



Source: Bronwen Maddox, 'After three years, it's diplomatic endgame for Tehran', *The Times in The Australian online*, 07/03/06.

Tags: [child/parent](#), [home](#), [nostalgia](#), [animals](#)

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Long ago there lived a man who had been king. The story has been told, how he mistreated his peasants but they rose and threw him into a bare dungeon cell. This man had once directed accountants to manage his money, jesters to entertain, even a dark wizard to scheme for him. Despite this, he had plotted to rid his kingdom of people. It never occurred to him, until his kingdom was confined to a square stone room, five paces wide and eight paces long, with only rats and spiders for subjects, that he needed people. One person would do, but those who slid plates of gruel under his door each day would not speak to him. Eventually he gave up counting days and years.

As a very old man, he forgot who he was or how he had come there. He only remembered a time when he wielded power and lived luxuriously. Most vivid were memories of early days, before his palace turned cold and friends abandoned him for fear of their lives. Of all his jesters he remembered one named David, a peasant boy, whose antics had pleased him. David had spoken in riddles that pierced the royal heart and unveiled secrets, slyly mocking the king's malice in ways that, even now, made the old man laugh to himself.

And so one day, when his meal was delivered, the old man was laughing aloud, and a hand paused by the slot below the door.

'You seem happy today, Pap.'

Actually the expression on Bernard's face seemed more maniacal than happy, but David hoped it came from the nuance of sun and a May wind across the Detroit River. This was the first day he had dared bring his grandfather out for a visit to the old house. Only now he realised this might be wrong. Dieppe Gardens could have bestowed beauty and familiarity, without this weight of memory. How selfish it was to open a door in Bernard's mind.

Well, we're here, David thought.

He pushed the wheelchair to the break wall at the end of the lawn where great willows shielded them from morning sun. These trees had seemed huge even when David was little, yet still they stood. He squatted down. Bernard craned around, thin hair fluttering madly. David had inherited those friendly crinkles by the eyes, a facade.

'What have I done?' Bernard asked. 'It must have been terrible.'

These were his first words in over an hour since David collected him from the home. Bernard hadn't spoken in the car, not even responding to a Glenn Miller and *In the Mood*. Now what did he mean?

'You didn't do anything, Pap. Do you think everyone went away on purpose? That's how life works sometimes.'

'How it works! Sometimes?' Bernard echoed. 'There's only one chance. I must have blown it.'

'You didn't, Pap. You've always been kind to me.'

That was part of the truth, as David understood. His father no longer lived to tell of his own father's stubbornness. David had always known an old man mellowed by age and retirement, mellowed now to point

of vanishing.

'Is that you, David?'

The old man crawled across stones, enchanted by torchlight glancing on a hand below the door, thick fingers with red knuckle hair. The peasant outside had spoken. Bernard couldn't understand the words, but heard familiarity in the voice now coarsened by maturity. Bernard pushed the plate aside and peered through the slot. The peasant withdrew his hand, but didn't leave.

'It's me.'

'Goodly jester!' Bernard cried. 'You remember me at last, and return to my aid.'

'I knew all along you were here,' said the jester, with derision. 'Don't you know who led the peasant uprising? My daughter has cooked your gruel for years, pitying the prisoner with whom she may never speak. She knows the atrocities you committed, but can't remember. She thinks it's a fairytale. Tonight she is ill, so I filled in. Honestly, I could have let you starve.'

'Harsh words!' the old man sobbed. 'You were a kind and gentle clown. And your tales, they made me laugh at my own folly, even then. Memory of your words has taught me to see myself honestly. But sweet boy, I can't remember anything now, only the laughter.'

'That is sad,' the peasant said. 'We hoped you would die remembering what evil you wrought on land and people.'

'Then tell me a story,' begged the prisoner. 'Like ones you used to tell, full of riddles and monsters. Even if I am the monster. Only give me one more tale.'

David gazed across the channel at Belle Isle, where distant cars of weekend rovers twinkled softly. He had so many memories, it was hard to choose.

'When I was a little boy, Gran would bring me to the big porch window, where her African violets bloomed, to watch you feed ducks and geese. I remember a snowy day. You waved at us, then scattered corn here by the break wall. They gathered by dozens around your feet, not the least afraid. You were grandfather to every wild fowl on the Detroit River.'

'I don't remember this, but when I was even smaller you must have carried me here at night, pointing to Great Lakes freighters passing in the dark. You knew so many of them by sight, but at night we could only see their moving lights.'

'Later, my parents took me outdoors one night. I pointed at the sky and said "toot-toots!" My first vision of stars, and I thought they were your big ships!'

David's eyes swelled with tears. He brushed them away before daring to glance toward Bernard, but his grandfather had fallen asleep, caressed by warm river breeze. David looked out again. It didn't matter. The story meant more to him, and would stay with him. He must tell it to his niece and nephew so it would not die too soon.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Van Waffle.*