

The Magnificent Joke

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He seemed upset that I wouldn't take the last seat on the bus until he noticed the elderly man with the strings of silver hair climb aboard.

"Does that vitamin water give you energy?" he asked standing behind me, regarding with keen interest the bottle sticking out of my coat pocket. "Does it give you real good vibes and power, so you can face the day? Does it energize you? Give you rhythm, and spark so good?"

"Well, I—"

"Or is it more for the flavor? Do you drink it for the electrons of delicious and the flavor so nice?"

"Yeah, it's more for the flavor," I tell him hesitantly.

"Me, I go to the dollar store. I buy packs of noodles for a dollar, you know? I take the noodles, and I crush them up real good. I walk to the mental health place, and the lady lets me heat them up with water in the microwave. She lets me sit in the waiting room because she understands that the weather outside—it gets cold, even though I don't have a mental disorder, you know? She likes my company; a woman of refined taste enjoys a man with humor and intelligence to bring life to her day."

He pauses, and his air of dignity strikes me. He's very clean, very poor, very ageless. In his eyes, I see Africa; in his voice, the drawl of the south. He isn't hitting on me or showing off but communicating.

"Women are laugh-o-holics. That doesn't mean there's anything wrong with them; it just means they like to laugh."

"Everyone likes to laugh," I tell him.

"No," he says. "Some women are congested. They spend so long holding in their smiles and their laughter. They spend too long caring about 'sucking in.' They can't guffaw nor chortle nor grin." He laughs—rich and deep—and gestures for me to sit down as a seat clears and then sits down gracefully beside me.

"I can get along with a woman of any race, ethnicity, color, age, religion as long as they aren't congested because I'm a comedian, and my jokes are so fine and clear and magnificent. Some people are just desiring a voice to spice up their day and make jokes, which will bring them closer to God and laughter."

I don't say anything, but I don't take my eyes off his face, either, just listening, captivated by the cadence of his words.

"I have many jokes, and this is my favorite one," he laughs with delight already appreciating his own joke. His voice becomes even, rhythmic like a beatnik or a jazz poet.

"There's a woman, gorgeous woman; she wants a king. This woman sees all men as pigs in blankets looking to get under her blankets. Even though this isn't the case, some men just have sleeping disorders. Like this man, you know? He's on the street, he just can't sleep. He isn't just any pig in any blanket; he wants a blanket of his own. This woman takes him in (as he is fine, fine, fine) to a McDonald's, to make an investment." He chuckles with glee.

"She spends \$1.73 on him. She figures if she's gonna get a king, she better make an investment. \$1.73! For a king! That's a deal if I ever heard one. She does not spend \$2.75, as she might have, but \$1.73. Later, he will make an investment on her because she is a queen, queen, queen. \$2.75 but he will always be to her one more pig in one more blanket! This is the most comedic joke of all time: that she will be gorgeous, gorgeous; that she will spend fifteen years alone; that she will be tired, but she's been promised by God that He will send her a king. She makes

investments. She buys a three bedroom palace apartment! A palace! But she, from the very start, explains her queenliness to him. She is a goddess, a g-o-d-d-e-s-s. Goddess, beautiful and what kind of man would not do anything for such a woman?" he asks me.

"Any kind of a man would swoop in. He would sweep her off her feet and take away her loneliness. He would take her to the finest restaurants, and her explanations would make him . . . what's the word? When your head is so full of ideas that you can't think? Is it incoherent?"

"It could be incoherent," I say, but he's already continuing, lost in the joke.

"So the man, he takes her to the finest restaurants. He strives to be able to spend \$21 on her. Take them to a Chinese buffet for a queen where they both sit down as men and women do and enjoy the egg rolls delicious and crispy, the rice deep-fried and full of flavor, the endless food that will continue to be placed on plates and consumed."

"But it is never enough. The next week she says, 'Where will we go now?' And I reply, 'Chinese?' and she says, 'We went there last week.' And I reply, 'Quizno's?' to which she says, 'No, it's cheap!'"

"I am not cheap, I am not a pig in a blanket, I am a man that can't sleep," he tells me, but he doesn't make eye contact.

"Pizza hut? Subway? No more Chinese? I don't know the places she wants. She says, 'What about Olive Garden?' I tell her, I've heard of this place from people I don't want to become, but she doesn't understand. She is the kind of woman that needs to be taken to these fancy Italian restaurants; what are they called? Not with pizzas—pizza is cheap—but with the pasta, the delicious and baked fresh breads, the Italian ice-cream for \$4 a scoop!"

He looks at me for support, and we both laugh.

"\$4 a scoop!" he says again, laughing. "You know those places. So the man, he goes to a psychologist, and the psychologist says, 'A woman like this just can't be pleased. Don't feel bad that you couldn't please her. If a king couldn't please her, then no man could!'"

He laughs and laughs. "That psychologist didn't know what to say. He didn't understand that this is the greatest joke of all time: that a queen chooses to be lonely in her three bedroom palace for fifteen years, though she is gorgeous, gorgeous and that a man without a blanket would do anything for her."

He pulls on the bus stop line and stands up to leave.

"What did you think of my joke? I can tell from your eyes that my joke was magnificent, magnificent," he beams at me.

"Magnificent!" I tell him laughing. He is gleeful as he gets off the bus. "Thank you for the joke," I tell him. He gives me a thumbs up from outside the window, buckled over with glee and giddy with laughter as the bus pulls away.

Magnificent, magnificent.