

#123 FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: February 11, 2010

I shovel, therefore, I am.

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, VA.—On Monday in the 5-a.m. blackness, I looked out my kitchen window at the thermometer. Ten below. Well, I rationalized, it's on the north side of the house, and the big maple does shade it.

On Tuesday morning, my wife, Melissa, reported another foot of snow was coming with wind gusts of 30 mph. That icing decorated about two feet of sheet cake already brought to the party.

On Wednesday morning, another foot fell in a blizzard with winds gusting to 60.

On Thursday, I got the drift.

Weatherpersons had stopped reporting inches, only feet.

This is VIRGINIA, not Siberia. We're not bred to freeze; we're bred to sweat.

At some point in every life misery, you may be lucky enough to find it funny. You, yourself, become its embedded humor. Once in that sweet spot, sorrow loses some of its grip. Or, at the very least, you feel slipperier in its grasp.

That's how I'm approaching the Yukonization of Blue Grass. It's also how I'm trying to approach (Saint) Valentine's Day, a grim and dangerous moment each year.

Our February 14th holiday is named for several Christians who were martyred by various Roman emperors. These martyrdoms are now reenacted by American men who are expected to celebrate Valentine's Day with wives, usually their own.

Some historians argue that the Church ginned up a mid-February holiday to paper over an earlier Roman fertility festival, Lupercalia, which Plutarch described as a time when many noble youths and magistrates ran naked through Rome, striking those they met with "shaggy thongs." In four years of high-school Latin -- Virgil, Cicero and Caesar's Garlic Wars -- Miss O'Donnell never once mentioned bare-bottomed Romans whacking each other with thongs, let alone shaggy ones.

Lupercalia traced its beginnings back to the cave where Lupa, the she-wolf, reportedly suckled Romulus and Remus, hence Lupercalia, or "Wolf

Festival.” Network news of the day reported that pagan priests gallivanted around in nothing but “girdles of goatskin.” Indeed, we may now know the origin of the confession: “He got my goat.”

The boys’ birth mother was Vestal Virgin Rhea Sylvia who was pledged to 30 years of chastity. To explain the twins, her inconvenient truth, she said that Mars, god of war, had splended her in the grass, for which she could hardly be held accountable. Had she been frolicking with someone ordinary like Plumberus Josephus Minimus, the Romans would have had her flogged, then buried alive.

Like Rhea Sylvia and the other Vestals, my job this winter is to tend the sacred fire in the home hearth. And tend. And tend.

After the boys started on solid food, they argued over land. Romulus wanted to build their eternal city on one hill; Remus, the next one over. Their conflict was resolved when Romulus stopped digging his city wall and hit Remus on the head with his shovel. Today, Romulus would have killed his brother with a backhoe.

I, too, have been wielding a shovel. Romulus would not recognize it. It has a plastic blade and a handle with a bend in it. It’s great for snow, but nothing else. The ergonomic handle allows me to shovel without bending my back very much.

I’ve spent a large part of 2010 shoveling. Nearby cities have been shut down, but out in the countryside, this crazy snow “event” is mainly an inconvenient annoyance. It’s also handy to have a neighbor with a John Deere 550 bulldoze the driveway, especially when he shows up before I’ve shoveled it out by hand.

I mind anticipating shoveling, not the shoveling itself.

Now that I know that Valentine’s Day originates in a fraternal murder and Christian martyrs, I’ve told Melissa that I feel historically correct in not celebrating it.

“You’re just too cheap to buy me a card,” she said. She is right, of course.

But I am looking beyond the cheesy greeting or fattening truffle. One thing on Valentine’s Day often leads to another, like dancing.

I am a guy with average hand-eye coordination, a standing vertical leap of two, maybe, three inches and below-average facility for most sports, all of which I play with the grace of a three-legged rhinoceros. By rights, I should be able to dance, at least a little.

And, in fact, I can. I have mastered the basic box step—and I no longer count aloud or on my fingers. My partners are no longer crippled, because I have perfected the non-electric slide where the soles of my shoes never break contact with the dance floor. And if the box fails me, I stand in place and teeter with an occasional flail.

Melissa is a good dancer, like pro quality. She has performed in public. Every Wednesday she does Irish dancing. She knows all the 60s stuff—the Shag, Boogaloo, Funky Chicken and the Potato, both Fried and Mashed. Music flows through her.

She can do two or three different things with her legs, a couple of things with her hips, another thing or two with her pelvis and who knows what all with her arms and head—all at the same time. I am dumbstruck at the number of brain cells that she fires together so effortlessly.

She loves to dance. I fear it, hate it and have joined several religious orders that ban it.

When we were first married, we ended up for supper at a five-star joint with an orchestra and a parquet floor. She suggested that we dance. I trotted out my trusty box. She started laughing.

I rose to my own defense. “Gene Kelly went to my high school, Peabody Class of ‘29,” I pointed out for the record. “I’ve played on the same stage, dribbled on the same court, swum in the same fetid pool, probably even in the same water.”

“Come on. I’ll lead,” she said.

“No, I’m the boy. I lead.”

So we stood on the dance floor, immobile, arguing over leadership.

Then the music changed. She said “Conversation!” and clubbed me in the bicep.

A welt the size of West Virginia arose.

“Why’d you hit me?”

“I was giving you a signal. That’s dance etiquette. ‘Conversation’ means you open up for a few steps. You learn that in cotillion.”

“Look. I’ve dated debutantes. They always slug you after the dance, not

during.”

Melissa and I have attempted a few slow dances since, never a fast one.

Valentine’s Day always raises the threat of dancing, like the forecast of another two yards of snow tomorrow. I’m lucky to have recurring hamstring issues that can strike at any time.

I’ve considered taking dancing lessons. I’ve even taken out a Personal Ad.

Big lug. Looking for dance teacher.
Start with the basics. Slow first.
Maybe more. Must move like my wife.
No leaders. Must bring low
expectations. Not looking for LTR.
Generous.

A large number of women and some men have responded. Most had 800 numbers.
All seemed too advanced for me.

Melissa and I are going to a Valentine’s Day supper this weekend. There may be music. There could be dancing.

Fortunately, another 40 feet are forecast so I may be able to shovel my way out of it. Still...

Roses are red...and other colors too,
Violets are blue...no, they’re purple mainly.
Sugar is sweet...and often loved,
And so are you...though this poem is ungainly.
BMV

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