



Source: Martin Chulov, 'President takes Iran back to future as West watches a dangerous agenda', *The Australian online*, 07/11/05.

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Pa's face went red. 'That lousy little creep!' He lunged for the remote control. 'Turn him off! Off! I can't stand that smug little bastard. You do understand, don't you, especially you two, Virginia and Toby, you do understand what that arsehole has achieved with his 'historic' bloody victory at the polls?'

We all knew from past experience that it was unnecessary to answer. Toby looked at his hands, Mum scratched her elbow, and Gina just sat and listened. Pa banged the table. 'He has achieved, with less than fifty per cent of the primary vote, the capacity, by July 2005, when that rotten bunch of pooncey little fuckwits will control both the Upper and the Lower Houses, he has achieved the power, ALTHOUGH NOT, AND I REPEAT NOT THE RIGHT, to change anything he wants in our legislation.

Understand? Anything! ANYTHING!!!'

Pa's annual rant. I couldn't remember the number of times I'd sat in the Rosebud house and wondered if the weatherboard walls would split from the power of his words. Or if I would. Because it was never easy when he got nasty. Nasty and personal. You know, as if you were somehow a lesser human being if you didn't know who the current Treasurer was, or what the Separation of Powers meant, or when the Dismissal happened and who were its major players.

'As if it wasn't bad enough what he's done to erode our reputation overseas, where our inhumane policy towards refugees has earned us the distinction of being a tight-fisted, mean-arsed and nasty country filled with complacent fat whiteys; but now he has to start busting up what we have on the inside. Yes, we have a relatively happy, relatively productive workforce, (with rather too much unemployment, granted, but then who's fault is that?) and things would be chugging along quite nicely, (that is if the government could control the country's debt) but no, let's get stuck into the workers.'

Some years were worse than others. And the rant could be sparked off by anything. One of the worst ones in recent memory was when my brother Toby had been entrusted to get Pa's Christmas present. You see Pa loved silk underwear. He wouldn't wear anything else. I'd got quite good at finding the odd pair in op shops, and then bleaching them up or dying them. One year I dyed some a brilliant crimson colour and he loved them, wore them nearly every day. Gina said she had to fight to get them into the wash.

Gina was his second wife. She wasn't Nan, but she was alright. So anyway, for some reason one year Mum and I had given the task to Toby to get the shorts. We should never have done that. He was a hopeless shopper and always had been. Always got distracted. But this time he had insisted. I can do it, he said, I want to! I want to get Pa's underpants! And so he set off one afternoon and came back, quite a number of hours later, with a beautifully wrapped up parcel and a smug look on his face. Wonders will never cease we thought.

Pa's voice was getting louder, and steadier. This was going to be a big one. I tried to relax. Tried not to worry about what barb or taunt or tricky question he might throw at me. I nestled into the armchair, and put one of Nan's old cushions underneath my head. It smelled like the sea.

'I mean what do you think Margaret, what do you think that little shit might want to tinker with, now he has control? What putrid little mark is he going to leave on things? Yes, his mark, like a stupid kid who graffiti's dicks all over the place. What dick do you think our Prime Minister will scrawl on the dunny walls of our nation?'

Mum giggled 'Well, I wouldn't be surprised if he changed the Industrial Relations —'

'Too right! That little shit is going to totally rewrite the law so that workers have no rights!'

'Well I don't know if he'll be able to —'

'Bullshit! He will take away them all. Only he won't let it look like that. No, he's too smart. He'll leave the workers with some basic rights, to make it look good, after all, this is Australia, but actually take away anything and everything else.'

Australia. That's what had come up when Pa opened Toby's present. He saw the satin boxer shorts inside, festooned with cartoon characters from South Park, and absolutely exploded. 'What! What is this crap? You expect me to wear this? I'm asking you Toby, what is this commercial, artificial made-in-China crap, covered in American cultural icons?'

That was the Made in Australia rant. Had gone on for two hours. Poor Toby. He was upset for weeks.

But this time, as I was watching Pa, and wrestling with his ideas and my ignorance, I was suddenly overcome by feeling. I think it was the stumble that did it. He was mid-sentence and something caught his eye out the window and then he lost his train of thought, just for a second. His eyes flickered desperately around the room, as if looking for some invisible thread, but then finally caught the thought, and he resumed.

'So not only will we have a working poor, but we'll have our very own totally oppressed and powerless working poor. Here, right here in Australia. It's a bloody disgrace.'

And all of a sudden I was glad. I was glad that Pa was still alive, and that he was rude, and bolshy, and stubborn, and courageous. Yeah, courageous. Because in his stumble I had seen courage. The courage to speak, to keep on speaking, to keep on speaking even if you create conflict; to create conflict and then let it shift and rework and refine what should be the ever-changing, ever-shaking houses of our thoughts.

A rant, a lesson, a gift.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Caroline Lee.*