

Mrs Kombrink's Christmas Pudding

There are degrees of silence. There is the silence of the deepest underground caverns, and of the vast deserts of the earth. And then there is the truly profound silence that signals the imminent reading of a will.

Into such a silence Mr Klein, of Berkowitz, Berkowitz, Berkowitz and Klein, rose to his feet, shuffled his papers, adjusted his spectacles, harrumphed importantly and began to read:

"This is the last will and testament of Elsie Agatha Kombrink."

He paused to bask in the rapt attention written in the unblinking stares of thirty-one pairs of eyes, and the stillness of thirty-one bums perched on the edges of the elegant seating in the late Elsie's Bishops court Lounge.

At the age of ninety-six Elsie Kombrink had, thanks to the canny investments of her late husband, accumulated a large fortune. She had also accumulated a veritable battalion of hopeful beneficiaries – many of whom were crowded into the room.

Mr Klein resumed: "To my daughter, Penelope."

He turned his head as an inexperienced young sparrow, deceived by the clear glass, thumped and fluttered noisily against the window. But no one else in the room heard a sound.

"... to my daughter, Penelope, I bequeath my Bishops court house, my residence in Jersey and my villa in Haute Savoie, together with all their contents except for the items listed below."

A spry grey-haired woman, sitting on a Louis Quinze chaise longue, relaxed back into the rich cream brocade. Penelope, at seventy-four, was the sole survivor of four siblings. She had fully expected to be her mother's main beneficiary. But you never knew with Elsie. She had been a notorious eccentric who had never lost her childhood penchant for practical jokes. Her descendants would have been disappointed — but not surprised — if she had left everything to the SPCA or even to the Salvation Army of which she had been an ardent member since the days of General Booth.

"To Gladys Purbright ..."

A corpulent woman in a short skirt, who had been relentlessly munching her way through a bag of toffees, froze in mid chew. She was perched, ludicrously on a dainty three-legged Georgian stool. Her thighs were so grossly fat that, as Mr Klein observed over his half glasses, she was unable to get her knees together. He hastily returned his gaze to the will.

"... to Gladys Purbright," he resumed, "who nursed me with such devotion during my last illness but one, I bequeath my eighteenth century Findlater mantle clock.

"To Sean O'Toole, my admirable vet, I leave a sum of money to ensure the continued wellbeing of my five cats and my Yorkshire terrier, Tinkerbelle, amounting to sixty thousand Rands."

At this a large pink bald man, sporting a forest of ginger beard, exclaimed: "Begorrah, the woman was a true lover of animals."

This remark broke the tension. The company relaxed as Mr Klein reeled off the remainder of the bequests – starting with a tidy annuity for Elsie's maid and gardener.

By the time he had reached the penultimate item, the room was lit by a bevy of smiles that turned into applause as he announced:

“To my entire tribe of descendants — of whose names I have long lost track — I bequeath, to be equally divided between them, my entire share portfolio. Which,” added Mr Klein, “is worth around eight million Rands.”

The young sparrow made another abortive assault on the window. This time it was heard by everyone. With one exception: a severe fortyish woman perched stiffly on the stool of the deceased’s Bluchner grand piano. Her mouth was puckered into an expression of prim disapproval that had an air of permanence about it. Only her toes moved – curling and uncurling inside her shoes. As Mr Klein started to read the final item they froze in the curled position.

“To my neighbour, Helen Grundle, for all her little kindnesses over the years, I bequeath ...” Mr Klein paused. He looked slowly round the room, a glint of almost sadistic amusement in his eyes. “. . . I bequeath one of my famous Christmas puddings.”

The prim mouth puckered even more tightly. The nostrils widened in furious disbelief. “How could she! After all I’ve done for her!” She almost shouted the words out loud.

Mind you, a genuine Elsie Kombrink Christmas pudding was not to be sneezed at. Five years previously BBC Television had flown Elsie to London to take part in their “Great Christmas Pudding Bakeoff” competition. She had won hands down. The judges had never tasted anything like it. It was a sumptuous, fabulous aristocrat of a pudding. A pudding to be transported in a golden coach with six white horses. Harrods of Knightsbridge had offered her a fortune for the recipe. But she stoutly refused to reveal her ingredients which were known by her close friends to include fruit steeped in copious amounts of Grand Marnier liqueur spiked with Calvados. Even more unconventionally, she included dashes of Guinness and Earl Grey tea. But there were other subtleties, so exotic and fanciful that she carried their secret to her grave.

