

Worth It
by Quinn Stennett

She's sitting there staring at the work computer in front of her, thinking about how she could turn it into a calculation, like the story she read. If everything is simply gain and loss, then there's a way to know if it was worth it. She thinks to herself,

The first date was cheap, because it wasn't a date, I made it clear that I wasn't interested. Back then I was driving a van which had terrible fuel economy, so that's say, \$20 for fuel. On the way home from the movies I stopped at the graveyard because if you climbed the hill at night, you could see the entire city, with the car ants crawling below, and it made you feel important. He said he was adventurous, and I wanted to test that claim, but for a reason unknowable at the time, I also wanted him to feel important. He was adventurous, which I wasn't, so I leapt into his arms when a tree brushed against me in the dark. The closer he stood, the more courageous I felt. He played piano for me later that night and I was mystified, which was worth a lot, but it was on my piano, and that thing cost me a fortune. So, let's just call our first not-a-date even.

And then there were the other dates that weren't dates over a three-year period. He drove most times, let's say that's \$10 a drive to be generous, and we'd go on a not-a-date once a fortnight unless he was away, which he was often, usually overseas for a few weeks without having told anyone he left. So that's about \$200 worth of fuel over a three-year period, which is nothing really. He organised our second not-a-date, and

drove, and brought cheeses and blueberries, and took me to a nearby place that I'd never seen to go bird watching, a *bird adventure* he called it, he'd prepared a playlist of bird related songs, *Seabird* played in the car with the windows down, salt breeze mingled with the stale smells of a 20-something-year-old man's food wrapper filled car, which somehow made the air smell sweet. I'd pay him \$100 for the labour of thought that went into those not-a-dates, which brings us to \$300. He took photos on every not-a-date. I didn't know anything about photography then, but now I know that people would pay good money to have photos like that, and film is expensive to buy and develop, so he spent almost \$5 a picture, plus commission for talent. In our 3 years of not-a-dates I suspect he took 50 pictures of me. I have 15 of them. I asked to see all the pictures and he said that I had. One time in his room, he was strumming his guitar on his black bachelor office chair while I read a book, and I noticed a folder on his computer desktop with my name on it. I asked to see it, and he said I could see it when the photos were ready, which I took to mean that I could see the photos when *he* was ready. He must have sensed my suspicion because he said,

“I wouldn't give you a raw photo. *You* need photoshop, okay?”

I wondered if the photos meant something to him, then later decided that it didn't matter. When I looked at photos, I remembered how I felt when the shutter went off, when he looked at photos, he was probably thinking about the rule of thirds. So, I only count the 15 photos that I saw, that's \$75 plus \$100 commission. I could add the cost of the memories, but once a moment has become a memory, only you can put a price on it. You wish the memories were worthless so that you could move on, but wishing and dwelling on memories creates some kind of nostalgia inflation. Those memories become priceless.

You know what? He wasn't the only one owed labour costs. I spent hours staring at the few photographs of him that existed, while listening to the songs he sent me, and writing about him, and missing his presence, then deciding against reaching for the phone, and holding myself back. He had the hands of a farmer and wore rustic silver bracelets and rings that would look tacky on anyone else. He had pale skin no matter the season, contrasted by dark stubble, so that when he shaved, he looked entirely different. His brown eyes were reminiscent of the landscape he was from, somewhere west, where everything was dry and golden. He was excited to show me things I might find

interesting and teach me things I wanted to learn. On occasion read to me, he was the only person I knew who liked what I read, he changed his tone and teared up in the right spots and spoke loudly, and he always ended up close to me when he read, my heart beat quicker and I wasn't sure why, so I focused on breathing purposefully to slow my heart down, worrying he might hear it and think that meant more than it did.

There was the time I suggested a week in Melbourne and he booked flights the next day. I had a partner at the time who found him non-threatening, so non-threatening that he and I platonically shared a bed for the week. On the third morning, I woke with his face one pillow's length from mine and decided that I loved him. But I had a partner back home at the time, who I also loved. I turned my back on my feelings hoping they'd get bored and run away.

