



Source: Ed O'Loughlin, 'Ceasefire doesn't stop the cluster bombs', *The Age online*, 03/10/06.
Tags: [Lebanon](#), [intimacy](#), [discomfort](#), [workplace](#), [plants](#)
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They met at Café Figs this time, found a table out the back under the big tree. She had helped her daughter only yesterday, dangerously up a ladder, picking ripe figs for jam. But here under the feet of morning latte-drinkers were a few squishy patches which would soon be swept up into the rubbish. What a waste. Inner city Melbourne boasts this, she reflected, that there are fruit trees in the back gardens of old terrace houses where optimistic European migrants had planted them. The least we could do is eat them!

'The proper way to eat a fig, in society, is to split it in four, holding it by the stump, And open it, so that it is a glittering, rosy, moist, honied, heavy-petalled four-petalled flower...But the vulgar way is just to put your mouth to the crack, and take out the flesh in one bite.

'D H Lawrence,' she murmured, but Harry didn't hear. He hated figs, reminded him of the Middle East he said. When they'd met up again last year, thirty years on, he'd told her that when he had travelled in the eighties, he'd gone to America rather than Poland or the Middle East.

'Did your parents plant trees?' she asked.

'No, just stalls at the Vic Markets.'

He changed the subject. 'You think we could give it another try?' he said hopefully, she thought, when really what he wanted was just a good fuck. Oh, not fair. She spoke up, older and braver with nothing to lose: 'It's not that I'm too old to want a good fuck, it's just that women want a whole lot more to go with it, y' know!'

He fiddled with his latte, put too much sugar in. The spoon slipped and clattered on the brick pavement amongst the few squishy figs.

She had taken him to Sydney last year, to wander through her childhood places. What can you do with an 'old friend' thirty years on, both with children still at home, both in mid-life melancholy. In need of 'putting a mouth to the crack', if truth be told, but too jaded to be optimistic about where it might lead. They had walked in the botanic gardens by the blue harbour, watching light shimmering off the white sails of boats and the Opera House under that glittering blue sky. 'Of course I was hoping for sex!' he had said. 'We were always so comfortable together, why not!'

But at dinner she saw his jaw clench, his eyes frost over. He would 'take out the flesh in one bite'. They slept in separate beds.

'Tell me about your childhood places,' she said now.

'It was grey in Poland, always grey. I don't remember much. When the police came to raid our house, I had to sit on top of the piano because I was the littlest. The bolts of fabric were hidden in the piano when there was a raid. I remember when my brother's appendix burst, my father had to pay over everything he had for the operation. No money, you die.' Again, the clenched jaw, the frosted eyes. He turned away.

She too had gone to hospital to have an appendix removed when she was little. Money was not the problem—though her father was a doctor at the hospital, neither of her parents visited—fear and loneliness were the problem. She turned away. Music drifted in the frosty air.

'How's the new job?' He was trying.

'Oh, not too bad. Still haven't quite gotten over the shock, moving from Canberra to Melbourne. Those rotten old desks in the staffroom look like the same ones I left thirty years ago. Can't get a computer. The classroom wall is cracked. Some days the place is putrid.'

'Haven't become bitter and twisted in your old age, have you?'

'Oh, I always like the kids, although some of the girls are a bit too quiet for my liking, not saying much in class. Yeah, I could get a bit pessimistic if I thought the great Aussie fair go for everyone including women was being compromised by this generation.'

She wanted to go on, but it was never the time. 'Teachers are so boring,' her mother used always to say. The kids have just been writing biographies of their parents who migrated to Australia in the 70s, the last time bombs were dropped on Lebanon. Their uncles and fathers used to grow apple trees, they had orchards. Maybe they grew figs. But she didn't tell him all this. He was talking about his friend Benjamin.

'Ben's brother is a famous writer now, a fighter for refugees, but Ben's pretty fucked.' She remembered a younger Ben heavy-petalled with commitment, eyes glittering, leaving to live on the kibbutz.

'We were so optimistic then, weren't we. We thought we could change the world, eh?' Her mobile rang, she fumbled around her handbag and missed the call.

'My daughter calls me an existentialist Pollyanna! I do still try, with my children anyway, to see the best in everything. But really I'm not sure any more.'

Now he was talking about his children. 'I sent them to private school, synagogue, Bar Mitzvah, the whole thing. You gotta show them how to live (he said it 'leeve')'

'But Harry,' she said, 'you never went to synagogue! What happened to left-wing secularism? Of course, to me it's wonderful, Hanukkah, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, I'm so pleased you've taken it up! Remember that one time you took me to your friends' wedding, the canopy, the glass, the relatives, the lot? I loved it, and the dancing afterwards!' But in truth that minor key had haunted her ever since.

Some figs caught her eye and she reached for them. 'A few more figs, maybe I could make some jam too,' she muttered. But they weren't rosy or moist or honied. She fumbled the figs, dropping the few withered pieces on hard ground where they landed with a jarring thud.

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by M. G. White.