



Source: Neil MacFarquhar, 'Tide of Arab opinion turning to Hezbollah', *New York Times* in *International Herald Tribune* online, 29/07/06.

Tags: animals, child/parent, countryside, food, death, husband/wife, travel

Writer/s: Nandi Chinna

© 2008 Barbara Campbell and the writer/s

He's talking about his desire for women, for my mother. We are sitting in the car. It feels like we are in the country but we are only in the landscaped car park of an institution.

The object of his desire is in the institution. We are all waiting in the car. She comes out; her eyes watery and bloodshot, her skin powdery and pale against her dyed black hair and bright red lips. And through the layers of perfume arises the bitter metallic smell of medication. She offers us a plastic bag full of bright sticky lollies. Dad doesn't approve of lollies, but this time it's okay.

Dad's desire is bigger than us and bigger than him. Dad's desire is like a poem he recites in public. Dad's desire leads him to places from which he cannot return. It takes him away from bedtime stories and bike rides and cubbies. Away from popcorn with cheese and staying up late to watch *The Birdman of Alcatraz* on TV. Whatever Dad's desire is, it is much stronger than I.

Like what happened with Ralph. I really wanted to talk about Ralph. It was summer and we were travelling. Dad hit a kangaroo in the night. It smashed the front headlight and banged dents all down the driver's side of the car. We pulled off the road and looked back. The roo was staggering across the bitumen, blood streaming from its head, one leg broken. Dad killed it with the car jack and we skinned it and cut up the meat by torchlight.

We made a camp so we could cook the roo. Dad rolled the skin in salt and put it in a rice bag. We were playing with the rubbery white sinew, pulling it out of the body like stretchy chewing gum. We ate the meat for breakfast cooked on the coals of the previous night's fire. Maybe that's why Ralph came. Maybe he smelt that meat from a long way off.

My sister and I were playing in a big gnarly peppermint gum near our camp. It had good branches for climbing and we were pretending to be bushrangers riding the big limbs like wild horses galloping across the plain. The grass was brittle with summer; golden yellow, almost the same colour as Ralph. He came quietly through grass that was taller than he and walked straight up to me. His eyes were yellow too only brighter than the grass. I patted him and he purred.

We walked back to the camp and Ralph followed at our heels like a dog. Of course we didn't know he was Ralph then. That's what my brother called him after he had thrown him a piece of meat and Ralph hoed into it.

Dad laughed. 'What the hell is a nice cat like that doing all the way out here?' Ralph hung about getting lots of pats and attention and gnawing on fresh roo bones.

We camped there for a few days. The roo skin was stretched out to dry. We hung the gut in the thin mallee branches until it dried and shrivelled and could be twisted into string. And meat, we ate and ate so we didn't waste

any meat. Ralph lay in the sun, blending in with the sand and grasses, his stomach bulging.

When it was time to leave we begged Dad, 'Can we take Ralph home please, please, please. Please Dad we can't leave Ralph here.'

Dad was silent about it for a while. Ralph sat watching with interest as we packed up the camp. Finally Dad said okay. We could keep Ralph. Filled with joy I picked him up and settled him in the back seat piled high with sleeping bags and gear.

We made our slow trip home pulling off the road to camp in patches of scrub along the way. Ralph went along with it all in a happy, compliant and easy-going manner. He sat up on swags and cleaned himself and walked delicately away from the camp to bury his shit in the sand. He waited quietly until someone threw him some meat of which we still had plenty. I stroked his chest and under his chin and he purred loudly like a lawnmower roaring away as he stretched out on my lap.

On the last day of our trip back to Adelaide we drove and drove into the night. My brother and I were curled up in blankets on the back seat with Ralph while my sister sat up the front with Dad. I was woken when Dad stopped the car on the side of the road. He reached in the back and grabbed Ralph. 'What's wrong? Where are you taking Ralph?'

'He needs to go to the toilet,' Dad said, and disappeared into the dark bush.

Dad was gone a while. No cars passed on the black, late-night stretch of road. We waited. Finally, when Dad returned to the car it was without Ralph. I sat up and peered out through the car window. 'Where's Ralph? Where's Ralph? Where's Ralph?'

Dad got into the car and started the engine. The car headlights shone, punching bright holes into the night. 'Where's Ralph?'

A terrible lump rising up from my stomach. The stench of meat from a dead roo. Flies buzzing, the smell of intestines and internal organs. Cutting, peeling back skin. The singing of meat on fires. Dead.

'Come on now' Dad said. 'You couldn't really have kept Ralph, your mother wouldn't like it.'

We are on our Saturday out with Dad. We are waiting in the car. The woman with the black hair and the red lips sits in the front seat. She is crying. We sit in the back eating the lollies. I've got a stomach ache. I want to ask Dad if we can go home now. But Dad has left home. Dad is on weekends. Dad is a holiday in an old car. Dad killed Ralph.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Nandi Chinna.*