

We sat in the shade of a white dune too old and fatigued to be bothered by the gentle breeze that was cooling our bodies. We had spent the whole morning making love; came noon we urged each other to at least do something we couldn't just as well have done back home. We took to the cobbled streets in our flip-flops and T-shirts, towels flung around our necks, fingers intertwined and playful, finally exploring the little fishing village that lay quaint and compacted at the foot of the mountain and came across a newly painted antique shop in one of the side-streets. Elsa skipped inside and I waited outside, thumbing the new ring on my finger, trying to get a feel for this thing that would now forever form part of my hand. In the dark of the doorway she held up a blue platter.

"We can't afford this," she said, biting her lower lip, "but let's get it anyway."

It could've been any price and we still wouldn't have been able to buy it with a clear conscience. After a whispered audit, we left the shop empty-handed. We sauntered towards the beach, her arm hooked into mine; her head on my shoulder. We didn't talk much; being in love made us adept at telling long tales by touch alone. We walked up the beach to put some distance between us and the tourists, eventually coming across the dune.

She lay on her belly on a towel, paging through an anthology of poems. I was sitting beside her, leaning back with my hands buried in the fine sand, transfixed by her back and thighs, brown and vibrant, sprinkled with the fine sand like powdered sugar. She would randomly stop at a poem and start reading, silently mouthing the words and nodding the rhythm. If it didn't capture her sentiments within the first few lines she'd start paging again. Every so often she would read a few lines out loud.

"A thing of beauty is a joy for ever:

Its loveliness increases; it will never

Pass into nothingness; but still will keep

A bower quiet for us, and a sleep

Full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing.”

Keats. Six years on and I still remember it word for word. She was in the middle of silently reading a poem when she suddenly spun around and sat upright.

“I’m sorry,” she said, “we need to go buy that platter.”

“Need to?” I chuckled.

She was shaking out her towel and I had to turn away my head. “Yes, need to, Martin.” She pulled me up and took my face in her hands. “I want to remember this day.”

“And the platter will help with that?” I asked, being pulled across the beach.

Her hair, so beautifully thick and strong-willed back then, lapped at my face as she bounded ahead of me; its ends dissolving into the brightness of the sun. Streaks of it slashed across her face as she sometimes spun around to talk to me.

“A memory is a fragile thing, Martin. Remove it from where and when it originated and it immediately starts disintegrating. But take a part of its source with you, give it a relic that can sustain it, and it will remain vivid forever. You want to remember this day, don’t you?”

“Of course, I do,” I laughed, breathless.

“Then let’s go!”

“Sold!” cried the auctioneer and his gavel cracked, “to the lovely lady in the second row for three-thousand Rand. A beautiful Johnson Brothers Willow Blue Platter.” Martin leaned forward and looked across at the elderly lady being civilly congratulated by nearby competitors and onlookers. The auctioneer’s assistant gently picked up the platter and gracefully slipped behind the curtains hanging across the small stage in the hall of the community centre where Elsa had spent so much of her free time.

Elsa didn’t tell him she was sick until it was obvious she was dying. She had been downplaying

her symptoms, blaming her exhausting work and a bad diet, joking that she would start to live healthily as soon as she could find the time. But she had known all along; two doctors had confirmed it and she was already being treated. Only when Martin confronted her, and that only after he had confronted his own desperate need to believe her lies so he wouldn't have to face the daunting truth, did she tell him. His anger and disappointment at being kept in the dark were intensely passionate but instinctively ephemeral; there was not enough time left to waste any of it on resentment.

The curtains were still swaying when the assistant slipped back through them with another memory.

"Next up," the auctioneer announced, "an impetuous three-hundred-kilometre drive, one way, mind you, to visit a penguin reserve on the west coast. It's still in immaculate condition. I will start the bidding at two thousand Rand."

There were no bids.

"C'mon people, not a scratch on it," the auctioneer coaxed those present. "May I remind you, this is the journey that culminated in a night spent in a seedy hotel where the police showed up in the early hours of the morning to break up a domestic dispute just a couple of rooms away. I will open the bidding at one-thousand-five-hundred Rand."

One hand slowly went up.

We were absolutely giddy on the drive there; proud of ourselves for doing something that impulsive. She was sitting sideways in the seat, her knees pulled up, and we were jabbering and giggling. Often, we just gazed at each other, congratulating ourselves with affectionate smiles.

