



Source: AFP, 'Olmert slips up on Israeli nukes', *The Australian online*, 13/12/06.

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It took Anna a moment to find Bella in the throng. She usually waited right at the front gate with Lucie and Jane but perhaps they had played a round of handball or sought some shade under the acorn tree; the afternoon hadn't answered Anna's small prayers for respite and the temperature was rising. As she raised her arm to shield her eyes, a confident bead of sweat departed the hairy station of her pit and rolled under her singlet and down the side of her ribs. She laughed at this gentle touch, snorted abruptly to stop and then entertained a split second thought that maybe she should go to church again if she wanted God to hear her prayers.

Aside from the spurious ones about weather, Anna had been uttering some more concerted ones about her mother. Bella's hide-and-seek would make them late for their 4pm visit and the nurses were Catholic in their vigilance over visiting hours. Suddenly Bella was standing right in front of Anna laughing.

'Didn't you see us mummy? Who have you been looking for? We've been standing right here since you arrived!'

'Sorry sweetheart, I must've had the sun in my eyes. Now jump in, we've got to go and see grandma quick, quick.'

Anna waved at the girls. 'Hi Lucie, hi Jane!'

Bella turned around to them and waved goodbye while pointing at her ear and spinning her hand in a circular motion from the wrist. The girls laughed and then looked at Anna. Anna smiled back noticing a tiny trace of eye shadow on Lucie's face. At the age of ten they had a surety about them that Anna didn't remember feeling until she was fifteen.

Bella's door closed with the satisfying thud of rubber and metal. The radio beeped half hourly news. Up until last year Anna had had to close the door for Bella.

'Hello, darling,' said Anna, flicking the air-conditioning on.

'Hi, mummy. Guess what.' The car was swiftly becoming its own chamber of sound and temperature, a Volvo spaceship disconnected from the outside.

*'...parliament today saying that she would do whatever it took to overthrow...'*

Anna felt her armpits dry up as her eyes started to well.

'Mummy?'

'Sorry baby, I'm a bit upset about grandma.'

*'...continue to burn in the state's north east as hot northerly winds blow unabated...'*

Martha's hospital lay at the end of a series of big hills in the eastern suburbs. There was one great vantage point where the road looked like a never ending rollercoaster snaking its way up and down and over. Anna could never decide if she liked it more by day when you could see a long way, or by night when its path into the unknown was lit by satisfying rows of yellow streetlights. Today it was like melting butter shimmering in the distance.

*'...war has been going on for too long and they've lost control...'*

Bella spoke for the first time since they left the school, pointing at the road ahead.

'You know, it does take a long time to get to Grandma but I love this bit, it's like a big dipper.'

Anna smiled and put her foot on the gas.

'Yeah, it's my favourite too,' she said as they started down the hill, the front of a four lane pack of cars.

'Did you have sport today?'

'Yeah, remember you packed my bathers for me this morning?'

'That's right, and how's your backstroke today?'

'I can't do it! I can't breathe and kick and move my arms all at once, my head just seems to fall under and I swallow water.'

*'...it just seems impossible to sustain at this rate don't you...'*

'My ears are still full,' she said, snapping her head from side to side in an eerie imitation of her father.

The hospital was cool in temperature and mood. They whispered along the ward towards Martha's room.

'Anna, Anna?' a nurse was calling her. This week they'd stopped with 'Mrs. Lambert' and were calling her by her first name.

'We've moved your mother to a second floor room with a view. I'll take you up there.'

'Oh, thanks.'

The room was at the end of the hall facing back towards the city. The smoke from the fires had obscured the skyline. Anna thought of the suburbs as a giant frying egg.

Martha lay asleep on her bed, propped up to thirty degrees. The room was cool but there were beads of sweat on her mother's brow. The room smelt like sour milk. A nurse came and took Bella off on some adventure while the other one explained to Anna that Martha had had a rough night.

She would need to contact the family to come today or tomorrow. Jason would have to fly from Sydney. Maybe he could pay for Greta or use his frequent flyer points. She was still painting, never a red cent to her name.

Bella and the nurse came back in. '...your Grandma was talking about you last night, said she was so proud of you.'

Anna looked at the photo of Bella on the mantle.

'Why don't you tell her about your day, I think she'd love to hear about it.'

'Can she hear me?' asked Bella.

'Course she can.'

Bella looked to Anna to confirm this apparent lie, who nodded, smiled, the edges of her mouth feeling like they might tear.

The Nurses' tea station was outside the door and they caught Anna's eye. She got up and they poured steaming water on a waiting bag.

She held it tight.

To her lips.

Breathing out through her nose so that the steam rose over her face and closed eyes. She opened them and the nurses were gone, hall empty.

She could hear Bella talking faintly about Lucie, about a broken fan in the classroom, about freestyle, about the acorn tree, about Shaun May's lunch.

And Martha lay there, gently sweating, keeping silent.

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