



Source: Jonathan Steele, 'Desperate survivors use truce to flee for safety', *Guardian Unlimited*, 01/08/06.

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'This world is a fucking mess,' said Hugh tapping the side of his coffee mug. 'I mean, just look at those Israeli bastards. They've just wiped out hundreds of Palestinian refugees for Chrissakes in bloody Beirut. A massacre, a bloody massacre! And do you see any protest here, mate?' He ground his teeth, grimacing into the mug.

The percolator was hissing itself dry on the gas ring. Neither man noticed, hunched over their coffees at the grimy laminex table. Afternoon sunlight peeped cautiously in through venetian blinds.

The other man, Stan, from across the road, was feeling rather small and inadequate in the face of this verbal onslaught. Stan thought of saying something to ease Hugh's obvious distress with the world. Stan thought that if he said 'You and me is only little people, mate, nothin' we can do,' that Hugh might think him stupid. So Stan said nothing, just the odd 'Yeah mate!'

Hugh was reading out loud now from a book, heavily dog-eared, 'Another child lay on the roadway like a discarded doll, her white dress stained with mud and dust. She could have been no more than three years old. The back of her head had been blown away by a bullet, fired into her brain.'*

Stan felt queasy. He didn't think this kind of thing was really necessary to talk about on a Sunday, especially since he himself had been to Vietnam and seen enough to last a lifetime of nightmares.

Hugh wondered why no one else perceived the world as he did. Why was there this shared blindness? He wondered if he had imagined the passion of the 1970s. Why it had dissipated was beyond his understanding. But it had gone, and all his ranting could not bring it back. It just made him so angry and that anger would not go away.

Suddenly, Hugh whispered, a sour wind of alcohol on his breath, 'Ssshh!' Don't talk too loud, mate. Godamns are in control of our country.' He paused for a reaction but Stan was perplexed. This was a madhouse. 'Ever heard of Nurrungar, mate?' asked Hugh. Stan scratched his leg, shook his head.

'No bloody Aussie has. But the Yanks have, that's right! The U S of A Air Force First Squadron 5 is firmly planted in Nurrungar, mate, South Australian desert. So what, I hear you say? It's a bloody desert. The Yanks are welcome to it. But what are they doing there, mate? Rats, scurrying around underground. Yeah, shocked you are, underground they are, sucking from our satellites and sending information to guess where?'

Hugh stood up again, knocking the table, cold coffee splashed onto laminex. He extended his finger, ready to stab out the climax, 'Israel, fucking Israel! That's who gets our secrets!' Stan jumped as Hugh broke into hysterical laughter, knocking over the sugar bowl. 'Oh, the irony kills me.'

Stan took Hugh's post-climatic collapse as the chance to leave, and let himself out quietly into the heat, relieved to breathe peace.

Always the same with old silent Stan, thought Hugh,

making him feel obliged to talk, and once he got going, well, Stan wasn't likely to interrupt.

Unlike that woman next door, what was her name? Thea? She liked to interrupt. He had bumped into her recently at a party above that bloody West End anarchist bookstore. He had forgotten how he got there, who had invited him and what it was for. Some sort of book launch, he guessed, given that it was a bookstore. That Thea was there, and she provoked him into conversation alongside a young man who had blue hair and smelt of faeces. They talked about being neighbours. Hugh had commented on a newsletter on the table nearby, something about international socialism. 'Twaddle!' he had said.

'Twaddle?' Thea had asked. 'What, like the rubbish you wrote about aid agencies for the National Times?' The young man guffawed into his cheap red wine in a Sesame Street cup.

'Tell me how you judge rubbish, and I will then give you room to argue with me,' Hugh rebutted her. How did she know that it was he who wrote that magnificent exposé of Indian aid agencies siphoning off money to the Vatican Bank? He felt simultaneously insulted and pleased that he had made such an impression on her, without really knowing each other, even as neighbours.

'Get fucked!' retorted Thea. 'Don't patronise me, you right-wing bastard. You have a hide coming here with views like yours.'

Hugh was floored. Right-wing! Him! He was momentarily lost for words. A silence had descended. Plastic mugs were held aloft in mid conversation, the onlookers eager for a bloody interaction. She had walked away, leaving him isolated. Hugh turned, refusing to be misrepresented in front of such a crowd, within which he noticed some of his own post-graduate students. 'Please do me the courtesy of discussing your views in a rational manner or desist from casting aspersions,' Hugh articulated with panache. He had unwittingly picked up a leaflet advertising a demonstration against Israel which he waved about. He followed her towards the rickety verandah above the road. He stepped forward to parry with her, tripped on the stupid grass matting, and fell head first into a pile of books awaiting pricing, and went out cold.

Hugh hadn't talked to Thea since that night. She was likely to ridicule him again across the fence.

But Monday was coming, and need drove Hugh to carefully open the back door and scan the fenceline. Was she there?

His clothes were flapping on the line from the waves of sunset heat. He had to rescue them for work this coming week, but he was reluctant to move out. She might see him. He took the risk and raced downstairs, quickly ripped two shirts, two pairs of shorts, two black underpants from the hills hoist, pegs flying onto the grass, and ran back towards the house. Inside the kitchen again, he felt safe.

* Robert Fisk, *Pity the Nation: Lebanon at War*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990, pp361-2.

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Miriam Taylor Gomez.