We had awoken at six o'clock that Saturday morning; way too early. We'd both of us had a rough week and were looking forward to sleeping late and vegetating for the rest of the day.

We were lying in bed, facing each other, bitching and moaning, when I – she always argued vehemently that she had – suggested that we do something crazy and irresponsible. We decided to go for a drive; consciously deciding to make that the extent of our planning. We jumped in the car, eyed the petrol gauge, and took off. When we were heading out of town, Elsa recalled a little farm stall about twenty kilometres down the road. As it came into sight, I recalled a bigger one just outside the neighbouring town. Before we reached that, Elsa mentioned how she had read about this small penguin reserve off the coast near Langebaan where they would take you out to an island where the penguins bred and enlist your help to collect some data on them. At that point it was still two-hundred-and-fifty kilometres away, but we were fully committed to the adventure. We arrived there just before eleven to find they had closed at ten. Our bubbles popped so loudly our ears were ringing all the way back to the car.

“We’re not just turning back,” Elsa said with stolid resolve. “I don’t care what we do now, but we’re not turning back.”

We lunched at a restaurant overlooking the ocean. The fish was pricey, but good. Afterwards we parked the car near the town centre and just walked around, exploring all the nooks and crannies. Our mood lifted and we decided to sleep over, even though we only had the clothes we were wearing. However, coastal towns do not look kindly on spontaneity, and we could not find a vacant room anywhere. We had no choice but to drive back. That three-hundred kilometres we so gaily covered earlier now lay like a thousand before us, and the mood in the car was cheerless and quiet. We hadn’t gone far when Elsa – she always vehemently argued that I had - spotted a little motel just off the highway. We were overjoyed to hear they had some vacancies. Overjoyed and unsuspecting. As soon as we entered the room, Elsa suggested we go sleep in the car, and it took some convincing to keep her inside. The décor hadn’t been updated since the seventies, and it looked like it hadn’t been cleaned since the eighties. I had just managed to calm her down when she stepped into the bathroom. She screamed, and then

began fuming. I begged her to keep it down, and she did, raving in a hoarse whisper; but, as we learned later, as night began to fall, indistinct shouting and loud music were part of the ambience of the place. Around two in the morning a shouting match that had started at midnight turned physical. We lay in bed, staring at the ceiling with widening eyes, convinced that the violence was creeping closer. We were planning possible escape routes when the police finally arrived and diffused the situation. We fell asleep as dawn was breaking, and they woke us at ten to vacate the room.

Our indignation was a lively topic for the first part of the journey, our tiredness for another part, our disillusionment for the rest, and we were relieved when a road sign indicated that the ordeal would soon be over. The little farm stall that had been our original destination came into view. We looked at each another and burst out laughing.

"Let's see what this weekend could've been like," Elsa said, and I pulled over without much resistance. The place was small and packed to the rafters with farm produce, preserves, trinkets, and ornaments. Elsa's mood was picking up with every step, and mine was doing better watching her. She gasped, stood up on her toes, and carefully slid a platter out from behind a selection of tin cans on a cabinet.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"You know exactly what I'm doing," she answered, holding the platter at arm's length, scrutinizing it with a sly smile.

I leaned closer to her and whispered, "You *want* to remember this weekend?"

"I want to remember everything, Martin."

"Sold! To the gentleman in the front for two-thousand-three hundred Rand."

The crack of the gavel was like a starter's pistol to the part of Martin's soul that was disconcerted and anxiously pacing the corridors outside the room where the decisions were

being made, where other parts were overseeing the completion of her final wishes, causing him to jump up and hurriedly walk towards the exit. The soft patter of applause and indistinct civil congratulations faded and was then cut off by the door closing behind him. Once outside, his pace immediately slowed and with his head tilted towards the sky he took a deep breath, urging the fist so desperately clenched inside his chest to release its grip.

Martin came home early one afternoon to find a van blocking his driveway. His boss had called him into his office that morning and said he could work from home from now on, if he so wanted, and only needed to come in if there was something really important that needed his attention. He had placed a sympathetic hand on his shoulder and wished him luck.

Martin parked in the street and walked up his driveway with a box of files under his arm. A man came walking out his front door carrying black bags hanging heavy with soft things. He greeted Martin in passing. Martin, confused, wandered through his house in silence, eventually finding Elsa upstairs, busy giving instructions to another man who was taping up boxes.

