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We ring in number 30

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—Our 30th wedding anniversary fell on the first day or two of this week. Fortunately, I caught it before it fell very far and took a bad bounce.

It was the appropriate time to reflect on the three steps I had taken to getting married: 1) The Proposal, which involved a capsized canoe and two days of upchucking, as recounted last week; 2) The Wedding Ring; and 3) The Wedding.

I've been instructed by the Powers in Residence to write nothing about Step 3.

Alert women of a certain mindset will note that I've left out a step between The Proposal and The Wedding Ring. It's commonly known among brides as, The Engagement.

Among grooms -- or at least, among me -- engagement was something that a foot clutch effected between an engine and a rear axle. I had to learn that engagement had another meaning, one involving a ring job.

This is that story.

For reasons that I will pass over, I had managed to turn 37 without ever having been engaged in the pre-marital sense despite having been married once.

Neither I nor my first wife gave much thought to any of the three or four getting-married steps. No RFP was issued, and no proposal was submitted that I recall. No ring was expected or given. Neither did we swap vows. We asked for no gifts. I couldn't even *give away* my surname.

The bride wore bare feet and a flower in her hair. Being the more traditional of the two, I wore Limmer hiking boots and what hair I had left.

We did provide guests with food, which they ate, and a volleyball, which they didn't.

Goodness, my giant Saint Bernard, lapped up all the champagne left in flutes on the lawn. When she woke two days later, she suggested that we have a wedding every weekend.

The point of rehashing old hash is simply to show that I had no firsthand experience with either The Engagement or The Ring that sealed it.

In early 1983, just a few months before my second go at marriage, I had been asked by Cyril Ramaphosa, head of the newly formed National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) in South Africa, to come over and advise them on negotiating their first contract with the coal industry. Apartheid was the law in South Africa, and black miners were the point of the pick digging away at its foundation.

I applied for a visa and started reading about South African mining for coal, gold, platinum and diamonds. Working conditions were harder and more dangerous than in America and Europe. Wages and benefits for black miners were low. Life was a lot cheaper there, as measured by how much of it was spent getting the country's minerals out of the ground.

In the course of these preparations, I read about how De Beers, the South African diamond monopoly, had created the American market for engagement rings out of the thin air of advertising twaddle like "diamonds are forever." [In fact, diamonds can be chipped, crushed, shattered, incinerated, scratched, discolored and, of course, cut.] American *Mad Men* successfully romanticized an ordinary carbon stone that had little intrinsic value, was not rare or precious and had nothing to do with love or marriage.

Until the late 1800s, only a few pounds of diamonds were produced worldwide, and these were found in riverbeds rather than mined. When huge diamond deposits were discovered in South Africa, the financiers and mine owners needed to create a mass market for them and then limit that supply through manipulated scarcity to maintain stupidly high prices. By the 1980s, De Beers was running the world's most successful, long-lived and anticompetitive cartel. (Edward Jay Epstein, *The Diamond Invention*, 1982.)

For six months, nothing happened with my visa application despite my periodic inquiries. Phone calls from Blue Grass to Cyril in South Africa were either jammed or routed into dead air. I had no way of knowing whether any of my mailings got through. I assumed my letters to Cyril were scrutinized for expressions of radical hostility toward diamonds impaled on rings.

The South African authorities finally approved my visa—two weeks *after* the NUM's contract negotiations had concluded. "Welcome," the official letter said, "and enjoy your stay."

I was flattered that the apartheid government considered me a serious threat to the regime. Perhaps they'd found out that I was arming myself for an attack with a pencil and a pocket calculator. I was also angry.

On the other hand, I was glad that I was spared being tailed in Johannesburg 24 hours a day, interrogated by agents of the National Intelligence Service and lured into compromised positions by exotic women

practicing exotica whose compromises I would have had to have rejected owing to my recent marriage.

Any reasonable man -- I'm excluding alert women of a certain mindset -- can now understand why I was both ignorant of and skeptical about newly mined diamonds and engagement rings.

A month or so after my oddly construed marriage proposal was accepted, the following conversation took place between an Unnamed Party of the first part and me, the named party of the second part.

Unnamed Party: Where my ring?

Me: I thought we had agreed that I would give you my mother's wedding ring.

Unnamed: Yes, dear. That's a wedding ring. Where my ring?

Me: Aren't I supposed to give you your wedding ring at the wedding? [I may have been walking around with one more incorrect Yankee belief, which proper North Carolinians had rejected during the recent exchange of pleasantries 120 years earlier.]

Unnamed: Engagement ring! Not wedding ring.

Me: There are two rings? We're engaged? Who knew?

Unnamed: Well ... we are.

Me: When did that happen?

Unnamed: It happens after the proposal is accepted and before the wedding.

Me: I thought that was the honeymoon.

Unnamed: Think of engagement as earnest money, a promise to perform.

Me: I'm marrying a house?

Unnamed: Boys buy engagement rings for girls.

Me: I'm 37. I'm too old to be engaged.

Unnamed: Where my ring?

Me: How about an antique ring? My mother liked antique jewelry.

Unnamed: You mean *secondhand*?

Me: Antique, not secondhand.

