



Source: Kim Gamel, AP, 'Iraqis declare state of emergency', *The Age online*, 25/06/06.

Tags: [intimacy](#)

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He heaved himself upright the previous night's alcohol made him wince. Memory shadowboxed his brain to a pulp. Drills screamed in his temples with the reconstruction effort. He heaved another sigh and scratched his head and as he did so something clicked and the drilling stopped. And started in again, only harder.

He clunked across the floorboards into the hall and into the kitchen with its smell of recent cooking, and music coming from his housemate's room. Damien's. Flies buzzed around a plate with bacon rinds and smears of tomato sauce and grease. He opened the fridge, fetched an open carton and drank directly.

The phone rang. He knew who it would be. He let it ring. He put the juice back in the fridge and headed for his room again. The phone rang on.

From Damien's room, 'Steve-O! Phone!'

He closed his eyes and threw his hands up in surrender. How did she always know as soon as he was awake anyway, he asked himself. Is that what happened to couples after a while? You just said 'couples'? I didn't say anything. But you thought it, today of all days. And now I'm debating with you. In silence. And I'm you. And you're me. This is crazy. Yes.

He let it go and wondered what else she might know.

'Oi! Steve-O!'

'Yeah, yeah, got it.'

He picked up the telephone. 'Hello?'

'Hi, it's me.'

Eyes closed, he pinched the bridge of his nose, as if by putting pressure on some other part of his head he might stop the throbbing at his temples. He didn't have to try too hard to sound gruff, though it wasn't exactly his intention. 'Now, how did I know that?'

She laughed but without humour and it matched her speech.

'How are you?'

'Alright. How're you?'

'Alright. Bad headache. You?'

'Mm.'

They didn't need to speak to know that words would mean something different today from yesterday. They both felt it. It made the rhythm between them jagged.

Her voice was meek and small. Her speech was short and clipped like a military drum. Her sentences were short and punctuated with long silences. They spoke about nothing and their discomfort grew and the words stopped.

'Feels like I'm facing a firing squad,' she said.

'Any last request?' he muttered.

'What?'

'Nothing. A joke. It was a joke.'

'You doing anything this morning?'

'Porch time.'

'Mind if I come over for a little while?'

'Mm.'

'Mm yes, or Mm no?'

'M'kay.'

They hung up. 'Which way now?' he said to the telephone and the telephone didn't answer him and so he went

back to the fridge.

He opened it and took an ice cold can from the lower shelf and went out to the porch. He sat on the porch with his back to a post and opened the can. At the short, sharp hiss and the click of metal, the music drifting out over the porch from his mate's window stopped. Damien's head appeared in its place.

'You're a sick man, Chewsyl!' Damien said, grinning ear to ear. 'Bit early for that, isn't it? Dunno how you do it.'

I don't do it, do I? Haven't you noticed? I never do it, he thought. But didn't say.

Besides, Damien was no longer in the window; he emerged through the front door with an ice cold can in his own hand and, locking eyes with his friend, stopped and brought the can to his ear with a mischievous grin. Raised and lowered his eyebrows rapidly, flicking the ringpull with a fingernail. They looked at each other.

The can spoke first. 'Ptsst.'

'Ahhh,' they heaved in unison. The pleasure on Damien's face was contagious. Temporarily.

'What's on for today then?'

'You're lookin' at it.'

'That's what I like to hear. You get that phone?'

'Yeah. It was Shel. She's comin' round.'

'Today?'

'This morning.'

Damien picked himself up. 'Well. I'll leave you to that on your own.'

'Yeah.'

His mind drifted and he let it. There was the sound of a car and its door, the sound of the front gate, and Shel was standing on the lawn in front of him.

She was fidgety. She shifted from one leg to the other. She put her hands in the back pockets of her jeans to hide the trembling. Her small talk, one of her specialties, seemed to curl and die in the back of her throat and she swallowed hard to clear the lump that it left there. Her skin, always pale, was positively ghostly and her freckles stood out more than usual. Her hands were jammed in her back pockets, elbows out, shoulders hunched in a permanent shrug and her bottom lip trembled and when she started to speak about the thing she was here to say she could no longer look him in the eye and so looked down and away, and all of these things told him she was speaking the very truth.

And the thread of what she said was that she knew exactly what she was doing and she suspected she would both enjoy and regret it and yet she went ahead and did it anyway and sure enough she enjoyed and regretted it, only she regretted it more, and much, much more than she could ever have realised she would. And then she talked a lot about why. And then the words were running out and the tears were coming in their place and she didn't want that and she made her apology and she said that she hoped he would take her back. And then she waited for him to speak.

The tiny tip of her dry pink tongue flitted back and forth across her cracked lips. She became aware of it and bit her lip to stop herself and where she bit her lip it creased and split like rice paper and she tasted blood. She waited for him to speak, and she waited a long time. And she thought to herself the same thing he was thinking: This could go either way.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Craig Doolan.*