

When a passport problem feels like a parenting fail

By Jerry Soverinsky

GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

As a kid, you always remember the moment when you find out that your parents aren't superheroes. With my mom and dad, it was on the same day: when they sat me down and told me that they were divorcing. Over time (and 32 years and counting of therapy), I would learn to adjust. But you tend to carry that disappointment with you as you enter parenthood, anxious not to relinquish superhero status in the eyes of your own children.

As my son turned 10, I felt I was doing reasonably well. Sure, there was the time while towing him in a bike trailer that I cut the turn too closely and flipped the trailer. But he was only 7 months old at the time, surely he wouldn't remember. Or the time when I asked a neighbor for help installing new wiper blades on my car ("You don't know how to do that, Dad?" my son asked, as he watched the five-second process. "Why not?"). That one was iffy. But if there was any doubt left, it was obliterated last week with one swipe of my son's passport at an Icelandair check-in counter at Toronto's Pearson Airport.

"Halló," I said to the Icelandair clerk, sliding my families' passports under protective plexiglass. It was a simple Iceland greeting, and I was certain I had botched the pronunciation — but more certain the clerk would appreciate my effort.

One at a time, she began swiping our passports for processing. First mine. Then my wife's. Then my son's.

"This one is expired," she said.

"Huh?" I replied, organizing my family's COVID-19 vaccination cards. "Here are our vaccine records," I said, sliding them toward her.

"Expired. Your son's passport. You cannot board."

I glanced over at my son who was resting on



VICTOR J. BLUE/BLOOMBERG

our suitcase away from the check-in line. He was snuggling Hedgy, a plump, stuffed hedgehog we had bought earlier that day, a cozy companion for his overseas flight. "It's almost nighttime, Hedgy," he whispered in the animal's ear.

I returned to the clerk. "April 12," I said. "It expires in 10 days, *after* we return home. It's still valid."

"No, not in Iceland. We subtract 90 days from the written expiration date. That's the latest you can travel in Iceland."

"What? Why?" I protested. "April 12. It's good until then."

"No. January. Twelfth," she said, enunciating each word. "Three months before what is written. I'll show you."

She began typing on her computer, and my thoughts raced: A gallon of water is heavier than it seems. Do most countries have raisins? I wonder what sound it would make if I hurled my iPhone through the Icelandair sign?

"Here, look." She turned her monitor toward

It's not that a superhero doesn't make mistakes. It's that they can always fix them.

me, which displayed an Iceland government website. I reviewed the language, Iceland's criteria for a valid passport. She was following the rules. We were non-compliant. I began flailing, reaching for anything that might salvage a trip that had yet to begin.

"Next to expiration date it says April 12. It's like a definition. Right?" I said haltingly, my voice weakening. "Right?"

"The Iceland police are getting very strict about this. Even if we let you on the flight, they will send you right back."

The clerk gestured for me to step aside. "Next," she said, looking over my shoulder to a waiting traveler.

I paused, staring at the clerk, who began processing the next traveler's documents. I made a last appeal for assistance, pleading with a supervisor who confirmed that we would not be allowed to travel that day to Iceland.

The 20-foot walk over to my son was excruciating, as I anticipated the confrontation. "Hedgy

says hi," he said, waving a stuffed paw as I stood before him. "Is our plane here?"

Breaking the news to my son was painful. We had booked our plane tickets last June after he finished a year of virtual school, anticipating a time when travel restrictions would be loosened. It became our family's 10-month adventure-in-waiting. We watched YouTube videos about Iceland. We learned Icelandic phrases. As a parent who couldn't wait to see the excitement in his son's eyes when it would all come together juxtaposed against his disappointment at the moment when he understood that we in fact were *not* going to Iceland.

I was gutted.

As a side note, before leaving the airport, I emailed our Reykjavik hotel to tell them the news and cancel our reservation. Five minutes later, they charged my credit card \$2,500. "I have to charge you in full because we have a 48-hour cancellation policy," the hotel wrote back. "You do not have to pay for the parking."

We returned to our car and began the six-hour car ride back to our home in Michigan, my son's disappointment eventually giving way to singing. He seemed relatively recovered. Me? Not so much.

It's not that a superhero doesn't make mistakes. It's that they can always fix them. Like give you the family you thought you had. Repair things when they break. And help you experience the adventure they had built up in your mind.

As I clutched the steering wheel tighter, replaying the airport scene over and over in my head, my son's singing began chipping away at my anger. My frustration. My humility.

And then I realized: When a parent is no longer a superhero to their child, the lingering disappointment is not the child's. It's the parent's.

Jerry Soverinsky can be reached at jerrysoverinsky@gmail.com.