He was standing in the doorway with an inquiring look on his face for a while before she noticed him. "Hi, honey." She tried to get up out of her chair and he rushed over and gently stopped her from doing that. "Just simplifying things a bit," she said, struggling to catch her breath.

She had arranged for a charity shop to pick up some of her old clothes. Some clothes had become almost all the clothes she owned. She kept a few pairs of pyjamas, a bathrobe, some sweaters, a pair of slippers, and one business suite covered in a plastic bag. Her closet and the half of his she had annexed years ago were empty. Gone were the formal work parties where she looked so beautiful it hurt and he tucked at a tight collar until she had to slap his hand away; gone the wedding functions where she wouldn't leave until he had done the funky chicken with her; gone the nights lying in, lazy and bloated with take-aways, watching a sappy movie; gone

the habitual workdays, the rushed mornings, the pecks on cheeks and the flopping into chairs with a coffee at the end of the day to exchange tales of idiocy; gone the late Sunday mornings that became afternoons naps that became turning in early with a book; gone the casual excursions to buy groceries, or to just do people-watching in the park with a melting ice-cream. All of them tied in black bags in the back of a white van.

The crack of the gavel, though muffled behind the door, pierced Martin’s ears, and he darted a few paces further away. He refused to consider which part of her was gone now, to see her face before him, to feel the self-reproach and regret so naturally and intimately entwined with acquiescence. Crack! He refused to be anything but dutiful and faithful. Crack! Unswerving. Crack! Unwavering. Crack!

Martin had been too long in catching onto her plan. By the time he tried to hoard memorabilia there wasn’t anything left except the collection of platters she had hanging around the house. For weeks he tried to convince himself to confront her, to stop her rooting out so much of their lives. He would storm into the room she was in, ready to demand that she stop and explain; but, without fail, standing in front of her with her looking up at him with an expectant look, her glorious soul still visible behind her weary eyes, he would ask her if there was anything he could help her with, and would end up taping up boxes and carrying them to vans waiting outside.

“There’s one more thing,” she said, hoarsely, laying her head back down on the pillow. Martin slowly drifted another spoonful of soup towards her mouth, but she turned away her head. He let sink the spoon into the remaining soup and put the bowl on the bedside table.

“I’ve sent an inventory of my collection of platters to an auctioneer. Turns out it’s actually worth something.” She giggled, which abruptly threw her into a coughing fit. Martin pulled her

upright and softly patted her back. He was fighting hard to hold back the tears, not because she had forbidden him to cry, but because he was scared that even one tear would show the way for all the anger and resentment he had blindly wandering in his darkest corners.

She lay back, exhausted, and picked up the conversation again as if nothing had happened.

"Who would've thought, hey?" she said, out of breath.

"They were always priceless," he said, meticulously combing her sparse hair from her forehead.

She took his hand in hers and squeezed it. "The auction is next Friday."

His eyes refused to find hers. "You've gotten rid of everything."

She weakly patted his hand, then pressed it affectionately against her cheek. "It's for the best."

"I don't understand." His sigh was broken, laden with desperation and fear.

"Martin." Her voice was warm and soothing, and she was rubbing her thumb across his hand. "Hey." His eyes found hers and immediately they saw their unremitting grace, a sob escaped his lips. "Martin." He took a deep breath and let it out, smiling apologetically, but another sob escaped his lips.

"I'm sorry," he blurted.

"Martin, I need you to listen, honey." He sniffed and, feeling slightly embarrassed, quickly wiped away a tear with the back of his hand. Then he looked at her, and her smile, though serene, had the faintest signs of sympathy and regret. "You have this immense capacity for love, Martin; and I am blessed to have been loved by you. It would be a travesty if you never shared that love again because you're hung up on me." Martin helped her to turn slightly on her side, never letting go of her hand. "I'm pretty sure I'll be somewhere after I'm gone, and I don't want to spoil the experience by worrying whether you're living in the past." Martin chuckled, sniffing intermittently, and Elsa crushed his hand against her cheek.



She didn't get to find out how much money the auction raised for the community centre she had volunteered at for over a decade. During the night she had another coughing fit, and after frantically trying to help her for a while, Martin phoned the ambulance services. They arrived to find him cradling her in his arms. She had stopped coughing.

They buried her on the Saturday, and halfway through the service the sky pulled a veil across the sun and a soft persistent rain began to fall that lasted until late in the afternoon. When the first drop hit the roof of the church, Martin smiled, hearing her scoff, "Well, that's a bit much." She had written her own eulogy which Martin read in front of a church so full people were standing in the back.

