



Source: Richard Norton-Taylor, 'General wants Blair impeached over Iraq', *Guardian, Telegraph*, Agencies in *The Age online*, 11/01/06.

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Writer/s: [Ross Murray](#)

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He degenerated into...looking back now, I guess most people would say a bag, more like a sack really I'd say, of bones. A bag just isn't big enough to hold all 206 bones of the human body. The word 'bag': first image comes to my mind is of plastic shopping bags, specifically, caught on a barb-wire fence, catching the wind, straining for release from the rusty spikes. That's how I feel. A sack is dirty, made of hessian, brown, cheap. That's my father.

At the end, my father, the sack of bones, I could've picked him up, shook all his emaciated insides to the bottom, twisted the slack skin at the top and thrown him over my shoulder, which was what I was inclined to do. To save the hospital employees any more time and effort, I would've dumped my father, the sack of bones, in an industrial bin. He was one of the easier patients to manage, they told me. Well, what else could they say?

The thing I remember most, because there was such a sharp contrast, was his forehead. Always when I approached him when I was young, it was, What d'ya want? When he looked at me the creases were always there, scrunched and pointed down in the middle towards his nose like a football jersey 'V'. Eventually I just didn't bother asking anymore, and by then, like I even cared. I'd discovered dictionaries and encyclopaedias were much more reliable sources of information. All those years later, his forehead was smooth, the skin blotchy in various brown, white and pink patches, with hardly a trace of the creases. I don't know what this meant. Was he happier being crazy?

My mother had been dead for about five years by this time. She'd been sick, but didn't let anyone know. She told us it was migraines when she'd be in bed all day. She powered on until her batteries ran low, collapsing to her knees in the kitchen, one hand still in the dirty dish-water. Maybe that's how I saw her, like a robot, her actions mechanical and predictable. This was how disconnected we were. The doctors diagnosed late stage breast cancer. Terminal sadness, if you ask me.

Most people reckon you see it in the eyes when people have decided to give up, but I could see something in my mother's whole body as she lay under the crisp, starchy hospital sheets that said, well, what would I do if I got better? Silently, I agreed. Maybe her self-imposed automata had staved off death. Three weeks after she went in to hospital, she came out for her funeral. My father's idea of a wake was a sausage sizzle and three cases of beer. I took one case, checked into a motel and drank myself into a stupor watching American baseball on Pay TV. Better than making a scene, I guess.

The first few years after her death were the worst. Summer exacerbated everything further. I dreaded the

onset of the heat. My father steadfastly refused to turn the air-conditioner on at all, and I watched, day after sweltering day, as he read the paper, ignoring the patches of sweat spreading across his clothes like a fungus and the constant drops from his jowls.

Then what happened was, he took up with this woman, Lisa, more a girl really, who wasn't that much older than me. When Lisa came along suddenly the house was a constant nineteen degrees.

Hate is such a potent, spiteful word. Let's just say, I disliked her, a lot, right from the start. Her ignorance of such a startling array of subjects dazzled me with its brilliance. To my mind this is what made her attractive to my father, whether he knew it or not. When I think about him and their relationship, the image of a big fish in a small pond comes to mind. So when he moved Lisa in, I wasn't surprised or upset, so much as disturbed. The action was no wound to the memory of my mother. More, it was because she was invading my space. There was a controlled distance between my father and me. Typically our spheres rarely touched except in a state of animosity. Lisa's presence infected everything, destabilising the status quo. I was going to leave but I thought, why the fuck should I? A few months later when he realised I was as stubborn as him, and wasn't going anywhere fast, he decided to sell the place. A perfect and spiteful gambit.

So, how did my father end up in a hospital mental ward uttering lunatic statements and pissing himself? The Salvation Army found him living in an Anzac Memorial Park. They just thought he was a drunk. Would you believe he had syphilis? Went completely fuckin' loony mad because of it, just like Al Capone. Caught it off Lisa probably, is my best bet, but I could be doing her a disservice. The disease can take decades to manifest the late stages. Apparently few people get to the debilitating mental illness stage, even without treatment. My father was just lucky, I guess.

My thoughts are, did he ever think twice about anything he ever did? Did he have any kind of self-reflection at all? Wouldn't it have been such an effort to be so right all the time?

Just like my mother, I sat with him until he stopped breathing, dying with his eyes open. Unlike my mother's body, his said nothing in the weeks leading up to his death. He had been reduced, like the hospital sheets, to a cold, pure blankness. When I closed his eyes I wondered whether my father, the sack of bones, had ever said anything at all.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Ross Murray.*