



Source: Mark Sherman, AP, 'Contractor admits to Iraq kickbacks', *The Age online*, 03/02/06.

Tags: [child/parent](#), [religion](#), [film](#), [forbidden love](#)  
Writer/s: [Kate Latimer](#)

© 2008 Barbara Campbell and the writer/s

Why are you always asking this? I already give you so many things, my clothes, my jewellery, money, you know I love to give you money, but it's never enough for you. It's not what you want. It's never what you want. 'But mama, I just want to know...' All this mewling. Bah. Enough. You want to know? Very well, I have another gift for you. Let me tell you a story, a story about you before you were born.

After I had finished boarding school, your grandparents took your uncle and me on holidays. It was winter. We stayed in a beautiful old hotel that overlooked the lake. Bellhops wore red uniforms with gold braid. Things were so much different then, you have no idea. On the first night, we had dinner in the grand ballroom, with its waxed parquet floor and chandeliers and mirrors. There were tiny lights reflected everywhere. It was so glamorous—the men in their formal suits and the women in evening dresses of pale satin, the colour of moths.

For so many years I had been away at school and now we were a family again. We were awkward with each other, and unfamiliar with ourselves in our new roles—me as a young woman, my brother nearly nineteen. There was wine on the table and we were each poured a small glass as concession to our new status as adults.

Then, at some stage during the meal, there was a murmur among the other diners and we watched a young couple come in and be seated. We immediately recognised her. She was the famous film star, the young actress from *National Velvet*, with her new husband. I don't remember which one he was, you know she married so many times. Was he the first husband? Maybe he was the one that owned all those hotels.

The orchestra played a song from one of her films and we applauded the two of them and she smiled and nodded slightly, acknowledging us in a general way. He looked at her and smiled too. Champagne was quickly brought to their table. Waiters fussed around them, pushing their chairs in, shaking out the linen napkins. We took all this in.

Back at our little table, the previously stilted conversation between the four of us vanished. We shared the giddy feeling that we were playing a part in something special, magical, outside of our ordinary lives. Father ordered

more wine. Mother was laughing at his stories and saying, 'Oh Edward, you do go on' but you could see she really liked him then. How gorgeous it was to be on holiday in the presence of a real movie star.

She was wearing a beautiful purple sheath, like a slip, and looked very young and slight. My brother nudged me. 'You know she is the same age as you,' he teased. His words stung because there she was, married and out in society, while I was just a gauche schoolgirl. Her short black hair seemed so modern, so chic. I became ashamed of my long hair that had so recently been in plaits. It had only been a few weeks since I had been at school, taking extra classes after dinner, cramming for the final exams, learning the rules of grammar in languages that were no longer spoken. And more.

*Three months from that night I was married. And four months later you were born.*

Of course, I did well in the exams but by the time the results came out, it didn't matter anyway. It's funny to think that a girl who knew so much about biology did not know about contraception. One of the nuns offered to drive me to a doctor she had heard about, had tried to convince me to do away with you. Of course, it was a huge scandal for the school.

Within a few weeks after the holiday where we saw the movie star, my parents knew the story—well, one version of it anyway. And Monsieur Guillard, your poor, dear papa, was forced to marry me and resign from his teaching post. He thought that I would eventually love him. How was he to know that I was simply acting my way, that I was only trying on an adult role for size?

By the end of that year the movie star had secured a divorce, citing mental and physical cruelty by her husband.

Looking back to that moment at dinner in the grand hotel overseas, you can catch a hint of the steely nature of young girls. You see, she already had secrets to keep. And so did I. And now, my darling, I give them to you. It's my gift.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Kate Latimer.*