



**MICHAEL
FINLEY**

Valentines Eve

Your Free Edoc

MIKE FINLEY



It was the night before Valentines Day, and Rachel and I went out for a rare dinner and movie date. Money was a bit scare. I had just bought a print for us, by an artist friend, of two birch trees gently intertwining. It cost \$300, but I was in love. Wouldn't you know, I got an overdraft notice the very same day.

We choose an Indian restaurant, figuring it's cheaper than fancy Italian, and that not many people will think of celebrating Valentine's Day Indian style. When the waiter, a man named Dinesh, stiffly presents us with our menus and leaves, Rachel whispers that he doesn't have much of a sense of humor. But I held out for him. "He's got a sense of humor," I said.

We ordered wine, my first drink since the diagnosis two weeks earlier. What a difference it was, to be wearing clothes and drinking merlot in a nice restaurant, compared to that pitiful hospital robe and that pitiful hospital bed.

We ordered our dinner, telling Dinesh to cook our food no spicier than mild-to-medium. "We are from St. Paul," I said slowly. No reaction.

So I tell Rachel her about my poetry reading the day before. The downtown mall thought a poetry reading on the main concourse would connote romance, and about 30 poets read for ten minutes each, while shoppers passed us on escalators and on foot. Only a few ever stopped to listen. I saw an old poet friend I have known for 30 years, Roy McBride. Once we sat on the dunes by Palos Verdes on the Pacific Coast, and smoked pot and watched the waves roll in. Though we were both writers, we seldom

spoke. We embraced warmly, and he told me about his baby daughter, 22 months old.

When it was my time to read, I took the stage completely unprepared. Everything went wrong at once. I couldn't find my reading glasses -- they were buried deep in my jacket pocket -- so I had to hold my poems at arm's length. I was so amateurish, after all these years, I had to laugh.

People were passing before me like traffic at a major intersection. The microphone sounded loud and hollow. This was what I told the shoppers:

"Hi, and Happy Valentines Day. My name is Mike Finley, and as you can see from the patches on my elbows, I'm a traditionalist.

"You know, it's sure funny to be reading here. I've been doing this for ages, and this is the first time any business thought it could make money off free verse.

"The other thing I'd like to point out is how few poems these days are about the love we feel for our spouse and partners.

"And what's really strange is that this failure of romance began in the Romantic era, when poets stopped paying attention to what was around them, and started paying attention to what was in their heads."

At about this time Dinesh brings our dinner. It is spectacular -- a dozen little dishes and sauces and chutneys and breads. I continue with my speech in the downtown mall:

"The reason poets don't write love poems to their husbands and wives," I said, "is because they love their muses, their imaginations, more. That's why poetry seldom seems to matter any more. It's not about love for others. It's not a gift we give readers. It's masturbation -- fun, but limited.

"I have a special insight into this issue because I just got a diagnosis last week. I have a brain tumor. They say it's not cancerous, but it may have to come out.

"And I've been thinking how I might be different after that. I might lose some IQ points. Maybe I'll lose my muse and my sense of humor. I'm not saying I will, but it's a possibility.

"And I'm thinking -- which is more important to me, my muse or my wife? And I'm thinking it's my wife. Poetry needs you to be at the top of your game, and have every one of your faculties clicking in perfect synch.

But I have to think that, even if I come home from the hospital washed up as a poet, that she will still love me.

"And that's why I say, I love Rachel more than I love my muse."

Then I read a couple of poems I wrote to Rachel and finished, to no applause. No one heard a word I said.

So I tell Rachel all this over our tandoori chicken and naan. And she shakes her head. "I don't believe it," she says. "If you love me more than your writing, why are you writing all the time? Not that there's anything wrong with that."

I nod and think about all the times I have headed up to snuggle with the computer rather than climb into bed to snuggle. She had a point.

"But," I say. "If I come out of the hospital a vegetable, you'll still love me, right? Whereas I'll probably never hear from my muse again."

"I've been thinking about that," she says. "You'll probably be OK, you know."

"I know. But you know, if worse comes to worse, you have power of attorney. You can pull the plug on me if I'm really bad. If I'm just pretty bad, you have permission to put me in some kind of home. All I would want is that you come visit me sometimes. I mean, I would want you to have a life, maybe get married again, have relationships."

For a moment there is silence, as we mop up the curry with the bread. Then Rachel speaks.

"You know, if you vegged out, you could still live at home. There's no reason we couldn't all still be together."

"Then it's settled," I say. I ask Dinesh for the bill. He gives it to me, and I give it to Rachel. "Handle this, dear," I say. Dinesh cracks up. "See," I tell Rachel, "I told you he had a sense of humor."

We have an hour to kill before the movie, *Shakespeare in Love*. So we drive home, I clap the leash on Beau., and he and I go for a six-block walk through the neighborhood, sliding on the ice, checking out the alleys, mounting mock Godzilla fights among the trash barrels. Beau throws himself up against me with all the violence he has in him, and he hold my cuff in his teeth and growls ominously. He adores this game.

The movie is spectacular. It is the fictional story of Shakespeare's doomed love affair during the writing of Romeo and Juliet. The movie itself has all the tropes of a great Shakespearian comedy and tragedy. Rachel and I have such a ball watching it, and whispering excitedly in one another's ears, that the man sitting in front of me turns around not once, but twice, to insist we put a cap on it.

"Just enjoy the movie," I said to him, as if I was doing him a favor -- "please."

It was just what I wanted to say, the sort of thing you usually stay up for an hour later wishing you had said. Just enjoy it -- just enjoy it.

And when I got home, there was Beauregard, asleep on the braid rug by the door. But our arrival roused him to a fresh fury of violence, and out we went for one more walk around the block, so he could pee, and then -- to bed.

But not before I wrote you this letter.

Michael Finley writes about topics relating to culture and change. His book with Harvey Robbins, *The New Why Teams Don't Work*, won a Booz-Allen & Hamilton Global Business Book Award. Mike has also been named one of a handful of "Masters of the Wired World" by Financial Times Press. BH SmartDocs™ are published by BrownHerron Publishing and are sold exclusively on Amazon.com (www.amazon.com/brownherron).

