

SECOND RATE

Nicholas Gordon

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webmaster@poemsforfree.com.

SECOND RATE

Joe Reynolds dreaded Valentine's Day because each year he had to come up with a present and an evening that he thought might please his wife.

"Surprise me," Adele would say, laying the rock of her expectations on his shoulders.

Soon after New Year's he would make dinner reservations and order flowers.

But the gift! Oh, the gift!

It was not easy to find something affordable that did not look somehow second rate.

One afternoon in late January he was scouring the stores on Main Street, having already exhausted the malls, when he noticed a sale sign in the window of a jewelry store he had always considered beyond his means.

"Up to 50% off," the sign promised. So he decided to give it a shot.

His hopes were quickly dashed when he saw the one small counter of sale items, most of which had labels announcing a mere 15% to 20% off.

"Yes?" the woman behind the counter asked.

She was dressed tastefully and expensively in a gray woolen suit, her shoulder-length blonde hair and makeup as perfect as a movie star's. Her diamond pendant, matching earrings, and ring sparkled in the intense rays of the store's track lighting.

Joe was already sorry he had come in.

"I'm looking for a Valentine's Day present," he said reluctantly. "For my wife."

The woman smiled indulgently, indicating she knew the whole story – that Joe worked with his hands, that his wife had let herself go and sagged in all the wrong places, that his tiny house was squeezed onto a tiny lot, that he couldn't afford 99% of the jewelry in that store.

"How much were you interested in spending?" she asked. Since there was no one else in the store, she was at his disposal.

"Around three hundred," he said, instantly doubling what he had intended, cursing himself for having walked into the store, cursing himself for not just walking out, which he was, after all, perfectly free to do.

The woman seemed to suppress another smile. "Are we looking for a ring? Earrings? A bracelet? A pendant?"

Joe shrugged. "Whatever's best for the price. Do you have anything on sale that might work?"

"No," the woman said decisively. "We have an opal pendant I think I can give you for something close to that. Just a second."

She went into the back as Joe perused the sale counter, hoping to find something there that might rescue him. But no such luck. Even with 20% off, most of the items were over a thousand dollars.

One item that drew his attention was an opal pendant on sale for 20% off the price of \$1,300. In the

fierce light of the display case, the stone seemed to be on fire, with green, yellow, pink, and violet embers glowing in the depths of its creamy flesh.

It was set in a delicate 18-carat gold frame, with diamond chips above and below. But what mattered was the magnificent stone, talisman of a world which Joe could only gaze at longingly from afar.

The woman came back out to the counter carrying a small pendant on a black velvet tray. She laid it on the glass just above the pendant Joe had been marveling at.

"I can let you have it for \$430," she said. "With the chain. That's 14 carat."

Joe nodded. \$430 was way over the \$300 he had specified and way, way over the \$150 he had originally had in mind. And the stone she had brought out was pitifully small next to the magnificent specimen below it – a blue-and-cream teardrop with little hints of pink and yellow flashing within.

"It's \$300 without the chain," the woman said. "Maybe your wife already has a chain that would go with this."

Joe said nothing. He was thinking about how ridiculous it would be for him to spend \$430 on a Valentine's Day gift for Adele.

He had no doubt that the pendant was worth the money. That was the sad part. He was very far from being able to afford even this second-rate facsimile of what he would have liked to give her.

He remained silent, consumed with resentment and despair.

"It's a beautiful stone," the woman went on.
"I'm sure your wife will love it. Do you want it with or without the chain?"

"With the chain," Joe said, hardly believing that he was actually buying it.

The woman disappeared again, leaving Joe looking down at the pendant he had really wanted.

Such a beautiful thing! he thought. So extraordinary! He and Adele owned nothing like it and never would. Its very existence seemed like a judgment against his manhood.

The woman came out with the pendant wrapped in a cream box with a yellow bow. Joe wished he could look at it again, to see if it might be just a little bigger or more colorful than he remembered it. But wrapped so beautifully, it would have to wait until he gave it to his wife.

That happened at The Way Inn, a local restaurant that Joe and Adele reserved for special occasions.

After they had had their fill of the buffet and had danced a bit, they returned to their table to exchange cards and gifts.

Adele was wearing the freshwater pearls he had gotten her a few years before. Her black knit top had a plunging neckline that the short strand of pearls did nothing for, but Joe knew she had worn them for him, because they were the most expensive thing he had gotten her on a previous Valentine's Day.

That was Adele. Everything she did was with an eye to pleasing someone else. That was how she got her pleasure.

He opened her heart-shaped card and read the sentimental little ditty inside. And then her own words:

Dear Joe,

I love you so much. You are what I live for. I hope you know that.

*Your loving wife,
Adele*

He leaned across the table and kissed her, moved by her simple words. It was true, he thought. Adele didn't say things that weren't true.

He opened the gift, knowing from the shape and weight that it was a belt, something he needed. And it turned out to be a black dress belt to replace the one he was wearing, the worn third hole of which showed clearly where his stomach felt most comfortable against the leather.

Then it was her turn. She opened his card and read the canned sentiments, followed by nothing more than "Love, Joe," and kissed him.

Then the gift.

When she opened the little box, she gasped. Joe leaned over, hoping the opal would look better than it

had three weeks earlier, but Adele brought the box up to her face, staring at the tiny stone.

"Oh, Joe!" she said. "This is exquisite! This is too much!"

"You like it?" he asked.

"I love it!" she gushed. "Oh, Joe! You shouldn't have spent so much money!"

He blushed and didn't answer.

She reached back behind her neck and took off the pearls.

"I'm going to put it on right now!" she said.

She took the opal pendant out of the box, placed it against her chest, and fastened it at the back. The tiny opal lay against her bare skin just above the glimpse of cleft, giving off a gentle bluish-white sheen in the dim light of the restaurant.

"You like it?" Adele said, arching her sagging breasts towards him.

"It's lovely," he said, thinking of the other opal and of the woman who had sold it to him. And then, "I'm not talking about the pendant."

She blushed and hit him playfully on the arm.

Then she took his hand.

"I love it, Joe," she said. "I really do. But you shouldn't think you need to do things like that to show me your love. I know you love me."

Again he blushed and said nothing.

"It's very expensive, and I know how hard you work," she went on. "This is something special that I'll treasure as long as I live, but I don't expect something like this every Valentine's Day. Do you understand?"

He nodded.

"Now don't pull a long face on me! I'm very happy tonight. Really. And I want you to know how much I treasure you and our life together. I live for you, Joe. I mean that. Of course, for the children as well. But first for you."

She took his hand and kissed it. And then kissed him.

He began to cry.

"What is it, Joe?" she asked.

"I don't deserve you, Adele," he could barely say. "I don't deserve you."

"Of course you do!" she said, beginning to cry as well.

"No, no!" he insisted.

She stopped crying and looked him straight in the eye. "Are you having an affair?" she said.

"No, I'm not having an affair," Joe laughed. "Believe me, I'm not having an affair. I just haven't been grateful enough for what I have."

He would have wept more, wept all the beauty he felt rising in him like lava, but for the fact that they were in a restaurant and people were already beginning to turn their way.

So instead he held it down just below his larynx, and with a smile wobbled on above it, stumbling along a trail of hot stones straight into his wife's eyes.

They rested their foreheads together, laughing through their tears, and when they separated Joe looked again at the gentle bluish teardrop suspended

just above the cleft between his wife's breasts and decided, yes, it looked pretty good, perfect, in fact, right where it was.