

...be in a mixed marriage

Falling in love with someone from a different country, culture or religion can bring a lifetime of joyous adventure — but it is rarely plain sailing, says *Christina Patterson*

I never liked the fish. I didn't understand why we had to have pickled herrings on Christmas Eve, or why we had straw decorations on our Christmas tree instead of nice, shiny baubles, and white lights instead of coloured ones. I certainly didn't understand why, 12 days before Christmas, I had to wear a white nightie and a crown of battery-operated candles and carry a tray of ginger biscuits and sing a song. My mother just said that this was what you did in Sweden and that she wanted us to know what Christmas should be like.

My mother was 18 when she did a summer course in Heidelberg, Germany, and looked up to see a tall, dark, handsome Brit. They married three years later, in a white stone church in a village next to my mother's grandparents' farm. After a few years moving around for my father's work, they settled on a housing estate in Guildford. More than 50 years on, my mother still lives there, but a part of her will always yearn for the country she left behind.

When my mother married my father, she had to learn how to roast a joint, make a crumble and speak a language that has more than a million words. She had to learn that when people say "how interesting" they don't always mean "how interesting", and that some of them even care where you went to school. I think she would say, on balance, that when she married my father, she gained

more than she lost. But she would also say that when you marry someone from another country or culture, there is nearly always a loss. In the 50-odd years since she married my father, an awful lot has changed. So how do cross-cultural couples feel now?

Tamzin Blinkhorn is English. Tamzin Blinkhorn is, in fact, very English indeed. She lives, with her husband, Kay Schultz, and their daughter, Tara, in a honey-coloured stone cottage in a Cotswolds village. All around there are fields of sheep and cows. And in her cosy country kitchen there's the smell of apple and cinnamon. Tamzin is making aebleskiver, little pancake balls you dip in icing sugar or eat with jam. An angelic-looking six-year-old with white-blond plaits is hovering over the waffle pan, waiting for the moment she can pop one in her mouth.

"I am pure Cotswoldian," says Tamzin, who speaks in a clear, no-nonsense voice and looks as classically English as she sounds. She grew up in the Cotswolds and

More than 50 years after she moved to Guildford, my mother still yearns for the country she left behind

had, she explains, gone back to the area, after seven years working as a chartered surveyor in New York, when she met the tall Dane who is currently spooning coffee into a jug. She was in her second year of training to be a chiropractor. He was in his first year. College sweethearts, she says, "second time round". He was 46. She was 39. "We got engaged on my 40th birthday," she tells me. "We were skiing with a big group of friends. He whisked me up the mountain. There was champagne and a little ice table and candles."

The first big cultural shock was the wedding. "At our age, a big white wedding? Well, anyway, it was just the way it evolved." They got married in a "beautiful old Saxon church" in the Cotswolds, but the surprises came from the Danish guests. "They stamp on their table with the cutlery," she explains, "and then the bride and groom have to stand on their chairs to be kissed. I hadn't been warned about this before!" After the first dance, the Danes picked Kay up, took off his shoes and snipped the ends off his socks. To make sure he didn't run away? "I did ask them when they were over recently," says Tamzin, "and they said yes." After that, his family "put on a little skit", with family members pretending to be Tamzin and Kay. The skit, she says, was "hilarious", but there was a problem with the food. Used to buffets that go on for hours, the Danes took tiny portions while the Brits loaded up their plates. When the Danes went back to the table, "there was no food left".

Tamzin has learnt to love the food in Denmark, even the Christmas rice pudding. She loves the candles on the Christmas trees and the fact that Danish families actually walk around it, singing carols and holding hands. She has learnt to join in the songs that are specially composed for people's birthdays and sung around the table as you eat. In this, I have to say, she's a better woman than me. When I was expected to join my aunt and uncle in singing Swedish folk songs at their dinner table a few years ago, I wrote a sneering column about it in *The Independent*. To my horror, the column was extracted in Sweden's leading daily paper, which led to a slightly frosty email from my aunt. Tamzin is more tolerant. "I'm a foreigner," she says cheerfully. »

MIXED BRITAIN

2.3m

The number of Brits in interethnic relationships or marriages

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"I MISS MY FRIENDS" Kay Schultz, a Dane, lives in the Cotswolds with his English wife, Tamzin Blinkhorn, and their daughter, Tara

TOMPILSTON FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES MAGAZINE

"I can make a fool of myself."

