



Source: Peter Beaumont, 'Nobody's victory, but in the end Israel could not defeat Hizbollah', *The Observer* in *Guardian Unlimited*, 13/08/06.

Tags: [child/parent](#), [crime](#), [discomfort](#), [violence](#)

Writer/s: [Craig Doolan](#)

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A young man comes home in the middle of the day with his hair hacked about and dyed in the most ridiculous fashion. It is not unusual for his friends to be at his house even when he is not. Some of them speak to the father working on his vintage motorcycle who, save for the occasional grunt, ignores them; some of them speak to the mother who, washing her hands and wiping down the sink, a cold fish laying mute on a tray of ice in the corner of the kitchen, has just gutted and scaled the morning's purchase from the local farmers' market for the ritual Sunday evening dinner.

The radio is on in the background. It is a talk program; the guests, police and lawyers mostly, respond to the host's questions in noncommittal tones; too little is presently known about the case—the recent rape and murder of a young girl from the neighbourhood. The voices on the radio mingle with the voices gathered around the small, worn billiard table in the family room adjoining the mother's kitchen, the father's makeshift workshop, and all the voices turn to other topics of conversation after a little while.

It is into this central room that the young man steps immediately attracting howls and yells from the billiard players. The young man laughs with his friends while they point and make jibes and laugh at his expense.

In the corner, behind the backs of the young man's friends, his father works on quietly. His brow is furrowed in what might be anger or concentration. He makes little sound. The friends do not look around at him and, not looking, do not see that the man's father is not laughing along with them; is in fact increasingly looking beyond the young friends as they joke and laugh; is watching his son intently.

The young man senses the paternal gaze, and so is careful not to make eye contact with him. Should he do so, it will be harder for him to laugh along with his friends. He has seen that look many times before, and it never fails to subject him to awkward silence.

His friends, oblivious to this subtle flow of communication, fall to talking and laughing about incidental issues prompted by the haircut, random moments from a long-shared history. Sustained through this habitual trawling of memory and friendship, they contrive to make the past more real than the present.

It is an illusion, of course, but one to which they happily submit and which some accumulation of individual sadness and yearning continually drives them to return. This is the common thread of their history together, what lies below the friendship.

Eventually, the voices and laughter trail away and the young men become more conscious of the brooding presence in the corner. The friends go to fetch more drinks. They help themselves to the refrigerator and as they do so, talk in joking and familiar terms with the man's wife, the boy's mother, in the adjoining room, whom they all still address as Mrs. They feign an increasing interest in the preparation of the fish, now

stuffed with fresh herbs and sitting in a roasting pan full of vegetables.

Instinctively they are retreating from some imminent moment of truth towards the cosy familiarity which they have enjoyed here since their childhoods, and which permits the woman to continue to address each of them as if they were still the young boys they have always been in her house.

Still, the moment comes, and this is it.

The father steps from behind the mechanical mess he is working at, wipes his hands on the oily rag and brings it down on the brow of the motorcycle with a wet heavy slap. He steps toward his son, pointing contemptuously at his butchered hair. 'What the bloody hell is this about?' he asks, quietly and roughly, and his tone of voice implies he already has the answer.

The question jolts the son from his jocular mood. His smile vanishes. But he cannot yet be certain of his reading of the situation and must persist awkwardly as if he is innocent of the question and, more importantly, what it potentially betrays.

'What?' he says.

'This, this...' and swipes in the direction of the boy's lurid crown.

'Nothing,' the younger man says. Silence follows.

Both the father and the son know there is a hidden obstacle between them, such as there has always been in a lifetime of unspoken hints and accusations. Unlike in any of his past infractions, since he is not unknown to the police, the sticking point feels different this time. This time it's more serious, the son knows. But in its essence it is the same as it has ever been: it is the truth.

No, not this time. The father will have it out in the open, even if the boy refuses.

'The Williams boy. I spoke to his father last night. He said he saw you. He said you weren't where you said you were at all. And he said you still had your own hair not this, this...'

The father's voice breaks. Cold eyes on his son, mouth pinched in disgust, he turns from him and walks back to his hopeless, broken machine and resumes his work in silence. And in that moment, with those last, hissed syllables still alive in the room, the conversation is over. Just like that. And with it, this unsustainable past between conspirators is over also. The deed cannot be undone, and it has finally been acknowledged.

The young man enters the realm of the present, from which there is to be no turning back. Family and friends and the past all fall away. From this moment on, there can only be the relentless unfolding of truth and consequence.

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