

## **Weighing In**

Two hundred thirty-five dollars and fifty-five cents. This simple amount paid yearly is said to insure the combined assets of my husband Erich and me. \$235.55 to replace my small but growing library, a hodgepodge of communal furniture and media, a sapphire and diamond engagement ring, and the other sparse possessions that can be ascribed a monetary value.

But what of the lesser known treasures lurking in our small home? Would the insurance agents dare put a price tag on my collection of matchbooks? Could they guess what it would cost in time and effort to replace the work of two aspiring writers? Do they care about the colorful artwork my nieces and nephews created, now proudly displayed on the refrigerator?

I understand some things defy quantification, so I submit for your approval this figure: \$205,000. It is a sizeable amount of money by almost anyone's standards and taken for what it is, the dollar amount assigned to my life, it could also be called into question. Of course my father would scoff at this figure. A chemistry professor in college secured him with the knowledge that the human body broken down into its basic elements and sold at market value is worth about fifteen cents.

Given his time frame of the 1950's you would have to account for inflation, but that still brings the price for my own humble self nowhere near the figure proposed by my life insurers. So how was this figure arrived at you may ask. It is a simple calculation produced by multiplying my annual salary by five. A matter-of-fact number purported to replace one human life forever extinguished.

But here again my own questions creep in. Have all matters been taken into account before settling on this figure? This so-called life (too afraid to call it death) insurance seems an extraordinary amount for one person with bitten nails and crooked teeth. Have the proper sums been subtracted for my left ovary that swells beyond its borders causing me both mental and physical pain? Are these assessors aware that my eyesight has not been good since the fifth grade?

A right foot slightly larger than the left, seasonal allergies, a tilted uterus, countless moles and one birthmark. Do they know? What are their standards? When will I truly be appraised for what I'm worth? Yet I know, even with my nails bitten down to the quick and glasses dangling from the bridge of my nose, I am more than they ever assumed.

From a young age I had the inexplicable knowledge that I was somehow different. Walking on the rocks lining my childhood home at the age of seven or eight I had a sort of epiphany that forever set me apart from my peers. Genetics and misfortune had placed me on a path to become a victim, but I knew in spite of or because of these facts I would never be the same as the kids I encountered on the playground.

This brand of self-awareness struck again in high school. Looking in a mirror, teenage stoned, I could convince myself I was an alien. Not the typical disillusionment or rebellion of most teenagers. I was still perfectly happy to do my homework, plan for college and be home by curfew. This was something else, something living behind my eyes. Something I was not wholly in control of.

So when asked the question of what I'm worth, I believe this unknown must be accounted for. The task of appraisal is a difficult one. If pressed I could assign no dollar

amount to this feeling for the sake of insurance, I have difficulty even giving it shape with words. It has always manifested itself in the form of endless questions, answers pending. And nothing sensible. Never what makes a car run, or how to make tapioca, or even where to see the stars most clearly. My constant companion, never absent, has, is, and will always be *why*.

Why should I drive 60 miles an hour to a job I never cared about? Why eat tapioca when bananas grow on trees? Why do the stars insist on the abyss when my heart is also open? Always too many questions and too few answers. Why can't I just be content? When will I be satisfied to dull my reckless mind with television, groom my unkempt thoughts with board games or baseball? What am I holding out for? *Is there something better?*

I think of those who have brooded before me; great minds lost before their time. Anne Sexton on the crisp October morning when suicide seemed the only answer. Stephen Crane taken by tuberculosis, a by-product of a bohemian lifestyle, just shy of his thirtieth birthday. Lord Byron exchanged words for action and lost his life to fever as a would-be soldier on the distant shores of Greece. Nietzsche succumbed to madness and lived a decade awaiting death.

Their names linger in history despite their untimely ends. What kinds of examples are these men and women whose works line my bookshelf? Do they rest any sounder in the ever after? Have all of their questions been answered? Are their lives to be aspired to for their greatness, or should their paths be avoided as thresholds of pain and misfortune? What have they passed on?

What will I pass on? I sit down to make a list of the things I have learned:

- 1) History is important
- 2) There is a bigness and littleness to all things
- 3) Love is not necessary, but it helps
- 4) A search for meaning is a lonely journey
- 5) I must continue to learn
- 6) We can all be cruel

Is this enough? I would like more, but whom would I share it with? Childless at twenty-six I see myself in my sister's children. Her oldest son, in his last year of grade school, echoes my own skepticism. He seems determined to hunt down conspiracies lurking in his science books and spends long hours postulating theories on ghosts and Pokémon. His words land on me like bricks. Why this curse for him also? As an infant did I hold him too close to my own restless heart?

Such a danger to bear new life, yet I am beginning to understand the appeal. To be born is to succeed without trying. Each finger a miracle, every toe a triumph. Once penetrated the egg becomes each parent's greatest accomplishment. Creation, not duplication - every artist's dream. With each new generation we finger-paint with life. I stand on the outskirts and watch, still trying to find reason to celebrate my own birth.

\$235.55 for my possessions, \$205,000 for my corpse. I still don't add up.

I will run the calculations again.