A therapist charges \$200 per consult, but with Medicare and a GP prescribed mental health plan it's about \$80 an hour. He's unqualified but has helped me more than any doctor or therapist, so, does he cost less, or more? Let's meet halfway and say that every hour he listened to me compulsively vomit about my interests, or showed me unconditional love and guidance, was worth \$50. And he gave me things, like my new favourite TV show, dinners that he cooked for me, glasses of wine, books he wanted me to read, one in particular that he found at a charity store, he said he'd wanted to give me a copy for a long time, but he had to search all over to find it second-hand, because he knew that I only read second-hand books out of stubbornness. As far as possessions, he gave me one other thing, an entry level film camera picked up on one of his travels that cost him \$5. He'd seen me taking photos on disposable cameras and said that this 20-year-old bubble of plastic would "do you better". From then on, he refilled every reel of film and had my film developed, because I never learnt how to do it, as an excuse to see him more. I paid him back in favours, like collecting him from the airport. I read somewhere that if you collect a man from the airport you'll fall in love with him so you shouldn't do it, but it didn't matter because I was already in love with him, had been for years now, even though I had been in relationships with other people all the while who I loved deeply, but they came and went, and I still had him to love. The love slept between us like a cat that we both thought too precious, and beautiful, and potentially frightful to stir. Unless maybe the cat was sleeping beside me, not between us, and only I knew it was there. That thought was enough to keep me quiet.

If we add the cost of everything he gave me and did, and deducted the years of yearning and unrequited love that I spent, he comes out at about \$300 on top.

When I was finally certain he didn't love me back, I met The One. It was on a trip that he had invited me to, in fact. The One was sweet, quite literally, he always smelt of soap and an almost feminine cologne, he talked sweetly, and on my birthday, he gave me a photo from the day we met.

"Not many couples have a picture from the day they met," I marvelled.

Then I remembered the man behind the camera, the one who probably knew he was witnessing something important and decided to immortalise the moment. He was the man I told myself I loved on a biting cold morning in Melbourne once, but not anymore, time had made those feelings stale and changed us both too much.

He gave me one final book to read, a collection of short stories, it took me six months. I read one of the stories and thought about him and wrote a little passage on a sticky note about how every time he went away, I missed him so badly, and ironically, I only got halfway through that stupid book before he told me he was moving for good. I remember when we met, he said he would stay till he finished his degree which I forgot about because he was always on some adventure, surely he hadn't studied law all that time? He had an internship lined up and decided it was time he grew up a bit, went back to where he was from, and got a *career*. He would leave in a month. I returned his book half-finished. The more I read, the less I could connect with it, so it didn't bother me to return it prematurely. Before handing it over I found the old note that read,

When I was young, I would read good books quickly and wish they would never end, which of course made the end come quicker. I did the same with my childhood. Most say that time speeds up as an adult but for me that hasn't been the case. I read slowly and wish that the book would finish. But the book never ends, six months pass and it hasn't moved from its place on my shelf, I haven't had time to touch its pages, and every day I don't read crawls by like an ant. One of my greatest fears as an adult is never finishing the book. When my best friend returns from his (frequent) travels, I understand the magnitude with which I missed him and ask myself if this magnitude implies a love deeper than friendship. Maybe owning books you'll never read is part of the human condition.

I slipped the notes out and crumpled them in my pocket. I saved the love we had by letting the cat sleep. I'm owed a lot for that.

He was sitting on his bachelor chair sorting photos into desktop folders. I put the novel on his desk.

"Did you read the whole book?" he asked, picking it up and opening it to the contents page.

"Nah, about half."

"What was your favourite story?"

"Um, I think it was called *Break It Down*. She really nailed that one."

"That was my favourite," he smiled and pointed at me, "that story is the whole reason I bought the book! They read it on the radio."

The book had more than a hundred stories. We can't have had the same favourite.

He flipped open the book to where the sticky notes were. I should've felt relieved that they were gone, but I felt sullen. He read aloud,

"*Then you forget some of it all. Maybe most of it all. Almost all of it, in the end. And you work hard at remembering everything now, so you won't ever forget...'*" he traced his finger down the page, "*If you have to figure in the bad times too, I don't know. There weren't any bad times with her, though,*"¹ he looked up at me, his eyes willing me to speak.

I said nothing. He smiled and closed the book.

She punched the numbers into the work computer. \$675. How much she hurt was not reflected in that value, so she resolved to stop thinking about it, in any way possible. All that he left was a plastic camera that she didn't know how to use. She gave it to her little sister, knowing time and the 2000 kilometres between them would absolve the rest of her debts.

¹ Lydia Davis, *Break It Down* (1986)