

# Love's Beautiful

By Yasheve Miller

**"I hate my wife.** She gets all bent out of shape when I use that one word. You know the word? It starts with a C," the comedian laughed at his own jokes. He had to. No one else was listening.

The *Playhouse Bar & Lounge*. My think tank. I brooded over a cocktail and cigarettes in the darkest corner I could find with both elbows on the table. During stressful times, I preferred being surrounded by other sorry bastards. Yes, I could have, should have, and would have searched for the bottom of a bottle in the comfort of my own home, but no one else was there. I told you I preferred the company of others. My wife disappeared three days ago.

The darkness, smoke and clinging glass soothed my mind. Thank God for people like me. We kept places like *The Playhouse Bar & Lounge* open for business. A few million people owed people like me some form of praise. **All Hail the Brooder!** WE fed the children of tobacco company executives. WE signed the checks of the brewery employees. WE made sure vineyards hadn't become obsolete. They owed us for the steak and potatoes, smothered in sorrow that we put on their dinner tables every night.

I was no alcoholic. Don't get any ideas. I was an artist. A painter to be exact. The pursuit of full time financial stability with a paint brush caused me so much grief. Often, I drifted around Miami, bar to bar, just to escape my art. Somebody should have shot that comedian. He had failed at lifting my spirits. I needed an escape from my escape.

Before the third act fumbled onto the stage, I swallowed another drink and lost the taste for my cigarette. I smashed the butt in the ashtray, dug out some loose cash in my pant's pockets and tossed a few bills on the table.

I grabbed the ticket for my coat and followed the trails of smoke fleeing for the front door. People stared. Apparently anything was more interesting than



the crackpots on stage. White shirt, navy slacks and no tie. I looked like a million bucks, but felt like one of the comics on display.

A young girl at the coat booth handed me my blazer. A second thought crossed my mind. I stopped at the bar.

“Can I get another of the cheapest Bourbon you got?”

“Coming right up.”

“Do you have a plastic cup with a top you can put it in? Maybe one of those coffee cups. Because I really got to get going.”

His face changed and Mr. Hyde showed up. “No sir! Absolutely not. You trying to get me to lose my job. I can’t sell you alcohol to take out of here. I’m going to have to ask you to leave!”

I refused to be apart of whatever drama was going on in his head. I had my own concerns. I thanked him for his time. And I nodded to the doorman on my way out.

“Have a good day, Mr. Love,” the doorman said.

Fuck off! Of course I didn’t say it aloud. I thought about it as hard as possible to telepathically transport the message from my brain to his. The afternoon sun sobered me up as soon as I stepped onto the sidewalk. I had hoped that I had drunk the whole day away. No luck. Biscayne Boulevard lunch traffic bumped along the construction sprawled up and down the street.

I checked my plastic watch. I hid it under my blazer just as fast as I had whipped it out. Who needed to know that I was out of my element in a blazer and dress slacks? Yeah, I starved from time to time, usually sported a week’s worth of stubble and lived in a motel on a strip of road known throughout Miami for its prostitution and drugs. But at a business meeting I didn’t want to appear poor, broke and hungry because I had not sold a single painting.





I loved painting. The act itself filled me with immense pleasure. The politics of the art industry troubled me. Then again, sometimes simply being alive caused me heartache.

Look the part. That's all he wanted. He wanted me to look like a European snob so that richer snobs would throw money at me. I had met with Santino Valdez twice before. One of Miami's European transients, Valdez heavily influenced the local art scene. Truth be told, I always believed he was a fraud. If you watched some of his longer television interviews and paid attention to his accent, you would have believed it too. It always faded in and out if the interview drug out too long.

Twenty or thirty years ago, I bet his real name was Steve Vickers or something. He created a whole new identity or killed the real Valdez and buried him in a mansion basement. Fraud or not, a world of art critics, artists and buyers worshiped Santino Valdez. First and last word on any piece in the art world went to Valdez. And I was an ink blotch away from his black list.

