



Source: Jonathan Freedland, 'If Europe doesn't want Middle East war to begin again, it has to step up', *Guardian Unlimited*, 23/08/06.

Tags: [child/parent](#), [home](#), [husband/wife](#), [drugs](#), [violence](#)

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Angus slouched before the TV in his green sweat pants. He held a half-swilled pint on his beer gut as he flicked through the channels with the remote. Jill sighed softly from her armchair. 'I was watching that.' She directed a wronged Princess Di look at her husband. Angus burped.

Jill surveyed the brown shag pile carpet. Ash and crumbs of peanuts and crisps nestled among its fibres. When the adverts started, she took the vacuum cleaner out for a lightning once-over.

'Jesus Christ, woman, can't you see I'm watching this?'

Jill kept on vacuuming.

'It's a pigsty in here, Angus, I won't be a minute. Anyway, I was watching *Coronation Street*, I don't see why...'

Angus got up, leaving a large indentation in the sofa. He pulled back his beer glass then brought it forward fast, making to throw it at his wife. He didn't release this time, but foam splashed onto her face. Angus laughed dirtily to himself. He'd get peace down at Smithy's. Jill wiped her cheek and called out in a high-pitched voice,

'Sometimes I wonder why I put up with this.'

Upstairs, Angus and Jill's teenage children lay on their bunk beds. They turned up Bob Marley to drown out their parents. Jeremy, the eldest, slung an arm down from the top bunk, his fingers open in an expectant V. He took the joint from Amy.

'Gutless,' he muttered.

Steam rose from two red mugs. Margaret pulled a chair up to the pine table in her buttercup yellow kitchen.

'It's not that he's a bad person, it's just...'

Margaret gulped her coffee then got back up. She started disinfecting her worktops; this was going to be long. Her next-door-neighbour, Jill, sipped her coffee.

'Work gets to him. And I think there's something wrong with Jeremy. He sleeps till four some days. Maybe I should take him to the doctor.'

Margaret struggled to keep her composure.

'There's nothing wrong with your son.'

'He makes it so hard for Angus; they seem to have a clash of personalities.'

Margaret put her hands on her broad hips.

'Jesus Jill. Who does Angus not have a 'clash of personalities' with?'

Margaret's daughter Hannah walked into the kitchen followed by Amy.

'Just getting some juice Mum,' chirped Hannah.

Margaret smiled wanly. Hannah beamed back and Amy flashed a shy grin. Margaret tousled her hair. Amy flinched as Margaret's fingers traced a small bluish protrusion.

'How did you get that, Amy?' she asked.

Jill clenched her jaw and shot a look at her daughter.

Amy shrugged, but held eye contact with her friend's mother for longer than usual. My God, thought Hannah. She passed the cookie jar to the girls before shooing them out of the room.

'On some level, he must know I'm leaving,' continued Jill. 'I mean, yesterday I said, 'sometimes I wonder why I put up with this.''

Margaret shook Jill lightly by the shoulders.

'When...are...you...going...to...tell...him?'

Jill cocked her head and giggled nervously.

'Oh you are such a good friend. It helps to get things off your chest, doesn't it? Thank you.'

As Jill made to leave, Margaret put a hand out to stop her.

'Jill, do it for the kids.'

As Jill unlocked her front door, she thought to herself that Angus was probably right about Margaret. She was interfering; a feminist. A good listener listened they didn't start giving you orders. Angus' orders were enough to contend with.

Amy slunk back upstairs to the bedroom, where Jeremy was sitting on the floor in the dark, surrounded by burnt out roaches. Blue smoke hung in the air.

'Come here,' said Jeremy.

Amy sat beside her brother.

'Wow, your pupils have exploded' she said.

Jeremy laughed and put his arm around her. Amy tensed her shoulders but her brother stayed put,

'So do you think she'll see sense this time?'

Amy considered what she'd heard from the other side of the door and pulled a face.

Jill poured herself a Cinzano. As she sipped by the light of the TV, she realised she should have seen it coming with Angus. She'd felt so lucky when, at 23, she was the first of the gang to flash an engagement ring. But it was just days after the proposal that he said 'I hope you're not planning on squeezing into your wedding dress with that spare tire,' pinching a half-inch of flesh on her waist. She realised quickly that marriage to Angus would be no picnic.

She spoke tentatively about pushing back the wedding date. But Angus took her to an Italian restaurant, told her she was beautiful and ordered a carafe of house red. That night was the first time he didn't pull out. 'I love you too much,' he said. Afterwards, he said he couldn't go back to the old way. Once Jill fell pregnant, she stopped questioning herself. The wedding date was brought forward.

After a third glass of Cinzano, she acknowledged Margaret was right. She waited for Angus, silently rehearsing what she would say.

'Angus, it's over.'

'Angus, I'm very sorry, but it's over.'

'You're a good man, Angus, but I'm so very sorry...'

Jill began to weep softly. Poor Angus. Later, she smiled sadly at him as he stumbled in from the pub reeking of stale cigarettes and beer. He was bad and she was good, saintly even. On the sofa, Angus grabbed his wife's left breast and pushed his tongue into her mouth. Jill lay back.

Amy retreated from the door and stood at the bottom of the stairs. She was afraid to report back to Jeremy. Nowadays, when he got stoned, he'd started acting weird with her. She turned from the staircase and slipped softly down the hallway.

Margaret did not look angry when she opened the door to Amy around midnight. She made up a bed on the floor in Hannah's room, gave her a spare toothbrush and whispered 'good night'.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Tessa Wallace.*