

MARRY CHRISTMAS FROM MOLDOVA

By Terri Elders

As much as I treasure “*Hello, Dolly*” and “*Fiddler on the Roof*,” I truly believe that marriages are made in heaven, and that mere earthlings lack the acumen to match one stranger with another.

So when Elvira, the Moldovan health project manager, suggested that Angela would be a suitable pen pal for my stepson, Rick, I hesitated.

A Peace Corps program and training specialist, I had been reviewing Eastern Europe health projects. Elvira and I had spent the day visiting volunteers and their counterparts at rural schools and orphanages. We had returned to Chisinau in time for a supper break.

Over a succulent pork stew and *mamaliga*, the traditional cornbread, we relaxed. Our conversation gradually drifted from nutrition and immunizations to technology and then to Internet romances. Elvira said her close friend met a Frenchman online and eventually married him. I countered with how a Russian hairdresser had pressured my stepson, Rick, to send money for exorbitant alleged internet café charges.

“Rick should write to Angela,” Elvira said. I had met Angela earlier that week. An executive assistant to the Peace Corps director, she had impressed me with her thoughtfulness and energy.

“Hmmm, I don’t know,” I said. I recalled hosting a Christmas party where two friends met and started to date. At first they lavished me with thanks for this fortunate stroke of luck. But when it became apparent that one was a spendthrift and the other a penny pincher, the relationship turned sour. Both parties blamed me, even though my matchmaking had been inadvertent.

But I agreed to speak to Rick anyway, and when I returned to the States I wrote him about Angela. She had a Master’s degree and had worked variously as a librarian, teacher, and administrator. She found most Moldovan men either lacking in ambition or overly fond of the local brandy, vodka and wine. She was tall and pretty, with thick curly light brown hair and a ready smile.

“I wouldn’t mind writing to her,” Rick said. “She sounds great. I’ll have to explain, though, how busy I am and that my letters might be infrequent and brief.”

Besides his full time meat department work at Costco, and occasional substitute teaching, Rick was

completing his MA in Education. He'd tried to date, but found the local pickings slim. While he was nearing forty, most available women were in their twenties and into discos and pub crawls. Those closer in age sought ready-made fathers to support their already-established families.

Rick envisioned a wife and kids in his future, he confided, but he wanted to finish his education first. "I still have time before the parade passes by. But I pray I'll find somebody who shares my beliefs, interests and my faith."

Over the next two years Rick and Angela exchanged e-mails. She wrote of trips to London and Edinburgh for her new job with the British Embassy, and of how frigid her apartment became at night in early spring after the government turned off the heat supply. He wrote of term papers and exams, his Bible study group, and his progress landscaping his Nevada home.

"There's never a trace of romance in those exchanges," Ken, my husband, commented, after Rick forwarded some of the e-mails. I shrugged. "Matchmaking's not my strong point," I reminded him.

In the meantime, I retired and my husband and I moved to rural Northeast Washington, where Rick, too, eventually wanted to relocate. One early autumn day I came in from picking apples, and sat down at the computer. I opened a message from Rick. Angela had asked if he would like to visit her at Christmas. Instead, he offered to pay for her to come to the States for the holidays if she could get a visa. "I've explained that we'll celebrate Christmas with you and Dad in the country, so make sure you provide snow."

We looked forward to having company for our first Christmas in our new home. When we attended local holiday crafts fairs, we always picked up a scarf or a pair of mittens for Angela. "Poor thing," Ken would say, "She has to boil water for her daily bath." He admired her already, sight unseen, for her endurance in dealing with the hardships of living in a developing country.

In early December I received an electronic greeting card from ever-optimistic Elvira. "Wishing you a Merry Christmas," she wrote. I laughed out loud. "I wouldn't bet on it," I wrote back. "I think this is just a case of two lonely people being kind to one another."

When Rick and Angela arrived early Christmas Eve, to my relief it had already begun to snow. Though we had a dusting at Thanksgiving, it had been dry ever since, and I despaired that I would be unable to supply the white Christmas Rick had asked for.

While Angela took her bags to her guest room, Rick confided that she had walked right up to him at the airport. She had been a hit with all his friends and neighbors, he said, cooking a tasty chicken dinner for everybody. "Steve and Gloria even said I ought to marry her," he added with a grin. Ken cocked an eyebrow.

By afternoon the snow measured several inches thick, but Rick and Angela decided to take a walk around the neighborhood anyway. We live on a loop, an ellipse, with many homes decorated for the season, several with elaborate crèche scenes.

While I set the table, Ken mentioned that Rick and Angela seemed smitten. “He was holding her hand,” he said. I hadn’t noticed. “They’re just friends,” I answered.

Christmas morning we opened our presents. Angela loved her scarlet mittens and the chocolates in the mini-stockings I had hung on the door to her room. She gave us flasks of the same cognac that graced the tables of lavish Moscow diplomatic dinners in the days of the former USSR.

We taught her to play hearts and she tried to teach us to play *durac*, a Russian card game. *Durac* means stupid, and we were too stupid to master it. We photographed each other and our dogs in the snow.

We told Angela about Rudolph and Santa Claus, and she shared stories of Kindly Grandfather Krechun, an Eastern European holiday character who delivers fir trees and gifts. Moldovan myth claims that baby Jesus was born at his house, she explained.

Rick cornered me in the kitchen as I began to peel potatoes. “I’m going to ask her to marry me,” he said. I dropped the peeler. “She’s perfect,” he added. “Just perfect. I think she feels the same way about me.”

They took another walk. It takes only twenty minutes to circle the loop, so after an hour I peered out the front window at the snowy landscape. I saw Rick and Angela approach our house then wheel to go back the other way.

When they returned, Rick announced we needed to break out the wine to toast the spouses-to-be. “I asked her how she would feel about living in the States,” he said, “And she asked how I would feel about having a wife.” Angela prepared *mamaliga* to accompany our holiday feast.

They married that May in Serpenti, her Moldovan village.

We’ve shared four Christmases now, always playing hearts, never *durac*. Angela never mentions our inability to learn. Somehow I always arrange for the snow to begin to fall on Christmas Eve. We find *mamaliga* a perfect accompaniment to cranberry sauce. Rick and Angela always walk around the loop, still holding hands.

So now I have proof that marriages indeed are made in heaven. It’s clear that Angela, the perfect answer to my stepson’s prayers, was heaven-sent.