A bus trip could have gotten me to his office on the beach in just under an thirty minutes. I walked fast down Biscayne to make a stop at home – my motel room. I needed to see if Claire, my wife, had returned. I promised myself that this time, I would not pester her about where she'd been and where she'd slept for the last three days. On television one day, a psychiatrist (probably an actor) explained the importance of accentuating the positive if you found yourself in a potentially explosive situation. All I planned to say to Claire would be, "I'm glad you're home."

My agent, who was really my closest friend who'd gotten hired to hang pictures at Valdez's new gallery, set up the first meeting. I missed that one. I spent the day in jail instead. The night before, Claire downed more pills and alcohol than I could keep up with. We bar hopped that night. If the bar had free admission, we stopped in and joined the party. Claire and I accidentally separated in the commotion at one of the bars. I forgot which one. Some jerk had her pinned down in a bathroom stall when I found her. What a punk to trick my wife into playing hide-n-go-seek in a bathroom stall!



Claire jumped off of her knees and in her native tongue cursed my mother, my father's grave and anyone else she could think to insult. Then, she turned on her accomplice. She picked a fight with him. He beat us both silly. Cops arrived, pulled him off of us and through the three of us in a Dade County jail.

A block south of the *Playhouse Bar & Lounge*, I made a right in an alley to go to a woman's apartment window. She sold discount cigarettes and alcohol from that very window. Most times, she worked the window. Other times, her daughter or her nephew serviced the window. People in the neighborhood called it "the drive-thru". You could buy single cigarettes, candy, and Caribbean food dishes. I'd decided to get some cigarettes before I went home.

**The brick walls in the alley** needed a coat of paint or a full mural. Graffiti was not my thing, but I knew when something deserved the beauty of paint. The walls cried out for my help. I stretched my arms to caress the decomposed brick.

BLAM! Suddenly, an alarm echoed between my ears. Then, my face slammed into a murky puddle on the concrete. I'd been attacked. They kicked me in the ribs repeatedly. A knife slashed the right side of my face. The assailant pulled my head back, held the knife to my throat, dug into my pockets and robbed me. He stripped my pockets, shoved my face in the puddle, kicked me in the back and ran off.

For a full minute, I laid in the middle of the puddle on the side of my face pondering the Miami that I never saw on television. I knew who robbed me. He'd used the same tactics three other times. His name was Rollie Jimenez, an old friend of Claire's. He was still illegally in the states. Claire only officially gained her citizenship a week before her last disappearance. We married two years ago and the conditional residence Visa had expired. The immigration department finally granted her permanent residence.

Whenever Claire needed money she petitioned Rollie to beat me up and rob me. She hated asking me for anything, because I asked too many questions. I refused to give her money to hurt herself with drugs.

If Rollie robbed me, Claire had begged him to do it. Had she returned home? I lifted my face out of the puddle, wiped my face with my blazer sleeves, and ran back towards Biscayne Boulevard.



I made it home with blood dripping down the side of my face and a few curious stares. But no further incidents. No Claire. None of my things had been returned either. No sign of her even stopping by.

The same cramped yet empty motel room. No bars in the area allowed people to sleep in their booths, so, I had no choice but to live there. The same scuffed floors. I was trying. My goal was to get enough money to get a place where Claire could rub her feet against smooth carpet. Dream yet to be realized. The same smell of bargain cleaning products from housekeeping. What a plague on the nose. Claire's perfume disintegrated underneath the aroma of these new women in my life.

The one suit, a bus card, some underwear and some t-shirts were all I had left in my name. There was no time to brood. I had a meeting to attend. I washed my face and scrubbed off the dirt and mud on my blazer and pants with a damp rag. I hoped that by the time I made it to the beach, the stains would have dried up. I dashed out the door.

Valdez demanded that I "at least make an appearance" at this meeting. He yelled at my agent/friend and me on the phone. He staked his reputation on his promise of revenge if I disrespected him again. He said the art world would see my paintings as worthless and me as a drug addict who was too difficult when it came to conducting business. No one would want to work with me.

