

Story for performance #784  
webcast from London at 08:28PM, 13 Aug 07



Source: Damien Cave, 'Iraqi premier to hold talks in search for compromise', *New York Times online*, 13/08/07.

Tags: [disenchantment](#), [refugees](#)

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Eventually I came up with this and placed it in the personals column of *Time Up*:

Fifty-two-year-old male. Exile. Desperately seeking anonymity. London-based. All offers considered. Box no. 14/01.

Within a week, letters began arriving. White and brown envelopes flopped through the tight metal letter box onto the doormat. I began by prioritising the thicker, quality paper first, followed by the handwriting.

Many of the offers were for sex: well-heeled women wanting the exotic. The word 'exile' had obviously done the trick and I can't say I wasn't tempted. I still got a kick out of educating ladies who know nothing about the world beyond theirs. So easily impressed, so keen to please, and so desperate to patronise the exile's fantasy of a triumphant homeland full of higher values, stronger ideologies and united people. They were always easy lays. But English aristocratic women had also come to bore me. The night simply often ended in tears.

I can't say I was surprised how much interest people showed in a complete stranger, but I was disappointed by their stupidity. Like Shirley, who suggested I contact the United Nations.

'They support people like you,' she wrote. 'They've got returnees' programmes.'

She had missed the point, as I explained by return post.

'Dear Shirley,

'You assume that I want to go home. But how do you know I have anything to go home to or anyone to go home for? I have no choice but to stay here. My life is about endurance. Enduring London. Enduring endless trips to Croydon to visit the only real friends I have. Enduring the endless ignorance about my country and my history.

'I am not,' I wrapped up firmly, 'seeking more rejection. But thank you all the same.'

Another woman, a scientist who assumed I was a refugee from somewhere—anywhere—in Africa, sent a frantic note which she had scribbled by hand in fading blue biro. 'New research,' she said, 'has discovered several gene variants that affect skin pigmentation. the protein SOX9 could provide the key to making black people white. If you want to disappear, this could help.'

'Did I say anything about disappearing?' I replied. 'Did I say anything about my race? Or my colour? How odd that you think being white would help my quest for anonymity. Dear lady, my predicament is that of the foreigner, perpetually haunted and alone: whether I am white or black makes no difference.'

Later, I wished I had not ranted. I should have resisted. After all, it was my idea to put the ad in. She was only trying to help...I suppose...

A week or so passed. The letters continued to flow. Several self-help counsellors looking for business got in touch, plus a few churches and religious groups to whom I did not, despite my promise, respond. And then a letter arrived from a couple of lesbians in Middlesex. They were looking for an anonymous sperm donor. 'No need for intercourse,' the letter read, in jaunty thin-nibbed ink-pen script, 'we can insert it ourselves.'

I felt strangely happy. I found myself thinking about the prospect of a child, of being a father, the father of an English child. Perhaps then, I would finally start to belong to this horrible place.

I folded the letter and slid it into my jacket pocket, and set off on a long walk following the Thames through London. I started about a mile from home, at Greenwich, and walked all the way to the MIS building in Vauxhall, where I peeled off to visit the City Farm situated on the edge of a decaying council estate. I had been given my first flat on this estate when I arrived in London. I knew the farm—and frankly, it wasn't a farm at all. It was a small patch of land, perhaps half the size of a tennis court, with a row of small and slightly battered stables looking out over a worn-down grassy square that was divided into six pens. There were a few tufty donkeys, a fat and slightly stunted pony with overgrown hooves, a lone brown and white cow and five dusty sheep. In the furthest pen, stood a large brown hermaphrodite goat called June. Nailed to the fence, behind which she stood, was a small noticeboard proudly announcing that June was the only goat to have spent two months at the University of Cambridge, where experts had confirmed she was a true hermaphrodite. In thick black marker-pen scrawled up the side, someone had drawn a picture of a penis and a pair of tits with an arrow pointing to the goat's name. Beneath that, someone had pinned another note, wrapped in cling-film. 'June produces rich and nutritional milk. Please ask at reception.'

By the time I left the farm, the day had become incredibly hot. People were cycling in shorts and tee-shirts, and children were playing in the streets around the estate in knickers and plimsolls. I watched them as I wandered back through the flats across a concrete playground towards the river, and found myself suddenly overcome with inconsolable grief. Perhaps a sudden wave of the heat and the breeze had blown over my skin at just the right moment, I don't know, but I recognised from far back in my memory, the great rift between my body and its native place, between my spirit and my country. And then I remembered Desmond's father and I thought about what he had said the first time we met in Croydon.

'The achievements of exile,' he had whispered steadily, 'are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind forever. You will never forget that, so long as you remain here, unbearably far from your birthplace. You will always look with great resentment at those around you who are not exiles. You will always feel out of place.'

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Lara Pawson.*