Unnamed: A used car is a used car, not previously owned. You want to give me pawn scum?

Me: Here, read this article [["Have You Ever Tried to Sell a Diamond?"](#) *The Atlantic*, February, 1982] by Edward Jay Epstein on the De Beers cartel and the dreadful conditions in South African mines where diamonds come from. He also explains how engagement rings were cooked up to sell diamonds at high prices to defenseless lovebirds.

Unnamed: [Two days later, after reading the article.] A blue sapphire in the center, not a diamond. Where my ring?

OK. The girl needs an engagement ring to be engaged to a boy who is wondering why anyone would want to be engaged to him. This can't be *that* hard. A boy who could engineer the collapse of the South African economy can surely buy one blue sapphire for his girl. Right?

As you might imagine, there were two ways to buy an engagement ring.

[I want it understood that I ruled out three other ways, which I preferred in the following descending order: 1) purchasing a 12-carat zircon, diamond-look-alike ring for \$31.97; 2) robbing Tiffany; and 3) recycling a ringer out of a Cracker Jack box, which I was willing to upgrade with some spare-no-expense chunks of flamboyant glass—the bigger the better.]

Way 1: We could march into the fanciest jewelry store around, pick out the biggest ring in the display case, pay the full retail price in cash and walk out.

This approach was beyond my imagination. Who, I asked, would do anything as crazy as that?

Apparently, this was the very approach that her Daddy followed in buying jewelry for her Momma every Christmas. Daddy always took Unnamed Party to help with the selection. Oh dear.

I knew absolutely nothing about buying jewelry, and even less about buying engagement rings swollen with supporting diamonds and wheezing under the weight of a central sapphire. But I suspected that buying high-end retail was not the way to go.

Way 2: “Aren't we lucky,” I said, “that the International Gem Show will be in Washington, D.C., this very weekend.”

I had a gold ring from my mother with two flank diamonds that could be reworked as a setting. I proposed that I buy a blue sapphire of her choice at the Show and have an engagement ring made. My proposal was accepted.

All we needed was a stone.

Unnamed Party of the first part was accompanied on our simple excursion that Saturday morning by her soon-to-be-abandoned, grudge-nursing roommate who had spent the preceding 24 hours practicing the insertion of one word into my gem negotiations. That word—“**BIGGER!**”

About 200 gemstone dealers had collected themselves in a cavernous convention hall. The three of us walked in. It was bright, loud and frantic. I tried not to look longingly at the exits.

We walked from dealer to dealer. We asked about blue sapphires. I looked at the stones as if I knew what I was seeing. I wouldn't have known a blue sapphire from a blue moon.

Each of the 50 or so dealers we visited pitched the virtues of his stone and the problems with all others. I asked for the price of this stone and then that. Our heads spun with stones, prices, carats and inclusions.

Unnamed Party pointed at one she liked.

"Bigger," said the roommate.

The dealer smiled. He ignored me and started working up the roommate. He pulled out a bigger one.

"BIGGER," said the roommate.

[I would have done better to send the roommate on a world cruise for a couple of years.]

At each step up in size, I engaged in spirited price haggling. I was trying to teach the roommate "Cheaper." to go along with "Bigger," but she had programmed her onboard computer to reject all words that sounded anti-American.

Let's say a broker quoted me a price of 10. I'd counter with a very sophisticated 4.3345, hoping that a four-place decimal would confuse him in a downward direction. The dealer would say, 9.9, which is less than 10, he'd point out. I'd counter with 8, meeting him half way between his 10 and a hypothetical 6. The dealer would then drop to 9.87, and I'd counter with 8.5. We'd settle at 9.86—a thrilling negotiating triumph in my book.

After 10 hours of haggling, we had narrowed the choices to 17 dealers and 17 stones, all of which looked exactly the same to me. The roommate had gotten a second wind; she liked haggling.

Unnamed Party of the first part, however, was not a haggler. She was about to phone Daddy to ask him to buy her a ring and be done with it.

Under that pressure, it came down to two stones.

"Which is bigger?" I asked.

And that's the one that's on our engagement ring today.

I've never felt right about how I handled the ring in of my engagement. I'd turned something nice into something stressful. I'd turned something small into something big. It took 10 years until Unnamed Party let me joke her around about it ... and that came only after a lot of antique jewelry -- admittedly, used -- flowed from my direction toward her.

On our anniversary, October 1st, I greeted Unnamed Party of the first part when she awoke.

“Do you remember the question you asked me more than 30 years ago?”

“Sure,” she said. ‘Is Blue Grass always just above freezing in July?’”

“Try again.”

“I remember,” she said. ‘Do you ever do anything like regular people?’”

“Now we’re in the ballpark,” I said.

“Oh, I know. ‘Where my ring?’”

I smiled and slipped her a box. Inside was a ridiculously big Art Deco emerald ring on a throne of diamonds.

“It’s only taken me 30 years to get this right,” I said. “That’s not even a blink in geologic time.”

“At least it got here before we turned into fossils. Does an article about the oppressed and exploited come with it?”

“A column about you?” I asked.

“Not me.”

“No article this time,” I said.

“It won’t be the same.”

“Good,” I said.

And it wasn’t.