

Fear and Salvation

by Michele Venne

I couldn't believe I was doing this. Me, queen of social ineptitude, was at a seminar on "How To Attract The Perfect Mate." A long-time friend had sent the flyer in a card with butterflies on the front and a message printed in her perfectly flowing script on the inside that read, "Saw this and thought of you. Best of luck." I was tempted to toss the entire package-card, flyer, envelop-into the recycle bin, but some unknown force kept me from completing that action. So, here I am, in the plush lobby of the most well-known hotel in a city I had visited only once, waiting for the doors to open to what was advertised as a "life-changing event". I had dressed appropriately, in a cream colored, short-sleeved silk blouse that tucked neatly into a green and purple flowered skirt on a matching cream colored background that came just above my knees so as to show off my most attractive body part. Flat, simple sandals, lest my already abnormal female height intimidate anyone I might meet, adorned my feet, allowing freshly painted toenails to poke pleasantly out the front of the leather straps.

From the depths of my overnight bag, which doubled as a purse when I went out of town, I pulled the literature that was sent to my address two weeks before. Not having a chance to even skim the material, I did realize it was a bit of research written by the Dutch professors that had world acclaim in the area of relationships. I glanced at the cover which showed a couple smiling lovingly at each other in full color on the glossy paper, and quickly flipped open to the first page.

How does a person go about meeting someone they might be interested in having a relationship with? Assuming, for example, if one flirts with another, but the flirting is obvious, unwanted, poorly done, or completely ignored? Does the person continue? If the humiliation of not knowing keeps one isolated, then how are they to share one's life with a person who would love, cherish, respect, and hold them above all others for the remainder of their days?

Is the art of flirting innate, or is it something that can be studied? Assuming it is natural, the one offering the signs of "open for mating" meets up with the one whom either likes, knows, believes, and trusts the offeree, each would then compliment, complete, and enhance the other, thus allowing their souls to rejoice in the love that surrounds their hearts and lives, knowing that theirs has been a life not well lived, but well loved.

Returning again to how one might learn the tricks needed in which to attract the attention of another that looks promising, let's discuss acceptable skills. Hair flipping, smiling, direct eye contact, and the showing off of desirable body parts are what are known to the recipient as "open for mating". Perhaps it is a returning smile, a look of interest or appreciation in the glow of the eye, maybe even being so bold as to reach out and make physical contact with the flirtatious one. Is there some signal, a scent, a knowing in the pit of the gut, a warming of the heart, that they thank luck and Spirit that each recognizes the other, as the peanut butter to their jelly, their sunshine to their blue sky, their trust, courage, and hope being rewarded? The accepting of the other's mind, heart, body, and soul, the compliment and completeness, the total enrichment, the reason perhaps that we are here, is to find this near-divine state of being.

What rubbish! I pushed myself to my feet, and as I stormed out of the lobby, I crumpled and pitched the Dutch professors into the trash as I stepped through the circulating door. Pausing just outside, I glanced both ways down the sidewalk, not knowing where to go, but feeling that I would be the "ass" of assuming should I stay. To my left was a sign marking "O'Malley's Tavern". Having a soft spot for Irish pubs, I headed in that direction.

The welcoming anonymity of being in a darkened bar in the middle of the day was a soothing balm to my thoughts of having paid a ridiculous amount of money for something that is "innate". Hoisting myself upon the bar stool, I raised my finger to signal the bartender. After pouring a black and tan for the gentleman at the end of the curved mahogany slab, he made his way to me.

"A Harp and a shot of Cuervo. No training wheels."

He raised his eyebrow in question, so I explained, "No salt or lime." 'Tom', his name badge read, smiled and moved away to retrieve a chilled glass. The beer came first. The shot glass was set next to the frothy ale and filled past the jigger mark. I smiled my thanks and set a twenty on the bar.

Not many patrons chose to hang around after the lunch hour. I glanced around the place, taking in the scarred tables, wooden-backed chairs, various animal heads that hung throughout, the colorful television sets, and pictures of Irish castles. Behind the bar was a mirrored wall with glass shelves that held every type of alcohol. I recognized most of the bottles. Besides the black and tan drinker, to my left was a business man, his suit jacket tossed on the stool next to him, his Blackberry multitasking in his hands. He had a nice profile framed by dark hair. As he shuffled the papers in his briefcase, I saw that there was no ring, nor any indentation that there had been one until recently. Behind me was a table of three women tourists sharing pictures on their digital cameras and talking excitedly about their next excursion.

I returned my attention to the liquid in front of me that through my life had served as fun, escape, acceptance, stupidity, and enjoyment. I took a few swallows of the beer, then gently fingered the glass of the golden juice that I knew would burn my throat, offer a brief oblivion, and should I imbibe too much, see again in a short time. As I turned the glass round and round, my thoughts were taken back to the seminar.