His accent evaporated when he said, "Do you know who I am? These are not threats."

I trusted his words. Not the fake accident that he said them in, just the words. Stories circulated around the art world about the artists he had ruined.



One word from Valdez and my journey to financial success and freedom for my wife and I would blow away with his hurricane of words.

I stopped at the store on the corner of Biscayne and 62<sup>nd</sup> Street across from the bus stop. The cashier was watching some talk show. He left me alone to browse. There were only two of us in the store. I knew the other guy by face and name only. Felix. I greeted him and he spoke back as we'd done a million times before around the neighborhood.

"A pack of the cheapest menthol cigarettes you got," I said to the cashier. He shook his head. Then, he said, "Aren't you Claire's boyfriend?"

"Husband," I said.

"I never knew she was married. Listen. I'm having a bachelor party for my little brother next weekend. Is she available?"

"For what?"

"To work the party."

"Doing what?"

"What are you talking about? I'm trying to hire Claire?"

"What kind of job is it?"

The cashier dropped a foreign brand of cigarettes on the counter. His jaw dropped next to them as if I should have known what he was talking about. He glared at me, then glanced back at Felix. So, I turned around to see if Felix had something to say. He shrugged his shoulders.

"You don't know?" the cashier asked.

"Know what?"

The cashier's eyes bugged out. They darted back and forth from me to Felix. I looked at Felix again for answers.

"What?" I asked.

"Two dollars and fifty cents, please." the cashier said.

I dug in my pockets. No money. Rollie had stolen everything I had on me.

"I'm sorry, man. I forgot that I got robbed earlier. I lost my wallet. Sorry to waste your time."

“You can ring it up with my stuff,” Felix said. He placed a couple of soda cans on the counter. I thanked him. My head hurt. I raced out of the store as fast as I could to light up a cigarette.

Outside the store, Felix opened up his drink. He asked, “You’re Randy Love, right?”

“Yeah. And thanks again Felix. I’ll pay you back next time I see you.”

Felix pumped fists with me. “No need. You seem like you need a break, especially with the wife you had.”

“What do you mean?”

“She’s a handful.”

“Had? What do you mean by had? Do you know where she is?”

“No. I’m not married to her. And if I were, I wouldn’t look for her.”

“How do you know Claire?”

“Everybody who has something she might want knows Claire.”

“What do you mean?”

“That you should move on as fast as possible.”

Felix patted me on the shoulder. I hurled more questions at him. He waved and kept walking.

I crossed the street – head down, honking horns, and cars barely missing me. I waited at the bus stop. Valdez and my agent/friend were probably waiting for me with their arms folded.

The fire and police department caused me to miss the second meeting that I had with Valdez. I asked Claire to stay home with me instead of going out with friends. We rarely spent time at home together. And I begged her to wait until I returned from my meeting to celebrate with me.

“You want keep me cooped up in this ratty hotel room for slave! I don’t leave the Dominican Republic to be slave in America,” she screamed.





We argued a little. Well, she yelled at me until I took a cigarette break on the front balcony. From outside, I heard things breaking inside. The fire alarm beeped loud enough to wake the hounds of hell. I ran for my paintings. My paintings, our room, and all of our things went up in smoke. Claire had built a scrap pile of my clothes, handheld electronics, papers and my paintings and ignited a fire. She threw her things out the back window before I had realized what happened.

The bus pulled up to the stop. Several people got off before I could get on. Then, I placed one foot on the first step. My heart asked me if I was doing the right thing.

“Sir, are you getting on this bus or not?”

My lips parted. Nothing came out. I shook my head. The doors closed and the bus blew exhaust in my face. I lit another cigarette and walked back home to check and see if my wife had come home.

Back at the hotel, I wrote a list of all the positive things to say to Claire when she came back. I planned to ask her to have a ceremony to renew our vows. Certain she was to return, I made lots of promises to myself. I was so sure that I vowed never to paint another stroke until she came back to me.

