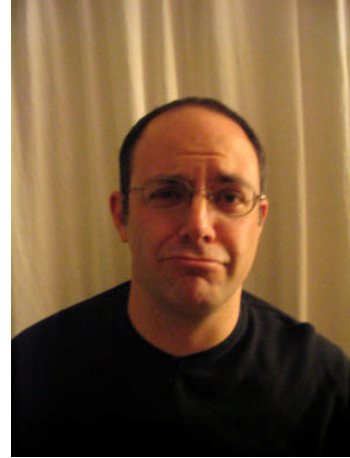


Why I Don't Celebrate Valentine's Day

Early 1980s, Waltham, Massachusetts

By Al Kaufman

Much to my wife's chagrin, I don't celebrate Valentine's Day. I've led her believe that this is because I find the commercialization of love unromantic, and that I don't need a particular day to tell her that I love her. This makes me sound like a true romantic and thus my wonderful wife puts up with my transgressions, although it may have something to do with the fact that I usually get her something shiny for President's Day.



But the real reason I hate Valentine's Day is junior high school.

For most people, there's not much to like about junior high. I think that's why most places changed the name to middle school; junior high had simply gathered too many negative connotations. It's basically three years of merciless teasing. And there's so much to tease about, what with the acne, sprouting body hair, budding breasts, and general hormonal overload, not to mention the noogies, wedgies, and elbows to the gut. To survive junior high was to survive 12 rounds with Mike Tyson (back in the days before he bit ears). If you made it out alive, you won.

I still wear many scars from my early teen years. But the scars that run deepest stem from that most brutal of all days: Valentine's Day.

At my school, John F. Kennedy Junior High, in Massachusetts, people bought carnations for one another on Valentine's Day. Red meant "I love you," and was only to be given to actual boyfriends and girlfriends who planned on marrying just as soon as they received their drivers' licenses. Pink meant "I like you," and was meant for friends, although it was an unwritten rule that boys would not give them to other boys. White meant "I'm your secret admirer," and was generally not given unless you already knew that person liked you and wanted to let them, and the entire class, know that you felt the same.

It was \$1 per carnation. We filled out our forms and paid our money a week before the big day. Boys with girlfriends would constantly try to outdo one another, spending upwards of \$50 to demonstrate that they loved their girl the most. I usually spent about three bucks and sent pink carnations to girls I was friends with but secretly had crushes on.

I never got any back.

Homeroom on Valentine's Day was extended for 10 minutes so the teacher could pass out the carnations. My 7th grade homeroom teacher, Mr. Simmons, liked to drag it out

one carnation at a time. Regina Keane was allowed to stay at the front of the room so as not to tire herself out walking back and forth for the 60 carnations (20 red, 20 pink, and 20 white) from Derrick Jameson. I sat at my seat the whole time. As the minutes dragged on and Regina's back began to bend under the weight of her bouquet, eyes began to stray from her to me. I was the only one in class without a flower on my desk. Even Adam Johnson, who picked his nose and wore dirty jeans to school everyday, had two pink ones.

I sat and cursed my female friends on whom I had spent my hard earned snow shoveling money. Didn't one of them think I was worth one lousy buck? One of Regina's friends suggested to her that she give up one of her pink ones for me, but Regina said that Derrick would kill her if she did.

Then the boys started chiming in. "Hey, Kaufman, can you teach me to be a lady killer like you?"

"Hey, Al, maybe if you showered more often girls would like you." (For this one I had a clever retort: "I shower.")

"Check out Kaufman, the ladies man."

I was called Ladies Man for the next couple years, until I somehow got an actual girlfriend. She wore a lot of black and liked The Cure. I thought she was exotic. Her name was Gerri and I couldn't wait for my public declaration of love on Valentine's Day. I had already saved \$40 of shoveling money.

We were sitting on the bus (the back, of course) on the way to school. The \$40 was making my wallet bulge, as today was the day to buy the carnations.

"These losers are so geeked up about Valentine's Day," she said. "It makes me sick. I swear if you ever bought me one of those dead flowers I'd break up with you on the spot. What a bunch of losers."

I heartily agreed with her on the spot, while my mind raced around like a muddy puppy on a freshly shampooed carpet. Did she mean it, or would she be secretly upset if I got her nothing? Was this some kind of test? If I didn't get her the flowers, should I spend my \$40 on those jazz shoes I've been eyeing that would make me look super cool to everyone except my Goth girlfriend? Should I get her something else, like some black lipstick? I was too young for these big romantic questions.

When Valentine's Day came, my desk was again empty.

"Hey, Kaufman, Gerri must really like you a lot."

Gerri, whose last name was Winger, was in a different home room, seething. I had decided to play it safe and just buy her one red carnation. When the bell rang for first

period she immediately sought me out. She threw the flower at me, yelled, “We’re through!” and stormed off. I never found out if it was because I bought her a flower or because I didn’t buy her enough.

Ever since then, I’ve worn black on Valentine’s Day. It is a day of mourning for those of us who have no one. It is a day for hand-holding couples to look at us with a combination of sympathy and disdain; to mock us and pity us. Even after I met my incredible wife, I still feel a solidarity with the lovelorn and loveless, all of whom stick out like thorns on this day of flowers.

It is for them that on this one day of the year I refuse to tell my wife that I love her. It is for them that I choose to celebrate President’s Day instead.

Oh, and I bought the jazz shoes.

[Al Kaufman](#) has published essays, features, and reviews in The Austin Chronicle, Time Out New York-Kids, and Creative Loafing (Atlanta), among others. His fiction has appeared in The Duck and Herring Co. Pocket Field Guide. He lives in Decatur, Georgia, where he loves his wife 364 days a year.