



Source: Martin Chulov, 'Hamas looms as key to peace process', *The Australian online*, 03/01/06.

Tags: [child/parent](#), [death](#), [corporeality](#)
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I was thirteen and I came home from school at 4 o'clock. My school uniform was scratchy and sticky with sweat from the walk up the hill from the bus stop. It was the end of winter, but warmer than that, with the jasmine out and my winter tunic and tights too hot for the weather. I wanted to flop in front of the television, promising to start my homework before dinner. I wanted to tune out of the day, a day in which there'd been power plays and unfair games in the school ground, and a difficult maths test in the classroom. I put my key in the lock and turned it. I didn't notice my father's car in the driveway.

My father was home and he told me that my mother was dead. She'd been killed in a car crash. A speeding teenager had lost control on a corner and sped into her car. She was driving home from teaching at the university, driving the same route she always drove. The way she took to get home sometimes before me and sometimes after me. But she always came home to be my mother and today it was different. She died instantly while the teenager survived with a broken collar-bone.

'Sit down Penny,' my father told me, sitting next my aunty Anne. 'We've got some bad news.' But then they didn't wait for me to sit down. I remember I was standing up, school backpack still on, the weight of it curving me back, the straps digging into my shoulders. I don't know why people always start the sentence with 'sit down'. Who said it first? Who first thought it would make any difference at all? Like if you were sitting down the feeling of being pulled down into the earth through the floor wouldn't happen, as if you might hold it together, would be prevented from collapsing if you just sat.

I didn't. I stood, because it felt like there was something huge and painful and strange in the air, and I didn't want to sit. And he didn't ask me again. It just came out of his mouth, quickly, bluntly, like he'd rehearsed the scene and lost his timing and blurted out the lines too quickly.

I heard him say it. 'Your mother has been killed. Car crash.' When I remember it now it's like he was speaking underwater, like the words were muted and far away, bubbling up faintly to meet me at the surface. They took time to reach me, and it was like they weren't real, that he was a character in a TV show and I was one too, but that none of it was real. But there was a moment that it hit me, after he finished speaking. I felt my heart beating and my face flush. Just like the time my mother asked me what I'd done with her silver necklace and I felt my neck and I knew it was lost. It was just like that. Except that now my mother wasn't asking me where her necklace was. Now my mother was dead.

My mother is dead, I thought. I don't have a mother. I am motherless. And then I felt something. Something physical, and tiny. I felt the edges of my mouth turning up, pulling up towards my forehead. A smile. I felt it, like a piece of rope twisted into an arbitrary upward curve on the floor of my father's boat shed. I still remember how it felt, how I couldn't control it, and how it seemed unconnected with the sick feeling in the pit of my stomach and the weakness in my legs, and how all those things seemed so much in the background, so distant from me, and how the upward turn of my mouth seemed so genuine.

It is too much for a thirteen year old to bear—to smile at the death of her mother.

The body is not necessarily a disciplined thing. It does not always do what it should when it should. The brain's wiring will often experience difficulty dealing with news that shocks, changes our lives, destroys what we know. Connections are lost, messages confused. Reactions make no sense. In the face of such news, some people stand frozen, unable to speak, move, see. Some collapse, vomit, go into rage.

I smiled.

Everything else felt false. I heard myself crying out, felt my throat constrict, those horrible hacking sobs I heard, they were mine.

When I was younger, in the throes of a temper tantrum, my mother had sometimes put me in front of the mirror to show me how silly I looked.

'Look at how your face is all red, look how awful you look. Silly girl.'

I'd become used to this and later, when struck by the unfairness of the world and the break up of friendships and the persecution of teachers, I often cried in front of the mirror, looking at myself feeling pain. And so I knew, as I cried, what it was like to look at me. I knew how my face went red and streaked and I knew how my mouth twisted as I coughed and spluttered.

As it all happened, I watched myself in my mind, knowing how I looked.

Knowing that I'd smiled.

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Sophie Townsend.