



Source: Stephen Farrell, 'Married, but Israel forces them to live apart', *The Times* in *The Australian* online, 18/05/06.

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The Yum Cha restaurant at Crows Nest, designated by Michelle as their lunch venue, was easy to find, but Anton could not see through the window as he walked up. It was a wall of aquaria filled with vast lozenge-shaped crabs, curling prawns and fish. They barely floated, crammed into the long rectangles of glass. Greenish water bubbled constantly around them, lifting their bodies in slow arcs before depositing them in rubbly piles of shell and fin. They looked stunned. Anton was repelled by the long feelers twitching, the white underbellies pressed against the glass, the round eyes glazed and staring. What on earth was 'yum cha', he thought.

When he entered, the noise was deafening. People were sprawled on chairs at the entrance, waiting for seats. He was carrying the *Sydney Morning Herald* they had agreed would be their symbol. The restaurant tables were crushed together, and each one seemed to be packed with diners. Waiters flew between them, doling out little plates piled with noodles, dumplings, spring rolls, exploded breasts of duck. Each person seemed to be shouting across the entire restaurant. Anton gripped the counter and asked whether anyone called Michelle had arrived.

'Yessir. This way, this way', the middle-aged waitress beckoned, and took Anton by the elbow, half-dragging him to an obscure table pressed against the wall. A woman draped in shadow was frowning down at a mobile phone, jabbing at its buttons with both thumbs. Long straight hair poured over wide shoulders. She had on a strappy green top. She looked up.

Anton's chest filled with an electric heat. Her eyes were a chocolate brown, and held his gaze with direct intensity. She looked amused, considered her older dining partner with a mock serious expression. She half-rose, then found her legs trapped by the chair, and sat down again, laughing.

'Sit, sit!' she said to him. He folded himself into the tiny space without a word, jogging against the table and sweeping his newspaper under the table. He looked around him with a self-conscious grin. The skin around his mouth felt tight and old.

'So, Michelle. We meet at last, eh?' He was astonished to hear his own Dutch accent bellowing out. Her Australian twang was somehow at home here, and moulded itself to the clatter of chopsticks, and the shouts of the Chinese waiters.

'Hello, Anton. Did you find it all right? It's such a great place, I come here all the time with my girlfriends after work.'

'The windows are—they're full of fish,' Anton babbled.

'I know, it's disgusting isn't it? My friend's little girl is obsessed with them, she won't sit anywhere else, wants to press her nose up against the glass all through lunch. Makes me want to throw up!'

Out of Michelle's mouth, the prattle fell as beads of joyful wit.

'Where are the menus, let's order.' Anton felt an urgent need to seize control of this encounter.

'Oh it's yum cha, they come round with plates, you just

choose what looks good. I always end up eating too much. The fried calamari are really good.'

Anton waved down a passing waiter, and pointed at the steaming green vegetables on the tray.

'Oh not them, actually, sorry, do you mind? I've had them before, they're actually the worst thing here,' she said, laying her hand on his arm for an instant. She smiled up at the waiter and shook her head. 'No thank you. Could we have some jasmine tea, and some of the sauces, please? Anton do you want a drink? I won't, I have to lecture this afternoon, but they do a good Chinese beer if you like it.' Anton hesitated and then lifted a finger at the waiter, nodding.

'So you have a daughter in Sydney, is that right?' she asked. Anton looked for signs of a reaction in Michelle even before he answered. His daughter must be older than the bubbling woman opposite him.

'Yes, she's called Adriaantje, good solid Dutch name. She works here, she's a nurse.'

'And your wife...?' Michelle asked. Her manner was a bewildering blend of gentle docility, and bared teeth tenacity. She seemed to have no sense of the fact that they had never met before. Seemed not to worry about how she looked, or how Anton looked. His own liverspots danced in front of his eyes, and his rheumy joints found the slippery chopsticks impossible. He was eating sweet and sour pork with his fingers.

'Yes, she died, my wife, about two years ago.'

'I'm really sorry to hear that. Was she very ill?'

'She, ah, had cancer. But it went very fast.'

Anton felt tears prickling in his eyes, to his own astonishment. He had barely cried for Anneke. The cancer had descended like moths into her lungs and then her liver. She had been dead within six months. There hadn't been time to cry. He paused. She broke in quickly, 'I'm sorry, sorry, I shouldn't pry like this. Look at us, it's lunchtime, and we should be celebrating our first meeting. It's very nice to see you in the flesh.' Her bright voice sang like pearls of glass bouncing off the white tablecloth. Anton clamped his mouth shut.

'Michelle, I am—very happy to meet you. It's hard to know whether this is quite—right or not. You're very young—'

'Not that young,' laughed the full lips opposite. 'I was nearly married, you know.'

The noise in the restaurant swelled and broke over the little table in the shadows, and the clatter of two hundred pairs of chopsticks beat a serenade for the couple flying solo in its own world. Passing waiters no longer stopped at their table, but rushed on past with loaded trays of glistening beef and lobster shells cracked open, the white rubbery flesh jogging in time to the trays. Forty years of lost time opened up between the two people like the widening of tectonic plates. They considered one another across the expanse.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Ingrid Wassenaar.*