to going out, Wit would need to be Marie.

On his first outing Marek brought home a dress. It was something that had been made available in a bin of charity clothing and had been rejected by all the other immigrant women because it was considered too ornate for practical wear – a cast off from one of the fine and charitable ladies of New York City. Perhaps Wit was one of the few new arrivals who could appreciate the beauty and craftmanship in the garment. He resolved that he would wear it, but that would be difficult.

“You need to find me a corset,” he told Marek. The puzzled look in reply forced Wit to use his artistic hand to draw one, which was the way they added to their understanding.

From the day that Marek brought home that corset, Wit wore only women’s clothes, with the exception of the cloak which could be worn by either sex, and that lasted just one more winter.

It was not what was intended by either of them, but they had formed a partnership of a kind, and it required less of Wit, or so it seemed to him. He felt that he should make an effort to pass better as a woman, for Marek’s sake, and for the boys that she might escort. Wit plucked out his beard and put up his blonde hair. It was said that “Marie Janski is a striking woman” – perhaps they meant more beautiful than pretty, but that she was.

The fact is that they had grown to appreciate the partnership that had developed. They had complementary personalities. Marek was practical and good humored. His children always remembered that he was often late home, but from the moment he entered there was laughter. Marie was educated and tidy, ambitious and strategic, but she loved to smile, and Mark was there to make her.

As a woman “she” was always well presented. That first dress led the way. The charity bins had other such garments if you were prepared to look for them. But Marie was also concerned that her charges should dress well, and good clothes for boys were harder to find.

Marie used her talent to do some line drawings – line sketches of New York City street scenes from the time, which she was able to sell to a dealer. The money was not much in the early stages, but she spent it all on her sons, which is what they were to her.

“Young men should always be well dressed, well behaved and well spoken,” she would say. “Only the first of these will cost money which I will find, but the other two are up to you.”

The truth was that she guided them in all three, and that truism has been passed on through our family. That and the need for a house full of happiness. The partnership of Marek and Marie made for just that.

But the provider was Marek. He was smart, but poorly educated but skilled with his hands and hard-working. More importantly, he had learned about the internal combustion engine, and for the Keating Wheel and Automobile Company which was one of the first companies to produce the engines in number. He left the company when it was sold to Eisenhuth Horseless Vehicle Company preferring to stay in New York.

Marek decided that before he joined Maxwell Briscoe Company as head of engineering, he should carry an America name, so he joined them as Mark Johns. His employer later became Maxwell Motor Company and built a series of successful automobiles out a factory in New Castle Indiana. Maxwell Motor Company traded until taken over by Chrysler in 1920.

So, the family moved from New York in 1907 as Mark and Mary Johns, and their sons Paul and Rodney. That was ten years after they had passed through Ellis Island, so Paul was 17 and Rodney 15. Mark was 37 and Mary 35.

Neither made any secret of their immigrant origins, and Mark retained a thick accent through his lifetime. Mary seemed to have no accent beyond that of a refined woman from the East Coast. There were rumors that she was a lady of some refinement who had met Mark in New York City – European yes, but perhaps aristocracy, maybe even royalty. Certainly she was regarded as being a classy lady, by the standards of the population of New Castle, Indiana, and he presence was desired. Yet she was never snobby or conceited, and prided herself on her ability to talk to anybody as an equal.

She continued to draw and to paint, and she actually assisted her husband’s employer with “artists impressions” of new models. But her art became more of a hobby, and added to her popular reputation.

It is hard for us to guess about the relationship beyond the appearance of the successful couple. It was assumed that they were husband and wife, and had married in Europe. They always present as a loving couple, but these were times when what is now known as “Public Displays of Affection” were limited. But in the household they shared a bed, and were always in a good mood on weekend mornings if that means anything.

There was also some conjecture that Mary may have been modified in some fashion. Certainly she retained all her hair until her death, although it was white by the end of WW2. She had given up corsets well before that, but it seemed that constant use may have shaped her body to that of a true woman.

Both Paul and Rodney went on to college at Purdue, 100 miles away from New Castle. Both studied engineering, with Paul going into aviation and Rodney agricultural machinery. These were areas that saw them avoid WW1 and they were too old for WW2. They built strong careers and they married and raised families.

Rodney Johns was my grandfather. My father Mark Johns Junior was born in 1926 and also avoided the war, although I did lose an uncle in the Pacific – a Seabee in the Marine Corps – in 1945. My great grandfather Mark Johns Senior died in the same year, aged 75. But my great grandmother, Mary Johns, although heartbroken by the death of her husband, lived on for another 20 years after that, finally dying at the age of 93.

So I remember her, and I remember her very well. Like many of my cousins, all descendants of the first Mark Johns, I was a baby boomer, so I had time with the grand old lady who was respected by all as the matriarch of our clan. None of us had any idea that she was not of our blood, let alone that she was not even a woman.

In fact if any of us had been asked – “who is the model of a good woman who all should aspire to”, then I would have said – “my great-grandmother, Mary Johns”.

I told her just that. She said to me – “But you are a young man. You don’t want to model yourself on a woman, surely?”

“But I do, Nana,” I told her, using the name for her that we all did. “The truth of it is that I feel that I am a woman inside. I don’t want to grow up as a man. I can’t tell Mom and Dad how I feel, or even Grandma, so I am telling you, in the hope that you might understand.”

“Better than anyone will ever know, I understand you my child,” she said.

The whole story came out.

Transitioning in the sixties and seventies was hard, but it was easier for me than most in my position. I had the model of a success to follow. And she had found herself a woman by accident. Yet she achieved a long-lasting love and a family who will live on into the future. I have made it my mission to do the same, and thanks to her, I have done just that.

The End

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