"We need not accomplish, nor be victorious, nor be hailed a saviour; we need not explore, nor discover, nor invent; we need not eons, nor centuries, nor years. We need none of this to live a meaningful life. But we do need love; copious amounts of it in diverse forms; enveloping and irresistible love; inescapable love that entices you to evolve so you're able to breathe it in, unfettered and fearless. That makes for a full and precious life. I want to thank everyone for helping me live a meaningful life. I hope, if only in the smallest way, I have done the same for you."

Martin judged himself enough under control to return inside. The last crack of the gavel had only slightly flustered him and he felt confident that he could see this thing through to the end. He quietly opened the door. The curtains across the stage were still swaying, and even though he felt his fist tightening again, he slipped inside and took a seat at the back.

"And now, the last item on the list," the auctioneer announced. "A beautiful example of playful larceny. This is a rare item, ladies and gentlemen, the only stolen property in the whole collection. I shall open the bidding at three-thousand Rand."

Elsa never once repented of her stealing that platter off the wall at our wedding reception, Martin smilingly recalled.

A hand near the front pierced the air, "I have three-thousand Rand," then one right in front, "Three-thousand-five-hundred," one near the back, "Four thousand," the one in front again, "Four five;" all across the room hands pierced the air in rapid succession, and the price swiftly climbed to nine thousand Rand.

Martin was astonished at the keenness of the crowd. The caterer's screw-up meant there wasn't nearly enough food for all the guests, the power was off for almost an hour during the reception, and Elsa's Uncle Nevil got so pissed and punchy a pair of her cousins had to subdue him and drag him outside – and yet there was so much interest in it.

The frequency of the darting hands ebbed. The price had sprinted to eleven thousand and was now crawling towards twelve thousand.

Martin shook his head in disbelief. This memory had already eclipsed all the others by quite a margin, and there were still two people in the race: the lady in the front who'd bought their honeymoon, and the man near the middle who'd bought their trip to the penguin reserve.

"Twelve-five."

Twelve-thousand-five-hundred, Martin sighed. He hadn't even gotten his vows right, they being, verbatim, "I will love you forever." He had meant every word of it, but an expectant and slightly uncomfortable silence replacing the reverential one present made him realise that he had genuinely misunderstood what was expected of him. "Really, I will" he added awkwardly. He sincerely meant that too, but it did nothing to appease the expectations. Elsa, however, did understand what vows encompassed, as was evident in her beautifully composed and compassionate words. She did though deliver it in a manner that accentuated the beautiful sentiments with hisses through clenched teeth, and with a facial expression that clearly communicated that it would be wise if he avoided her for a couple of hours after the ceremony.

"Thirteen thousand."

There was a short pause. "Can I get thirteen-five?" the auctioneer asked the man. He shook his head in defeat.

"The bid stands at thirteen thousand Rand."

The lady seemed to have emerged victorious once again. Martin couldn't see her face, but he imagined her holding back the parade smile with quivering lips.

"Thirteen thousand; going once, going twice...thirteen-five!" the auctioneer cried elatedly.

There was an excited murmur around the room as everyone craned and whipped their necks to identify the bidder. Martin was helping them look, when he suddenly realized that his hand was in the air.

"Fourteen thousand." Her hand appeared blasé at the wrist yet couldn't hide its intention to be unfaltering.

"Fourteen-five." Martin stared bewilderedly at his dispossessed hand stabbing the air. Let it go, he urged, you promised. "Fifteen." "Fifteen-five." You promised Elsa you wouldn't hold on. "Sixteen." "Sixteen-five." It isn't holding on if it's just one little platter. Buying up everything, now that's holding on. I let it all go without resistance; I just need this one thing. "Seventeen." "Seventeen-five." I won't live in the past, Elsa; I'll keep that promise. I will love again; I'll keep that promise as well. But you were spectacular; it's going to be difficult to find someone like you again. "Eighteen." "Eighteen-five." Who knows how long it will take; if it happens at all. That's what I'm afraid of, Elsa; what if it takes me my whole life to find someone like you again? I'll keep looking, I promise, but what if it never happens. "Nineteen." "Nineteen-five." Surely you won't begrudge me a little indemnity; just in case my search does not go well. I'll keep searching, I promise, but just in case. One thing to hearten me, "Nineteen-thousand-five-hundred; going once..." and remind me, "...going twice..." that if I can't find you out there, I can always find you back then.