She talks, in fact, as if it's all a big adventure, full of cakes, candles, trips to Denmark and the odd "Viking invasion" over here. Three years ago, they ended up with 34 people for Christmas lunch in the village hall, complete with rice pudding, cooked the traditional way, in hay. For her, the main challenges of a cross-cultural marriage seem to be logistical: the fact that all holidays are spent in Denmark seeing Kay's family and friends, and the fact that neither she nor Tara speak much Danish. "I'd love her to be bilingual," she sighs. "We both would. It's just the practicalities." But she is well aware that it's Kay who has had to come into her world. "Having a gregarious partner," she says, "has made it easier, but it's probably quite difficult for him."

Well, is it? Tamzin reads to Tara while I quiz Kay.

After the big wedding with the snipped socks, he and Tamzin started married life in the Cotswolds. From the outside, it all looks rather cosy. A shared chiropractor practise in Stratford-upon-Avon and one in Stow-on-the-Wold. Aebleskiver in their country kitchen. And, in a basket in the corner, a beautiful dog. Does *he* feel that he has given up much to be with her? For a moment, Kay looks serious. "Well," he says, "that's a very hard question because I wouldn't be without her, of course, and I wouldn't be without Tara, but I miss my friends and family. Yes, I miss them."

He says he feels bad that he didn't talk to Tara in Danish more when she was little, but she spent more time with Tamzin as a toddler, and he was busy with the business. He has been here so long that he dreams in English and now almost feels English. Is there anything he doesn't like about us? Another long pause. "The Brits can be very snobby. They don't want to say something nasty, so they smile and you are on unsure ground. I don't like that."

Veena Supranamiam and Nativ Gill know all about "putting cultures together". She's a half-Anglican, half-Hindu Sri Lankan Tamil who went to live in Botswana when she was 12. She went to boarding school in South Africa and then went to do a degree and a PhD in Melbourne. Nativ was born in Israel, the grandson of Holocaust survivors,



and moved to Australia when he was nine. He and Veena met in Melbourne when she spotted him at the gym. "He caught my eye straightaway," she says.

"I thought," he interjects, "that she was very beautiful and very exotic". But they were friends for five years before they "got together" and then another nine years before they got married, two years ago, in a Hindu and Jewish ceremony on a Sri Lankan beach.

If this is a slow burn, it has certainly generated a lot of heat. When I join them for a drink at their rather swanky flat in Dalston, the sliding window to their balcony is wide open. "He always has it open," Veena moans, but after we have been talking for a while, I can see why. This is a couple who are so engaged with each other that the room almost crackles with energy and warmth. It was full of candles for Diwali. "The whole house was a fire hazard," says Nativ. A few minutes later, he's telling me that he's "fiercely proud as an Israeli", loves to celebrate Passover and Hanukah and marks the start of the Shabbat with the kiddush, the blessing of the bread and wine. But he also says that his Judaism is "cultural" not "religious" and that he's "the world's worse Jew". "I eat so much swine," he confesses,

"I LIKE TO STIR THINGS UP"
Nativ Gill, an Israeli Jew, and Veena Supranamiam, a Sri Lankan half-Anglican, half-Hindu, say they feel at home together in London

How it feels to...

"I could support a pig farm."

Perhaps it isn't surprising, with a background as multicultural as this, that they fell in love with London when they came here for "an adventure" 11 years ago and decided to stay. Now both 39, they hope to have a family. Nativ says it will be a "cocktail". "You know what I've found? That it's easier for me to be part of several cultures than it is to be part of one."

"I came from an upbringing," Veena adds, "where I had two religious backgrounds and it worked. At the moment, we celebrate everything. Hanukah, Passover, Christmas, Easter, Diwali. As a child, I loved that I could go to church with my Christian cousins and then I could go to temple with my Hindu family."

Will it be confusing? Well, perhaps only in the way that it's a bit confusing to be a child in your average London primary school, where many traditions and cultures are present and are taught to treat each other with respect. But this would surely only work, I tell them, if neither has strong religious beliefs? Nativ, a lawyer, doesn't believe in God. Veena, who works in biomedical research, does, but for her religion is "something very personal" that she doesn't like to pin down. What the couple clearly share are their values. Love of family. Love of celebration. Love of animated discussion. Oh, and love of food.

Nativ says Veena is a "phenomenal cook". But it is, he says, "impossible for me to cook if she's in the kitchen, because she's a total Nazi." Perhaps only the grandson of a Holocaust survivor has the right to say that to his wife.

When I tear myself away from their kitchen table, I leave with the feeling that the Diwali candles, and the Shabbat bread and wine, really aren't the point. The point is that what it takes to have a successful cross-cultural relationship is pretty much what it takes to have any successful relationship. You have to like each other enough to put up with each other's foibles and you have to be able to laugh. And you need enough tension to keep the spark alive. "There is tolerance," says Nativ, speaking for all the people I have interviewed and also for my parents. "But there is challenge, too," he says, his eyes glittering. "I like to stir things up." ■