



Source: Ed O'Loughlin, '[Rice stays for final drive at peace deal](#)', *Sydney Morning Herald online*, 16/11/05.

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He takes his socks off, curls his big toe in the shape of a broken promise and fills his yellow, soot-stained kettle. He plugs it in: the phone rings. She's been waiting for him at the Diamond Grill Pancake House on Tupelo Street, right across from the abandoned parking lot in which they shared their first sloppy kiss; tongues interweaving, unobstructed motion and dangerous open mouths. The kettle is boiling and she's already eaten his French toast and her blueberry pancakes are getting cold. She's on her fourth cup of coffee and he's just begun the slow, calculated dispersal of dark green tea leaves in his favourite mug. The steam rises and caresses his face while the phone's dial tone brings him back to the kink in his neck and the leaves rising to the surface of his cup. Two cups later he makes his way to the restaurant, his movements dictated by the syncopated beats of ragtime music in his ear—Scott Joplin now a part of his marrow.

The previous night they'd covered a range of contentious topics—from the growing corporate influence on the production and dissemination of hip hop to the implications of the Human Genome Project; from the growth of political correctness to the displacement of the media as the nervous system of a culture—and they were engrossed in each other (he, in the ease with which her mouth negotiated each and every syllable; she, in the increasingly visible lines around his eyes). If only they could have stayed there, locked into that moment on the waves of red wine and winning rhetoric. The next morning they both would have complained of biting headaches, hangovers, and mechanical sex, had he not left in the middle of the night to return home.

On his way to the diner, he's reminded of a story his nephew told him, a story about boys and girls and flowers. The boys were convinced that the girls didn't

want to play with them so they kept their distance—in class, at lunch time, after school, always—and they made due with the arrangements they had in their own little groups of boys. They played marbles in the morning, exchanged food at lunch, went to the park after school. His nephew slyly tried to avoid mentioning he had broken away from his group of friends in search of a girl. Her name was Sally. He liked Sally because she had long curly golden hair, hair that played and sang and danced and was pretty. He liked her because she was pretty. He secretly wanted to play with her in the morning, at lunch, and after school, but he couldn't make up his mind whether it was better to keep his friends at school or to have Sally all to himself. He was scared that once he'd broached that subject of wanting her to belong to him, there was no returning from the outside world. That kind of transgression only kicked you out of any circle, and he knew it. And even though his nephew really wanted to be with Sally, he couldn't risk being left outside, at the foot of something he couldn't climb.

On his way to the diner, his movements still coupled with the doo-de-pah-de-de-PAH of ragtime rhythm, he kicks the only puddle in sight and thinks inside or outside? He makes up his mind. With his hands in his pockets, a boyish grin, and tummy full of tea, he enters the restaurant. He sits down in a booth with two empty plates—one, the former site of burnt French toast; the other, a syrup-covered memory of the lightest, fluffiest blueberry pancakes—and an unpaid bill. Across from him, the quiet hum of the vintage jukebox. She is gone, as is his boyish grin.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Ian Reilly.*