



My Washington Romance

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Weddings traditionally or at least in most 80's movies, put people in the mood. The mood for love, the mood for sex, the mood for some human connection. Is it because they symbolize the ideals of love? The culmination, the peak of romance?

In any case, killing time on the streets of D.C. before the wedding of Jennifer, my best friend from junior high, it seemed as if fate had a touch of romance in store for me. Entering the National Gallery of Art, I expected to wander the halls in solitude. Never did I imagine that my life and my heart would be forever changed.

For some reason, all galleries and museums I perused during my stay in D.C. first required a bag search. I wasn't really clear what the guards were searching for. Guns? Had there been a rash of sculpture shooting recently? Liquor? Usually they search one's bags for liquor at concerts. Were they worried it would be harder to appreciate the ironies of Dadaism completely trashed? Well, why didn't they offer sobriety tests at the door?

Anyhow, the purse searches I was subjected to were so cursory and half-hearted I could have had a small bird in there. Livestock? Were they looking for wildlife? SARS? Ebola in our bags? Were those diseases even of concern anymore? It was hard to keep up with whatever pandemic was in vogue at the moment. I learned that day, though, what one man was looking for. In purses, and in life.

I plopped my bag on the counter, parted its lips, and the 80-year-old security guard prodded its insides with what appeared to be a drumstick. Not like a piece of fried chicken, like a long, wooden...nevermind. As he poked around my bag, he noted my wad of dollar bills.

"A woman with money? I been lookin for a woman with some money," the elderly man said seductively.

"Well then, I guess I'm your lady," I quipped back, gazing into his wet, blue eyes, cloudy with cataracts behind his thick, wire frames.

"You got enough for the both of us?" He smiled dashingly at me as he scratched one of the liver spots on his arm. I smiled back, keeping my outer calm, while inside I began to panic. Did I? Did I have enough for the both of us? Oh my god, what were his standards of living? I didn't even know, and here I had just committed myself to a life with this octogenarian security guard.

And what about my man back home? I had carelessly thrown our three months together aside when a confident senior citizen had asked me to. This was all happening so fast. My mind was racing. The guard turned around, and I walked away, afraid. Exhilarated.

Suddenly, I found myself in the sprawling museum gift shop. Jewelry, posters, art books, magnets, and postcards emblazoned with the paintings and images of the bevy of artists featured in the National Gallery. My mind turned to my artist friends back home, and what they would be feeling here in this gift shop.

"Selling out," I could hear them murmur of the Warhol magnet set as they extolled the virtues of not selling out as an artist. In fact, just the night before, at the wedding rehearsal dinner, I had sat next to a woman who was complaining about her job as a photo editor for *Town and Country* magazine. I said that sounded like a pretty cool job as she talked about being flown all over the country, and the life in Brooklyn it afforded her. She groaned and said she couldn't wait to quit and go back to school for a masters in art history, as she felt like such a sell out at her job.

I nodded with understanding, as did the economist to her left. I gave thanks for my job back home as a pizza cashier. I smirked as I thought about all the free pizza I ate on a daily basis, my \$8 an hour, and the pride I felt at never selling out and letting "the man" fly me to Uruguay on his dime to supervise the photo shoot of a cave. Poor girl. There in the gift shop, I chuckled to myself again, until his words ran through my mind once more.

"I been lookin for a woman with some money." I gazed around the gift shop. Should I start buying my new lover gifts here? How carelessly was I supposed to throw my dough around as his "woman with some money?"

I started to feel panicky again. Why was I even here in the gift shop? It was so huge, and I couldn't figure out how to get out of there. BUY! BUY THESE ART DECO EARRINGS! BUY! BUY THIS BOOK ABOUT THE DECORATIVE ARTS OF THE 1700'S! BUY! YOU HAVE MONEY! WE'VE SEEN THE INNER WORKINGS OF YOUR PURSE! BUY! BUY!!! I almost knocked over a tower of Marcel Duchamp coffee mugs as I reeled from the pressure. I stumbled out of the gift shop without making a purchase. As I began to sigh with relief, I realized I was now in the Gallery Café.

"I been lookin for a woman with some money." Oh my god, I should start making us reservations. My 80-year-old security guard boyfriend was probably going to want to eat at all of the finest restaurants. Did he eat red meat? Did he like Greek? Thai? God, I had rushed into our whirlwind courtship so fast, I didn't even know where to begin.

Come to think of it, I hadn't even caught his name. Hmm. He looked like a George, and for the time being I figured I would mentally just

call him that. Why the hell was I still in this café? Was there actually any art here in the West Building of the National Gallery? I ran haphazardly between the tables while a strangely erotic young girl stared.

Jesus Christ, she couldn't have been more than 9 years old! Why was she wearing eyeliner and standing all seductively with her lips slightly pursed? I considered punching her on the way out to calm my discomfort, but exited with a sprint instead. Still feeling mildly traumatized, I wandered through a room of large tapestries into a hall of clouded mirrors and shiny turquoise dog heads. It was set up like a sitting room in a fancy castle, and I began to feel claustrophobic.

"I been lookin for a woman with some money." Oh God, we were going to have to get a new place! There was no way my dirty one bedroom apartment was going to suit my elderly gigolo George. Sure, it had hardwood floors, but someone had seen fit to paint the floors an odd burnt sienna that was now furiously chipping away. The vinyl on the kitchen floor was stained to look permanently filthy, the shower walls were falling off...these were only some of the cosmetic pitfalls of my home. Surely, George would want to live in a sort of splendor as a man who'd been "lookin for a woman with some money."

I hated the National Gallery, and the pressures of this new relationship. I ran past a gilded collection of religious iconography. There was a nun, looking wild eyed and terrified. I paused as I envied the small, scared woman in the comfortable looking sandals. Her vows of poverty and chastity would keep her safe from ever being romantically ensnared by a man beast such as George. Poverty and chastity...nuns take that vow, right? Or was it monks? I had no time to ask her.

I stumbled down a small flight of stairs and burst into the sunlight. I put on my sunglasses as I wandered down Constitution Avenue, feeling disillusioned and dirty. Hot dog stands, T-shirt stands, street musicians and tourists consumed the sidewalks

I knew what I needed to do. I needed to eat a hot dog.

I reached into my purse and found the wad of dollar bills that had so easily seduced my elderly lover. In slow motion, I handed the dollar bills to the vendor, and as I received the hot dog, I watched my future with George slip away with the cash transaction.

I took off my sunglasses. Everything looked so different now. I didn't have any money anymore, and had thus lost my old man, possibly the only man I'd ever truly loved. I had been a vegetarian (give or take some pepperoni pizza and some mini cheeseburgers) for almost six months, and with every bite of the hot dog, that was slipping away too.

And yet, I felt so free. I had the blue sky! I had my hot dog! And I had the Museum of Natural History in front of me. I decided to enter. It was a woman who searched my purse this time. She smiled and wished me a good day. I was gonna have one, baby. I was gonna have a fucking awesome day. We didn't need George. We had each other. This was going to be something special.