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Pucker Up

by **Tristan Taormino**

True Love

February 20th, 2004 4:00 PM

On your day of true love I will find you. Simply by being the best self I can be and dedicating this day to you, completely and with the most opulent, expansive, excruciating, honest, and truly dense and yummy passion, you will have the opportunity to experience true love for perhaps the first time.

That's just a portion of how artist Kathe Izzo describes her very personal, one-woman interactive performance art piece called *The True Love Project* (trueloveproject.com), with which she has traveled the country for nearly two years. Here's the idea: For one day, Kathe will be in love with you. You can experience it via e-mail, by phone, or live. She's done close to 50, and presently, she does them mostly as in-person days. "Everyone is born with certain talents and I realized at a very young age that one of mine was the ability to connect with people, even people I have never met, from a still place inside of myself, sometimes over great distances," says Kathe.

These days are as varied as their subject: from heated e-mail correspondence with one man who said he needed her to love him like a slave loves her master to a woman who took her to a suburban mall for a day of shopping and Jamba Juice smoothies. For one date, she was treated to a private "tantra room" at a health club on the beach with massages, great food, and decadent pampering. Some dates become sexual; Kathe says she relies on her instincts and is open to where true love takes her.

J.Lo's love may not cost a thing, but Kathe's does. Her love is her gift to you, although as the recipient-art patron, she requests that you pay her expenses for the day and a suggested donation of \$500. The notion that love is for sale is not a new or profound one, but it is fascinating to hear how Kathe navigates the water between art for art's sake and the commodification of her service: "The money part still fucks with me. Five hundred dollars feels both incredibly high and incredibly low, but I have to put a price out there in any case. People tend to engage more deeply when they pay. I accept barter and I also accept donations to a scholarship fund, for people who are in need of an in-person true love day and cannot pay." She's in the process of forming a nonprofit organization, which will be finalized this spring.

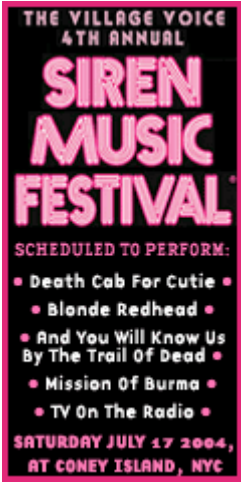
I am strongly aware that our culture encourages people to buy love in many different forms. Nowhere is this more apparent than during the relentless marketing siege called Valentine's Day, where seemingly any product can be bound in scarlet ribbon and sold as a token of one's

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affection. Before February 14, one can't escape shelves overflowing with red and pink candy boxes and stuffed animals. More insidious than diamond-ring commercials is the kind of love for sale in the form of fairy tales. Look on television and you'll see that so-called "real" love has been well lit, edited, and packaged into 10-minute heart-shaped segments through reality dating shows like *The Bachelorette* and *Average Joe*. One thing these shows all have in common is that producers create such elaborate, once-in-a-lifetime-style dates—hot-air balloon rides in Aspen, swimming with manta rays in Hawaii, a trip to a private island off Belize—that contestants can't help but get caught up in it. No wonder they seem to fall in love at the drop of a hat. Almost anyone could be hit by cupid's arrow under such picture-perfect circumstances, absent the stress of jobs, family, money, and other everyday worries.

I met Kathe about eight years ago at a writers' conference; we stayed in touch for another year and then lost track of each other. When I heard about her latest project, I was dying to experience it for myself. She sent me a brief questionnaire that explained the process and posed several questions. The first noteworthy thing about my experience was the amount of time it took to schedule: The realities of work and other commitments conspired to postpone true love for me. When I finally booked my appointment, it was up to me to decide: What would be the perfect day to fall in love, to be in love? I decided that my perfect True Love day would be an honest one. Because a horse-drawn carriage ride in Central Park, making out at the top of the Empire State Building, or having my name tattooed on someone's ass, while all my idea of romantic, don't say "true love" to me.

On the designated day, I had stressful phone calls to make and overwhelming amounts of work to do, and she needed to be in love with me through all that. After spending a couple of hours in my real life, we hopped on the train to Union Square. We shared my favorite meal (sushi) and trotted around the city. We saw *Monster*, then talked, over latte and cocoa, about film, serial killers, real estate, friendship, exes, and, of course, love. I'm not sure if the connection would have been as strong if we hadn't known each other long ago. Kathe's energy was totally focused on me, but not in an overbearing way like a stalker or a fake way like a call girl. Her love may have been contrived, but it was genuine, a paradox I still find hard to explain to people who didn't experience what I did. She considers herself "a cross between a prostitute and the Dalai Lama," and she indeed delivers a combination of spiritual companionship and sensual enlightenment.

It's not often (or ever) that someone asks you to be specific about how you want and need to be loved, as Kathe did in her questionnaire before our day. It forced me to articulate some things that can't always be put into words. I need unconditional love, love no matter what my mood is, love when I am on and when I am off. I need to feel that you who love me are firmly and completely on my team. I don't need a devil's advocate, I need a cheerleader and a friend. I need you to be present. I need you to be honest. I need you to be transparent and share your feelings with me. I need to be doted on and taken care of as much as I need to be left alone. I don't need to be pressured. I need you to have incredibly high expectations and no expectations at all. I need connection. I need to be seen and understood for who I am. My day of True Love made me realize how much true love I already feel in my life, and for that I am grateful.

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