



Source: Tim Butcher, 'Presidential sex scandal has Israelis transfixed', *Telegraph*, London in *Sydney Morning Herald* online, 18/10/06.

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My partner Emilie has recently completed her PhD on perverse French Baroque musical practices, and now, with both of us still stranded in France, planning our next move, she's trying to earn our living as a freelance arts correspondent for any interested and willing newspaper. Her latest prey is the expat Aussie painter Justin O'Connell. She suspects he is a misogynist poof and worries that her English is not so good. So, regardless of the fact that I know next to nothing about the visual arts, I've agreed to craft the introductory correspondence on her behalf. Here are some excerpts from last week's emails. Nothing particularly illuminating. He avoids my questions and rabbits on endlessly about irrelevancies. I fear this might be a long and torturous assignment.

Monday.

Dear Mr Justin O'Connell, Thank you for taking the time to respond to my request. May I begin with some questions regarding your choice of circumstances?

I understand that, although an Australian citizen, you've been living in Italy for many years...

Tuesday.

Dear Emilie, I have met, flirted and supped with sufficient cardinals to ensure my welcome in Rome. I paint religious subjects. Many artists have acquired that habit over the centuries. Two of my worst paintings hang in the vaults of the Vatican Museum. And so, all in all, my Roman residency over thirty years has been quite secure.

Wednesday.

Dear Emilie, Please forgive me. I don't have the head space to respond to those questions today. I am distracted by the legalities of maintaining my Palestinian house boy—Muhammad. He's living downstairs with his pregnant wife. They've recently 'immigrated' here. He's from honest working class stock, and has, I suspect, been involved in some sort of trouble back home. I must not lose him as he is the model for my present painting—a very young St Peter with his fishermen. Their boat, that I've recently finished painting, is impossible—but will certainly never sink. Muhammad is much too beautiful to drown! But I expect any day now the thugs from the Italian Immigration Department will suddenly knock at my door and tear him from my canvas...

And, incidentally, please do not preface your emails with the word 'Hi'. I abhor the word! It symbolises all that is vulgar about the internet—a tool I generally use only to download pornography.

Thursday evening.

Muhammad is an efficient house boy. What do I need at my age? A vacuumed floor, a clean dunny, some wine in the refrigerator, a little cheese. My apartment is quite modest, on the Via Michelangelo just off the Piazza

Navona. (What is it they say about 'the worst house in the best neighbourhood'?) In the afternoons Muhammad sits for me, by the window with the sun on his face.

He seems out of sorts today. He's been standing for two hours this afternoon in the stairwell, pretending to mend some fishing nets. He avoids my eyes. I try my best not to harass him, but what is on his mind? Planning his next move?

Friday evening.

Well that is certainly provocative! What are you suggesting? That Muhammad might be a dormant terrorist? Who am I to say? And do I care? I am a walking time-bomb myself! A 60 year old chain-smoking alcoholic, penniless, poor prospects of employment, devoid of company, angry, and avoiding any appointment with the doctor who's going to pronounce me 'fucked'.

Saturday.

Ah, no! I might know a lot of people, but I have no real friends. I sit and drink and smoke at night alone, knowing that Muhammad is downstairs caring for his wife and dreaming of a son. But the painting progresses well.

Sunday morning.

Dear Justin, So pleased to hear the painting is coming along. When do you expect it might be finished? Will you sell it in Italy or in Sydney?

Sunday evening.

My dear Emilie, It is most unlikely to 'sell'. None of my work tends to 'sell' these days. Still, I'm painting fast, as time is not on my side. I'm presently not at all well. But please do not mention this in your article! If I must, I will die quietly, and only Muhammad and his family may attend my funeral.

It is strange to imagine that I might pre-decease my elderly father. Generations pass in all the wrong order in these frightful times. And then some die in unreasonable grief.

No doubt strangers and others who notice my passing and care sufficiently, will arrange some lavish remembrance. Who knows—my prices might then rocket! For my part, as an uncertain Christian, I simply pray to some alternate Allah that Muhammad be cared for by someone who might understand. For he is far too special to waste.

PS. I have no doubt that you are the sweetest and most well intentioned young woman. But I am not sure we should meet in person. Let's just continue our correspondence from afar. I'm afraid you might discover, face to face, that I am the most terrible liar.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Nigel Kellaway.*