

## *The Cost of You*

“You never spend any money on me,” she smiled. “Not that it’s a big deal.

“I do.” He protested. But then, the conversation fell silent.”

“I don’t care you know. I mean it. I really don’t care. I was just thinking, you know. How much have you really spent over the past five years? You gotta admit, I’m pretty inexpensive for a girlfriend.”

The conversation moved on from there. But a residual smell lingered like cigarettes in the clothes the morning after a bender. The restaurant was dim; almost empty, with the resentful air a place takes on when the staff feels the few patrons aren’t worth the trouble of staying open.

They walked home, arm in arm, as snow began falling and a northern blast rolled in and the cold sunk down into their coats.

Once inside the apartment, she held him sensing she had needlessly started a petty argument that stung more by exposing his paltry income than any neglect of her.

“I’m sorry,” she said, taking his face in her hands, “I really don’t care.”

He smiled and kissed her before dropping his eyes.

“Aren’t you freezing?” She crossed to the thermostat.

“You’re always colder than I am.” He said.

She jabbed at the buttons making the boiler roar to life in a rush to get the heat to rise a few degrees and they snuggled down into the sofa and dozed to a witless reality show of tanned and shallow exhibitionists.

The next afternoon he asked her out again.

“I want to show you something. It’s a surprise.”

She met him out front of their favorite bar. He was holding an envelope under one arm and only smiled when she ask what it contained. They ordered beers and dinner, a modest one from the sandwich page. Then he took out the envelope.

“I want to show you something.”

“Yeah?”

“I want to share it with you.”

“Sure, lay it on me.”

He began, “Please understand, these are just estimates but I think they’re pretty close.”

“What is it?” She tried to read the title of what looked like a spreadsheet.

“Sort of an investment portfolio.” He said keeping it faced to himself.

“Okay...”

He began, “Since 2005, I have lived in my apartment where, as you, know I pay for heat, hot water, cable etcetera on top of my rent.”

“Yeah?”

“I’m comfortable with the temperature at 65 degrees. The heat is on regularly from November through March. You stay at my apartment an average of three days a week and you like the heat turned up for an average of 10-12 hours during those stays. After doing the calculations off the Energy Star website, the estimated cost of keeping you warmer over the last five years is approximately 268 dollars.”

He looked up reluctantly, “Remember, these are just estimates.”

She stared at him as she realized what he was telling her.

“You bastard!” She whispered. “I’ve never seen anything so niggling and parsimonious in my life! It’s pathetic, really! Did you spend all night on this?” She pulled her sweater off the chair next to her and put it on.

She seemed ready to get up and leave him at the bar, so he folded the paper up and prepared to return it to the envelope when she stopped him. “No, no, no! You prepared this “financial report” now I want to hear it. All of it.”

Hesitating, he unfolded the paper once again. She took a long draw on his beer.

“Don’t forget to add the cost of half a beer at the end.” Contempt foamed in the crease of her lips.

“Base operational investment: up until 42 degrees the cost is absolutely necessary to avoid frozen pipes, and general system breakdown. Secondary investment: from 42 to 65 degrees is the range that’s sole intent is for my own comfort, ability to eat, sleep, bathe, etcetera. Tertiary investment: 65 to 70 degrees—the cost added to the previous two and which sole reason is for your comfort and my happiness in that it allows us to sit on my sofa with ice in our glasses and your head on my chest. If this were a Morningstar, the overall rating of this investment: A”

He didn’t dare look up at her. The waitress brought two more beers.

“Go on.” She said.

He began reading again.

“Phone usage. My cellular plan has a base rate of 61 dollars for 700 minutes of airtime and up to 25 text messages a month. Three years ago, we found we talked and texted more than this monthly allotment and so I upgraded to an unlimited plan at the cost of an extra \$22.95 per month. Though the benefit was spread across any phone calls or

texts, the only reason for the upgrade was our personal communication. The benefit is the ability to reach out and talk with the one person I really ever wish to hear from. Cost \$826.20

She took his phone off the table and went through the address book until she found her number. Then she deleted it.

He looked at the phone still glowing on the table between them then continued to read.

“Hot water.”

She rolled her eyes and leaned back into the chair.

“This may seem like a rather tangential cost. The average length of a hot shower is 5 minutes. According to Going Green.com, it costs approximately \$128.21 to take a daily five-minute shower per year or a little more than 35 cents a day.

However, at least once a week over the years my showers can run up to and past 25 minutes due, almost exclusively to you. For example, after I commence showering, I begin to fantasize you quietly using your key and coming into the apartment. Immediately you hear the shower running and creep down the hallway. While my head is under the water you slip into the bathroom. Maybe I’m singing or maybe it’s the spray of the water, but I can’t hear as you slip out of your clothes and climb in behind me.

Reaching your hands around me, I startle but you hold tight and press your naked body the length of mine so that we stand together under a warm spring—no, under hot rain. We explore each other like a landscape we’ve

only just discovered touching, groping and meshing together. I turn around and hold your face protecting it from the water. I kiss you and hold you.

And we melt together.

This has added somewhere around \$192.40 over a five year period.

The cost of a bottle of baby oil is \$3.95. During these “showers” I estimate I’ve gone through about 13 bottles in five years. Cost: \$51.35”

“How many times a week?” She asked.

Ignoring her question he continued, “Laundry.”

“The actual increase in the cost of laundry is negligible, I believe, because the load doesn’t change much and I wouldn’t know how to parse it anyway. However, in this category goes replacement. In the past five years I can specifically think of at least seven sweatshirts or sweaters you have borrowed and countless t-shirts you have slept in.”

She started to protest but he held her with his finger.

“I realize you have returned most, if not all of these. However, most of these have had to be replaced at some point because I have refused to wash them. Once you leave in the mornings, the shirt you borrowed smells like your perfume, your hair, your body. I fully intend to wash them but by the evening I long to smell you again and will sleep with the item of clothing until, eventually I can’t wash it as the memories have grown stronger than my need to wear it and so it ends up in my bottom drawer with the rest. So, in reality, all of these items must be replaced. Estimated Cost: \$306. I split it due to my own sentimentality so it comes down to \$153.”

She was smiling into her beer.

“I-tunes.”

“I-tunes?” she laughed.

“The songs that came over the radio when we drove to your father’s house overnight last summer. I would have never bought, *I Love a Rainy Night*, *Wild Horses*, or, *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*, and 11 other songs. But we sang long and loud to the radio, and I wanted that collection. Usually, I would have just downloaded them for free, but after our conversation about the value of an artist’s talent and you asked why wouldn’t I pay for another person’s labor, I paid for each one—\$18.06. Now, the playlist is on my ipod and I listen to it every time I want to take the best trip of my life again.”

He continued to the next column, “Blockbuster, and then Redbox...”

But she stopped him putting a hand on the paper before him.

“Okay, okay.” She said, “I get it.”

He smiled at her, unsure of where he stood now that the relationship had been brought down to digits and decimals.

She stood and took a dollar to the jukebox. After some searching, she found the song she was looking for and punched in the code. Then, she took the check off the table and handed it to the waitress. She pulled him to his feet and whispered into his ear, “This one’s on me.” Then, she kissed him long and deep as Mick Jagger, chalking his way through, *Wild Horses*, moved their bodies together.