As a sort of postscript, the will directed that two magnums of Veuve Cliquot (they were waiting in ice buckets behind Mr Klein) be drunk by the assembled company. They needed no urging.

Amid the popping of corks and the buzz of happy voices Helen Grundle retrieved her pudding from a kitchen cupboard and, refusing to expose herself to further ridicule, slunk out through the back door.

That evening Mr Grundle came home later than usual. It was getting dark but there were no lights on in the house. He found his wife sitting at the kitchen table. A cigarette between her fingers glowed red in the gloom. Next to her was a full ashtray, a glass and a half empty bottle of vodka. She was staring at what appeared to be a huge pudding bowl.

“Don’t ask,” she said.

“But what did the old girl leave you in her will?”

“You’re looking at it.”

“But what is it?”

“What does it look like?”

“It looks like a pudding.”

“It is a pudding, *stupid!*” she shouted. “After all I’ve done for her, the old bitch goes and leaves me a pudding. A miserable pudding, for heaven’s sake! Haven’t I changed her library books, haven’t I read to her, haven’t I fetched her shopping for the last three years? And what the hell are you grinning at?”

Hiding his smile too late, her husband replied: “I was just remembering something you said, darling, about a year ago. Now what was it. ah, yes. ‘The old trout has not much longer

to go. And, make no mistake, she's *loaded*. If I butter her up she'll put me in her will. She has hinted as much. Consider it a blue chip investment,' you said."

Next morning, Helen Grundle answered her front door to a familiar, but less-than-welcome face. It was Mrs van Schalkwyk, a tiresomely assiduous worker bee from the church committee.

"Ah, Mrs Grundle," she said. I've come to collect your contribution to the Bishop's Christmas auction. A small piece of jewellery I think you said."

The words hung in the air. Helen Grundle had no intention of relinquishing the gold bracelet she had promised in an unguarded moment. Her calculating little brain raced desperately, then clicked into gear:

"I seem to have mislaid the bracelet," she said. "But I have something else for you. Something really exotic and famous."

"Lot twenty-four," called the auctioneer. "A Christmas pudding." But this is no ordinary pudding, ladies and gentlemen. This is a pudding of international distinction – made by the hand of the late Elsie Kombrink to the same recipe that won her first prize at the BBC's Christmas Pudding of the Year competition in London. This is a pudding to make the most jaded of gourmets salivate. Who will start me off at two-hundred Rands?"

An elegantly-dressed woman in the front row abruptly sat up straight. She was Deborah Willoughby-Smythe, well-known society hostess and social climber of great agility. In two weeks' time she would be throwing an extravagant Christmas dinner party. Among the guests would be the editor of a national women's magazine. What a talking point the Kombrink pudding would be. Why, she could even have it piped in by one of those handsome, kilted young men from the Cape Town Highlanders. What a coup. And what a chance to upstage that little upstart Edna Prendergast. She caught the auctioneer's eye and nodded.

"Two hundred I am bid," he called.

Unfortunately for Deborah Willoughby Smythe, her 'little upstart' was sitting at the back of the hall. Edna Prendergast, a stockbroker's wife from Somerset West, was also planning a lavish Christmas party. She also had seen the social potential of the famous pudding. She raised her folded pink programme.

"Three hundred. From the lady at the back."

"Four hundred. From the lady in front."

"Five hundred,"

Deborah Smythe-Willoughby turned round, recognised her rival, scowled, turned back to the auctioneer and nodded.

"Six hundred."

"Seven hundred."

The audience began to turn their heads in unison like spectators at a Wimbledon final.

"Eight hundred."

"Nine hundred."

"One thousand rand I am bid for this fabulous pudding. Any advance on one thousand?"

There was a slight pause, then:

"Eleven hundred, from the lady at the back."

"Twelve hundred."

There was a longer pause as dozens of craned necks waited for the flash of pink.

"Thirteen hundred I am bid. Any advance on thirteen hundred. Going at thirteen hundred."

Dora Willoughby-Smythe moved in for the kill. She gave a distinct double nod.

“Fifteen hundred rand,” called the astounded auctioneer.

Edna Prendergast subsided furiously into her seat as the auctioneer’s hammer sounded the death knell of her plans.