I had been single all my life. Well, if I didn't count the time I was engaged, twice, to the same jackass who was years younger than me. He was good looking and fun in bed. So fun, in fact, that he felt the need to share with others. Before I'd found out, I had rescued him from a knife fight at a party and bailed him out of Madison

Street Jail. His sister, who gave birth at the age of sixteen, suggested that if I wanted to keep him, I should "just get pregnant". Then there was the airline pilot who gave me free flights to incredibly exotic places like Costa Rica, San Paulo, and Detroit. I discovered that the Mile-High Club was not all that exciting, nor was the constant swimming through bottles of vodka in the preflight lounge. The rodeo clown was romantic in an Old Western kind of way, but his lack of steady income, and the constant borrowing of mine, as well as his trips out of town, were a strain on any permanent relationship. It wasn't until recently that I had heard he was known for entertaining Buckle Bunnies in his hotel room. Figures. Seems I've had a track record for picking guys who are "emotionally unavailable", which I didn't know about until my therapist brought it to my attention. The blind musician was perhaps the one that cracked a bit of my heart. I took another few swallows of ale to derail my thoughts.

There were many positives to being single. I could eat what I wanted, when I wanted, whether that was a bag of microwave popcorn and a glass of wine for dinner, or barely toasted frozen waffles, plain, at 3 AM. Dirty underwear could remain on the floor, not having to be picked up until I was damn good and ready to see the carpet in my bedroom again. There were no taking messages from estranged ex-wives or crazy mothers, even if the mother was my own. I didn't have to decide where to spend the holidays or be concerned about how I looked when I woke up alone, day after day. I could come and go as I pleased, like the flu that often floated around my friend's kindergarten classroom. I sighed and downed the Tequila in one nerve-bracing gulp. Setting the glass back on the bar, I continued my silent litany of reasons for staying single.

After a moment, my brows drew together as I realized what was at the heart of all my failed attempts to find love: fear. Fear of not living up to the other's expectations because, hell, I had a difficult time living up to my own. And that was at the heart of my entire life. Fear. Sipping again on the beer, I forced myself to be the free-thinker I proclaimed to be, and thought positively about the emotion that was always sought after, but rarely found. Love. What if I fell in love? The flutter of excitement at the possibility of salvation from my isolated and slovenly-lived single life warmed its way through my whole body. The temptation to flirt with the idea that what I most sought could be mine, filled me with trepidation. I pushed that aside and tried to find words and images of what it would be like.

I would be able to share meals and laughter and holidays. Laundry day would be more colorful. I could wake up to the same beloved face, morning breath and all, and perhaps the phone calls from my crazy mother wouldn't be so gut wrenching. I felt a certainty that I'd like to be responsible to another person, calling when I was leaving work or when I forgot the grocery list on the fridge. Joys would be doubled and sorrows halved. I wondered if there was even a complement to my soul out here in the world, as despite all my searching, I never came across one that felt warm and safe. I sat up a bit straighter on my bar stool, as a knowing whispered inside my head and echoed in my heart. He would have to be attractive, educated, emotionally and financially stable, well-traveled, faithful, and . . . I would never find someone with all those qualifications.

The Blackberry wielding warrior on my left held up his hand to the bartender. I glanced at him and smiled. He smiled back, then requested, "Two more rounds of what the lady is having."

Tom moved off with a half-smile on his face. He placed two Harps on the bar and two more shots of Cuervo.

"I believe that drinking, like dying, shouldn't be done alone," he told me with a slight Irish accent.

He lifted his shot, and I followed. We clinked, then welcomed the heat of the distilled agave.

"Thank you," I said. I found myself flipping my hair and crossing my legs.

"Do you live in the City?" His thickly-lashed blue eyes, openly and honestly searched my face.

"No. I'm here for a-" and I paused. I couldn't tell this handsome, articulate man that I was supposed to attend a conference on how to find my perfect mate. I improvised. "A matter of a little soul searching, you could say."

He raised his brows. "Well, have you had a chance to see much of the place?"

"Not this trip. I was here once before and did some of the typical tourist attractions."

"Then you're in luck. I happen to have been born and raised not far from here after my parents immigrated to America about thirty years ago. I could show you quite a bit of unknown sites, if you'd like."

"That's sounds great," I smiled broadly, thinking that this day wouldn't be a total waste.

The man made a call on his Blackberry, keeping his eyes on me. "Yes, Sheila. Cancel my afternoon appointments. Something interesting has come up. Thanks."

He gathered his coat and briefcase while I grabbed my purse and hopped down from my perch.

"Have a good day Mr. O'Malley," Tom waved as we made our way to the door.

"Mr. O'Malley? *The* Mr. O'Malley who owns this tavern?"

"Aye. This tavern and several other successful ventures."

We stepped out into the bright afternoon sunshine and the busy streets of the City.

"Let's see if we can find what you search for," he said, and placed his hand at the small of my back as we strolled down the cracked sidewalk.

Aye, what if I fell in love?