



Source: Angus McDowall and Anne Penketh, 'Iran's new President sworn in as nuclear crisis deepens', *The Independent online*, 04/08/05.

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Clank, clank, clank came the din from the garage. Six months ago his father had put in some basic soundproofing. It didn't make much difference, just dulled the noise down to sound slightly more like a thud than a clink. James Elbet didn't know which was more annoying, the high-pitched clink or the thud that had just a little bit of clink in it. And the sonic repetition coming from the room below his seemed to be spelling out a miserable and uneventful future in this small country town of Jasper, population six thousand. He'd half heartedly take over the family business, run it through its slow demise and then get married, probably to Sally Jackson. Sally lived out on the edge of town by the highway and was always dropping over with any old beat up horseshoe she could find in a thinly veiled attempt to make stilted conversation with James. Sally was sweet but James didn't really feel any kind of great connection with her, not like the ones he read about in books.

His father had made it clear to James that he wanted him to take over the business. His arthritis was getting bad and sometimes in the winter he couldn't get through the whole day. That's when he would have to work right through the weekends, clank clanking from dawn, when James would go out to play football, right until dusk when he would come home. 'How was the game son? Did you win?' James would humour his father with some tales from the four quarters; the football was their only real point of bonding since James had finished school. 'And where've you been since then?' 'Down by the river reading,' he would reply.

He read voraciously, devouring all the books he could get his hands on: classics, modern novels, poetry, short stories, anything to keep his mind busy; he'd already read the Jasper library dry. His auntie Kate was an author and she lived up in Sydney. She grew up in Jasper but she was wild, too wild for that subdued little town and she skipped out when she was fifteen. When she left she walked down the main street at two in the morning screaming at the top of her lungs about how she was leaving and how she hoped they all enjoyed their miserable lives 'cause she was off to the big smoke. She was the only living hero James knew. Once a month they spoke for hours on the phone. They talked about books and authors, she asked James about his dreams and tried to cajole him into leaving Jasper. During these conversations his father would inevitably grumble something about the phone bill but James would ignore him. When the Telstra envelope arrived James'd be the first to find it and he'd cut it open and leave ten dollars inside. His father never mentioned anything about the money and it made James happy. It was like resignation on his father's part that James would never be the son

that he hoped for.

One Sunday James was working in the garage while his father was on a break when an old convertible pulled up outside. He heard a knock at the door and he opened it to see a young woman standing before him. She couldn't have been much more than twenty-two and as she stood in the doorway framed by the light from the fading afternoon, James' heart fluttered in his chest. She was wearing a black dress with white polka dots, her black hair arranged with an elaborate collection of bobby pins. Her lips were painted a faint shade of red and her eyes were sparkling green. She introduced herself as May and told him how she was driving up to Sydney to make a short film about Hephaestus, the Greek god of fire and forge. She wanted to know if he would like to be in it, she thought he would be just perfect with his facemask and all the dirt on his hands and arms. But they had to leave right now she said, she had people to meet by tomorrow. With a lurch of his stomach he said yes and went upstairs to pack a small bag. May said she would meet him at the store across the road and could he drive, her feet were terribly sore? He said sure and told her he'd meet her in five minutes. As he barrelled out of the garage he bumped into his father who asked him firstly who he was talking to and then where he was going. James relayed the story about the girl in the convertible as he ran up the stairs to his room and shoved a collection of clothes into a bag.

He grabbed his savings of three hundred and eighty seven dollars from under his bed and kissed his mum and sister goodbye telling them he would be back in a week. His father mumbled good luck and they hugged awkwardly in the doorway. He ran off down to the store where May was waiting in the car. By this time there was a small crowd gathered out the front of the post office, whispering and talking. His family came out of the house and were standing on the street staring over towards him and the car. His father looked worried. James got in the car and started it up. May was smiling at him and he asked her how long it would be to Sydney. 'As long as it needs to be,' she said, and with that they cruised gently out of town, through the Jasper dusk.

And so it was that he joined his auntie Kate in the history books of a small town. Years later they would say: Do you remember the day when James Elbet drove out of town in that big old convertible all on his own talking to himself?

Just as his father knew, he never came back.

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Declan Kelly.