Outside the church hall the victor placed the pudding carefully into the boot of her Mercedes. On her way home she parked at a shopping centre, having collected her two-year-old son, Rodney, from his crèche. Before extracting his push chair from the boot she placed the precious pudding out of harm’s way on the roof of the car. The newly-bought push chair seemed to have been constructed by a designer of Chinese puzzles. She struggled for five minutes to open it. Rodney hated it on sight. It took her several more frustrating minutes to install the kicking, screaming child. Finally, cursing under her breath, she stalked off towards the shops.

On the roof of the blue Mercedes the pudding bowl stood out like a white beacon.

Seven-year-old Jake Nolutshungu, who had been begging between the rows of parked cars, spotted the strange white object. Scrambling onto the boot lid, he grasped the pudding. One sniff told him it was food. He looked furtively around before he slithered to the ground, cradling the heavy pudding in his arms. He hoisted it onto his head. Then he trotted off towards the distant township –the pale undersides of his brown heels twinkling in the sunlight.

Jake’s mother, Lucy, was incredulous.

“You found it where? On top of a car? Do you think I’m stupid? You stole it didn’t you?”

She took the pudding from him to give him a good smack. As she lifted it up, her nostrils caught the pudding’s magical fragrance. A second sniff, with closed eyes, at the subtly delicious aroma soothed her anger and sparked off an idea.

Times were bad for Lucy and her family. Her husband had lost his job as a night watchman six months ago. Lucy had struggled to feed her four children in their wood and iron shack by charring in the not-so-nearby white suburbs. Now her best ‘madam’ had announced her imminent departure to Australia. Christmas, due in two weeks’ time, would be a bleak celebration indeed were it not for the kindness of her sister, Tandy. Tandy was a primary school teacher married to a policeman. They lived in a nice brick house in Langa. She had invited Lucy and her family over for Christmas dinner. But Lucy was looking forward to it with mixed feelings. She was embarrassed that she could contribute little to the celebrations beyond a few sweets for the children.

Now Lucy smiled. This wonderful pudding was indeed a gift from heaven. The trembling Jake was astonished to receive a kiss on top of his head.

The party was a great success. There were ten children and seven adults, including Lucy’s mom and dad who had bussed down from Transkei. Everybody tucked into the three chickens, braaied to a golden brown in the yard by Tandi’s husband, Temba.

Then Lucy served up the pudding. She held her breath as her father raised the first spoonful to his mouth.

“Ow,” he said. “This is delicious. This is very special. This deserves a toast. The adults raised their glasses to the blushing Lucy.

“There’s plenty more for seconds,” she said – an offer that was soon taken up.

Little Jake was halfway through his pudding when he gave a sharp cry. He pulled something metallic out of his mouth. Lucy gave a concerned look across the table.

“Oh, you lucky boy,” she said. “That looks like a fifty-cent piece.” The others dug hopefully into their pudding, but with no luck.

Later that afternoon, while the grown-ups were asleep, Jake took the coin to Mr Alvez at the Portuguese café at the edge of the township. He asked for some sweets.

Mr Alvez examined the coin with a frown.

“I’m sorry my boy,” he said. “This is a worthless foreign coin. I can’t give you anything for this.” Then, seeing the boy’s crestfallen face – and no doubt warmed by the few glasses of Christmas cheer he had imbibed earlier in the day – he presented Jake with a five-rand bar of chocolate. Absentmindedly he tucked the coin into his pocket.

Late that evening, after locking up, he went round to his car at the back of the shop. Feeling for his keys in his trousers pocket, his fingers closed on the coin. He gave it a cursory glance before flipping it far out onto the dusty veld.

“It is definitely missing,” said Giles Kombrink as he sat in the bank vault sifting through his late Grandmother’s coin collection. “It was the centre-piece of the of the collection – a Charles the First golden sovereign dated 1671.”

“Was it valuable?” asked the executor.

“You could say that. Try sixty-thousand Rands for a start.”

Out on the rubbish-strewn veld a small, half-buried disc of pure gold gleamed feebly in the light of the dying sun – its fate as ignominious as that of the English king depicted on its surface. For a few minutes a stray sunbeam, refracted through an old Coke bottle, brought a brighter glow to the embossed face.

Was it a trick of the light? Or was that a sardonic smile on the king’s lips?

Anonymous