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Shinan: On the existentialism of Passport Canada



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There was a photo of a dolphin behind the nice man at the desk – possibly Flipper, I but cannot confirm. Meanwhile, the older woman in a shift dress scribbling madly beside me – a Montblanc, I can confirm – was on the phone at the same time, talking smack about a wedding.

“I’m not sure why they have to get married so soon,” she was telling the poor sod on the other line, as I gingerly elbowed for space at the desk, wearily shifting through forms at 74 Victoria Street, aka the ground-zero Passport Office in Toronto. “I also don’t know why they have to have a destination wedding, anyways,” the matron went on, sniffing and giving her very best Dowager Countess of Grantham.

Her ‘tude gave me pause. Her Montblanc gave me envy.

In the passport office — where neither social station or celebrity can drape you from the dreary bureaucracy of getting *out* — we’re all in the same row boat, but a proper pen can, at the very least, lend the occasion some dignity. In my fingers, as I filled out my deets right in the nick of time — my passport was up in two days — lay a pen that’d come from an airport Holiday Inn, presumably when I’d run into a boo-boo with a connecting flight back from L.A. months ago.

Why couldn’t my jacket pocket have unearthed a pen I’d nicked from the darling Hotel Jerome, in Aspen, at such an auspicious time as this? I was there in February. Or what about a pen from the Soho House, in Berlin, from my travels last summer? Somewhere, at home — I sighed — there was a nifty writing instrument from the ranch-style Four Seasons in Uruguay that I got to in Oh-Ten.

Seeing that I cannot professionally jet or set with a Canada-sanctioned document, this social columnist felt a trickle verklempt as he set about saying buh-bye to his old passport. Oh, the parties I had seen. Oh, the celebrities I had tracked. Marking the seasons, I strove to count: how many Art Basels in Miami had there been with this navy-blue buddy whose time now ticked? How *many* Cannes Film Fests? It was with this very document I had gone, after all, to the lavish re-opening of the Mamounia Hotel, in Morocco, a few Christmases ago, joining the likes of **Gwyneth Paltrow** at that desert-set blow-out.

Clearly, I was being a silly billy. That, or perhaps there’s some truth to the tale that passport offices — like airplanes — have a lower level of oxygen, thus causing general verklemptiude. I’ll stick to the latter story.

Slowly coming to my senses, I was then hit with a blast of existentialism when the man behind the desk — the one in front of the dolphin — asked me if I was going to be applying for the new 10-year passport (an option that Canada recently introduced). I think so, I told him. It occurred to me he looked not unlike Forrest Whitaker as *The Butler*.

“Everybody wants to do the 10 year,” he deadpanned. “Not me.”

I peered closer. “I don’t even know if I’m going to be alive then!” he went on. “Five years is good enough for me.”

But ... wait ... what about me? That chill they speak of ran up my spine. To sign up for the new 10-year evidently required a necessary glass-is-half-full stance ... but 10 years? Seemed so long. Would I still be going to parties professionally? An **Edvard Munch**-like horror screamed. (Who knew getting one’s passport could spur such a crisis?)

I decided then: Ten years it going to me. I choose life! That’s what I said to myself. (Added bonus: you get to stay frozen in time, pic-wise!)

Filling out the deets, and taking a ticket stub to go see someone at a counter in the next step in this rigamarole, I waited. And waited. Actually, it wasn’t as bad as I was making out to my head — and certainly people have been waiting longer in line for Cronuts.

Finally, up: my number.

The woman at the counter — the one who’d be taking my papers, my pics, and my money, — was lovely to talk to. A sterling bedside manner. She informed me that though the 10-year passport is convenient, it doesn’t come with double the pages of the five-year-passport. More, yes. But, not double. Be forewarned: her eyes told me.

“But what about **Ryan Gosling**?” I asked. “Does he not get more pages from Canada? There’s a lot of travel involved in being a movie star, y’know?”

Actually, that isn’t what I said ... but I sure wanted to.

Yes, I told the woman, I’ll still go with the 10-year-passport. What choice is there in life, after all, except optimism?