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Would You Pass the Immigration Marriage Exam?

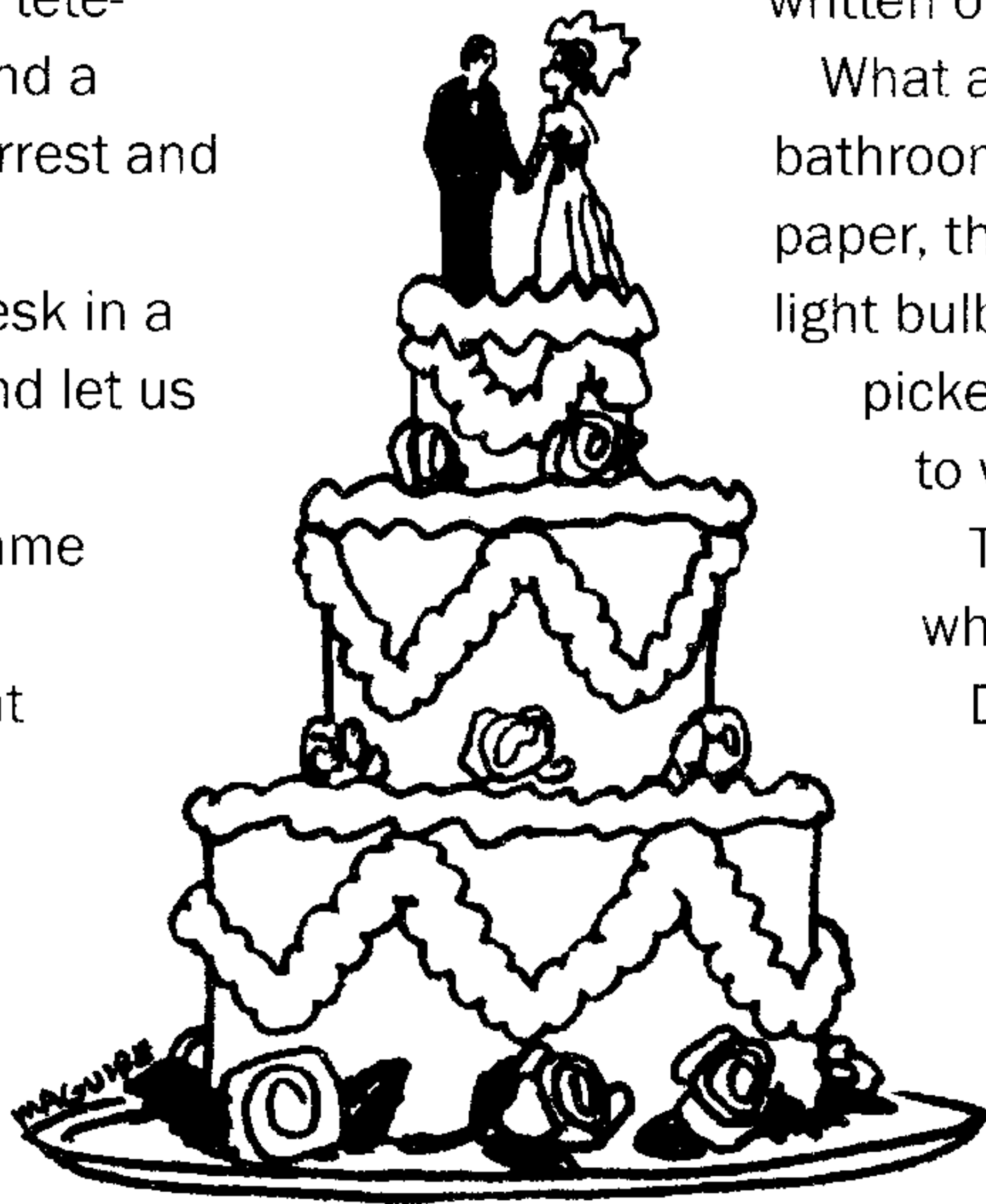
Each year, several hundred thousand U.S. citizens marry foreign nationals and subsequently petition for them to obtain green cards. In most cases, these petitions are eventually granted, but not without a good deal of scrutiny from the federal government. Before a foreign national can obtain a green card through marriage to a U.S. citizen, officials at the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (what used to be known as the INS) must be satisfied that the marriage is not fraudulent. If they have the slightest suspicion that the marriage is a phony one, they may elect to question the bride and groom separately. In my former incarnation as an INS prosecutor, I conducted many such interviews, and the results could be sad or comic, often at the same time. Foreign nationals who fail this interview may be arrested for fraud, prosecuted and deported.

As Valentine's Day is upon us, it may be instructive to those who are complacently married (as I am) to consider how they might perform during an immigration marriage exam. Could you convince the examiner that your marriage is indeed legitimate? Or would you be so ill-informed about the circumstances of your own conjugal relationship as to arouse suspicion? Remember, you are tete-a-tete with a skeptical government official, and a potential consequence of the exam is your arrest and incarceration.

Please take a seat behind an imaginary desk in a typically featureless government chamber and let us begin.

So, Mr. (or Mrs.) Lovejoy, tell me the full name and birthday of your spouse. Born in 1962? Then how old is she today? I see. About what day did you meet your spouse, and where did you meet? "During the playoffs" is not terribly precise, Mr. (or Mrs.) Lovejoy. A date would be helpful.

Tell me about the wedding. How did you and your wife get to the ceremony?



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Who attended – any of your spouse's relatives? And are "mom" and "dad" their given names, or can you perhaps be more specific?

Let's move on. Describe the place where you lived right after marriage. Describe the number of bedrooms and bathrooms, furnishings, color of walls, floor coverings, appliances, type of heating or air conditioning. And where did you get the furnishings? Were they there already, did you buy them, were they a gift or did they come from your spouse's previous residence? You won't find the answer written on the ceiling, Mr. (or Mrs.) Lovejoy.

What about your current home? Where are the bathroom towels kept? Where do you keep the toilet paper, the dirty clothes, the garbage, and the extra light bulbs? What day of the week is the garbage picked up? Here's a tissue, Mr. (or Mrs.) Lovejoy, to wipe off that sweat.

Talk to me about your spouse. For instance, what is his or her phone number at work?

Does your spouse have any scars, unusual marks or tattoos? If so, where on the body? Don't be shy, Mr. (or Mrs.) Lovejoy, I'm an immigration official. Does your spouse have any children from a previous marriage? Can you tell me their names, ages, where they live

and where they go to school? Did you buy your spouse a Christmas present last year, and, if so, what?

Your recall is impressive, Mr. (or Mrs.) Lovejoy. Yes, I'm being ironic.

Just a few more questions. What is your spouse's favorite food? Does your spouse drink coffee? If so, does he or she use cream and sugar? What time was dinner served last night? What did you eat, what shows, if any, did you watch after dinner and what time did your spouse go to bed?

Well, congratulations, Mr. (or Mrs.) Lovejoy. You pass. It's quite obvious by the questions you answered, and by those you didn't, that your marriage is a valid if not particularly

ardent one.

And that is typically the way it goes. Through a series of tough questions, government interviewers (though not as snarky as portrayed here) usually have little trouble distinguishing the real marriages from the faux ones. It's a lesson I always impart to my clients and which has a wider application on February 14, in particular. You can't fake it, and you're a fool if you try.

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