



Source: Martin Chulov, 'Zarqawi shows his face to fire revolt', *The Australian online*, 27/04/06.

Tags: [child/parent](#), [animals](#), [death](#), [sound](#)  
Writer/s: [Caroline Lee](#)

© 2008 Barbara Campbell and the writer/s

Yes there were a lot of them, an awful lot. Eight actually, and no girls. She was sorry about that at first, but after Marty, the fifth healthy boy they hauled from her body, she was glad, because it would have been tough for a girl amongst that lot. And most of them so big too, well except for Col. Which must've all come from her side, because Bri wasn't that large, not really, and especially not when he'd been out on the town, been down the San Marino and was feeling sorry for himself.

In the cab, working, she didn't tell people anymore. I mean of course locally everyone knew them anyway, how could they not...oh, you're a Boyce, not the mother of all those boys? Get out of here, you're not their mother...People could spin it, couldn't they? Of course she was their mother, and by god she looked it. No, people would always exclaim, and in fact that was how she had come to define people, classify them if you like, was what response they had about the boys...if it was the mess, the noise, the food, or the money. The people who focussed on the money were useless, didn't need to be spared another thought, nor the mess people; tight and uptight she called them in her mind. The food people could be dodgy, because they could be money people in disguise, but on the other hand they could be interested in food and eating and these people could be promising. Like Jeannie, who would come over every few months with her crazy Indian boyfriend and cook up a feast of such magnificent proportions that even the backyard cricket had to be put off for half an hour while everyone digested.

No, it was the noise people who could be the interesting ones, but only if they asked the right questions. If they launched in with 'Oh, it must be so noisy...' they were lost. But if they asked...

'Cos there wasn't any. Well not much. Because, for better or worse, for some reason that she found impossible to fathom, none of her boys was a talker. Not one. Not one of the nine specimens of manhood she was surrounded with for a great deal of each day was a talker. Oh, there was the occasional word, yep, na, ta...fuck. But not anything that resembled a sentence. And sentences can be quite short sometimes. Really. The things that made the most noise in their large, falling-down house in the far, far outer suburbs were the sound of shoes on the tiles in the kitchen; the sound of furniture scraping; food cooking; tools working; oh, and the yells during backyard cricket.

They'd all talked at first, when they were young, when they were sweet, wicked, darling boys. Especially Ben and Stevie, the eldest, they were real chatterers when they were little. But sometime during primary school the genes kicked in, or the hormones, or the psychological issues, whatever, and they just started to dry up. All the words left the building. And it was the same with them all. One by one, they became silent.

She worried about them. As all mothers do. But there was nothing wrong with them, any of them. A family of philosophers, one doctor had said. She didn't know about that, but most of them did at least think. Aside from Eric. But she worried about their mouths, and their ears. Maybe they'd kind of seize up, from lack of use. Especially Artie's. He was number seven and she hadn't heard him say an actual word for about two years. Was doing okay at school though. Loved science. She worried a bit about herself too, but at least the two shifts a week in the cab forced some exercising of the organs of communication. But at last, when the 'incident' had happened with Col, the family's capacity had been affirmed.

She'd been doing the dishes after breakfast, and, thinking that she was alone in the house had been singing along to the radio. But during one of the ad breaks she'd heard a funny sound. She turned the radio down and listened for a moment, but it was gone. Imagining things, she thought. But then during the next ad break she heard it again. It was faint, but it was there. It was very unusual. Someone was talking. Someone, in the Boyce household, was talking.

She went to investigate. Didn't turn the radio off; oh no, that was needed for cover. Walked the whole length of the house before she found him, Col, curled up in the corner of Ben and Stevie's room, talking to his pet mouse, Jemima, who was dead in his hands. Col stopped when he saw her. Looked as if he'd seen a ghost.

She paused. Looked at him. Thought. And then she said, 'Na, don't stop, Col. I'll leave you to it. Get it off your chest. It's the best way.'

'Ma?' he breathed.

'Yeah.' She paused. 'You see, Col, that Jemima, she's got her listening ears on. I can see, from here. She wants to hear what you have to say. It's helping her. On her way.'

Col looked at her.

'Your grandmother taught me that. At the end. She taught me to recognise them. Listening ears. Never know when you might need them.'

And she left him to it. Over the course of the next couple of hours, as she did the housework, she'd hear snippets. It was his life story, everything important that had happened up to then. And then later, he fell asleep, Jemima on the floor beside him. And then, even later, he buried her.

She and Col never spoke about it, but she kind of relaxed after that. Listening ears and talking mouths. They turn up when you need them.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Caroline Lee.*