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Blue Grass negotiates with New York City
By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, VA.—After 26 years of marriage, I learned something new about my wife, Melissa: She is really cagey.

We were in New York City the day before Thanksgiving, walking along the stuck-up, stick-up end of Fifth Avenue south of Central Park where flip-flops go for \$1,000.

She was window-shopping; I was anti-window-shopping. It went like this:

Melissa: “Isn’t that a nice bracelet?”

Me: “It would make your face look too long.”

Melissa: “Isn’t that pendant sparkly?”

Me: “It would overwhelm your beautiful blue eyes.”

Occasionally, I’d stop in front of a Christmas-decorated window to remark: “My, my. I can’t decide between the \$500,000 wrist watch that announces the time under the polar ice caps in Martian, or the \$800,000 model that delivers babies and zaps incoming meteors. Honey, which do you think would go best with my red sweatshirt?”

Melissa normally lets me decide such matters on my own.

For reasons that I can’t explain, she dragged me into a French jeweler that offered what a rough-cut friend from Brooklyn named Flash used to call, “the toppest quality stuff,” except he didn’t say “stuff.” This shop was so high on the upscale that its walls were lined with fake leather-bound, fake books.

Five gorgeous blond women, each seven-feet tall not counting their six-inch spike heels, surrounded us. All wore funereal black. Three had leather boots that came up to their armpits; the others wore low cuts that ended at their pelvic girdles.

“May we assist you, madam?” (They were quick to figure out who wore the jewels in our family unit.)

Melissa said something that alarmingly resembled, “NECKLACE!”

I kept my head. I figured my best strategy was to get thrown out before this

went any further. I began soliciting customers for my about-to-be-homeless fund. One exquisitely coiffed woman patted my head: “There, there. My husband gave up 35 years ago.”

I whispered to the manager. “I’m a terrorist. I have the Iranian nuclear bomb embedded in my earwax. It will explode in 37 seconds. Get me out of here, fast!”

“You must have been voted second-funniest in your high school class,” he chuckled, patting the same spot.

I glanced toward Melissa. A small, stylish crane was hoisting necklaces out of the case. Several dangled diamonds the size of watermelons from a platinum chain that would have felt at home on any logging job.

“How do you know they’re not zircon?” I yelled in her direction.

As each piece was introduced, she kept shaking her head, No, assisted by me with a hand on each cheek.

“What’s this one cost?” Melissa asked, holding a tiara up by two disdainful fingers as if it were a tangle of old, rusty barbed wire.

“High sevens,” the manager said.

“Cheap,” Melissa said.

The manager looked to me: “And what is the gentleman’s preference in ladies jewelry?”

“Less is more,” I squeaked. “Why ruin perfection with baubles and trinkets?”

“He buys me antiques,” Melissa said.

“Estate Sales!” the manager commanded. A new set of black-clad ninjas jumped me. They gave me the bum’s rush into a private room. Here, the fake books were deteriorating reproductions of the front-room fakes.

Over the years, I’ve given Melissa “old” jewelry, which is nicer than saying “used” or even “pre-owned.” I’ve learned that an amateur like me needs to buy from a handful of trustworthy dealers who know what they’re selling.

The ninjas brought me eyeball to eyeball with a diamond pendant that an unemployed back surgeon might give to the world’s strongest man to slip his disks. She cooed: “It’s from the Doris Duke estate.”

I unscrambled my wits, leaving them in slightly better shape.

Melissa traces her North Carolina roots back to the time before T. rex and that crowd. “Dukes are new money,” I sniffed, “They bought jewelry; they didn’t inherit it. Her...things...are too, too...40s.”

Desperate, the ninja pointed to another: “This is from the 20s.”

I felt the ground firming under my feet. “I only buy classics for my wife.”

“1890s?”

“Older. 1840s, 1860s. Victorian or earlier. Come Melissa,” I said with elaborate hauteur. “WE...don’t trade in THIS type of merchandise.”

Back on the street, Melissa allowed, “Gaudy.”

Still, a necklace was in the wind.

Melissa found ourselves in Smiling Sammy’s Rare Art Objects and Really Genuine Persian Rugs for the Discriminating Individual. I don’t see myself as a Discriminating Individual. I lunged for the door.

Smiling Sammy himself blocked my exit. “Welcome, he said, “to our Lost-Our-Lease Big Pandemonium Sale—90 percent off!”

“How long have you had to give that much off?” I asked. I wanted to show that I was empathic with his distress.

“Seventeen years this January.”

I thought we’d get a better deal back with the tall girls in waders.

“The \$150, big white pearls in the window,” Melissa said, without preliminary pleasantries, “I want pink.”

Smiling Sammy just happened to have a fresh-water necklace in the desired shade. “\$450.”

“Too much.”

“For a special friend of Rick’s. Did I say \$450, \$425.”

“Too much.”

“Come with me.” He took us to his second floor on an elevator which was an

early discarded experiment that Mr. Otis perfected 40 years later.

The second floor was crammed—statues of people I didn't know, oils from the Exxon Valdez school, chandeliers hung at nose level, suits of armor, metal ladies with no armor and a Shaq-size bronze of Mr. Toad smoking a cigar. He led us to an unlighted alcove where I sensed tied rug rolls lined the walls.

“Look,” he said to Melissa, unrolling one in the darkness with a flourish and a snap. “Silk, from real worms. Not mercerized cotton. Fifteen hundred knots to the square inch. \$21,000. For you, take off a zero. A deal like this only comes around once. Timing is everything.”

“It's smaller than a dish towel, and we don't need a rug,” I said, introducing two scraps of reality into the haggling.

Smiling Sammy waved me off with one hand and patted my head with the other. “This is not a rug. It's an investment.”

“We have two Yellow Labs that would dog up this investment,” I pleaded.

“That's what rugs are for. Each dog hair builds character, which adds value. See”

Sophie and Lucy have never added value to anything, least of all, my net worth. They do, however, routinely make contributions to our front yard.

“Too much,” Melissa said.

“For you, not \$2,100. \$1,800.”

“Too much,” she said.

We went back to the first floor and started out. “Here's my best,” Sammy said with a smile. “For the rug AND the pearls, \$1,600.”

“No,” Melissa said.

“That's \$1,300 for the rug and only \$300 for the pearls.”

“Nope.”

He sighed. “\$200 for the pearls, which cost me \$600. How can I stay in the sale business at that price?”

“Done,” Melissa said.

She wore the necklace out of Frowning Sammy's as he rewrote his sign: "200 percent off...and more. Help me steal from my wife and children."

"Why did you look at that rug?" I asked.

"I knew that if I listened, he'd offer us a two-for-one-money deal. I kept my eye on the pearls. They're quality, and I know what they're worth."

"But you were raised in a family that always paid full-price retail."

"Well," she said, "I did marry you."

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