



Source: 'Iraqis find a common goal—for 90 minutes at least', *LA Times* in *Sydney Morning Herald* online, 18/12/06.

Tags: [food](#), [war](#)

Writer/s: [Ellen Zweig](#)

© 2008 Barbara Campbell and the writer/s

If I sit and drink this green tea long enough, I might be able to understand what happened yesterday. That's why I'm sitting in my office, staring at the computer screen with a cup of warm tea, holding the tea in both hands. The warmth of the cup consoles me; the smell of the tea entices me. I can't tell you how soothing it is to sit here, alone, and drink a cup of tea.

I've visited many cafes and teahouses. This one had a large oak door that opened into a brightly lit room. As soon as I got inside, I felt uneasy—I can't describe it—something was going on. I was taken upstairs, into a room full of empty tables. The denizens of the teahouse were all downstairs. I could hear them talking, but I couldn't hear what they were saying.

I had a book to read, so I settled in; the waitress brought me tea and biscuits. But I couldn't concentrate. Voices were raised; someone was singing. Okay, I thought, they're having a party down there.

The waitress seemed to want me to leave. She kept coming up to clear away my things, but I was drinking my tea slowly and pretending to read. I got the feeling that she was nervous. She would look downstairs, pretending that she wasn't looking. She would linger in a corner of the upstairs room, wiping one of the empty tables over and over again, watching me. I pretended not to notice. There was so much pretending going on that I almost started laughing.

Then, the shouting got louder; there was a lot of noise. I imagined that tables and chairs were being thrown around the room. It was a brawl; people were hitting each other and screaming. I heard moans. I wanted to leave but I was afraid to go down where I might be caught up in the fray.

The waitress came over and whispered 'window.' She took my hand and led me to a small window at the back of the room. It was open. There was a cool breeze and a strange smell. But when I looked out of the window, I could see no way down. The waitress kept encouraging me to leave, but I was afraid.

Meanwhile, the shouting got louder and it sounded like someone was firing a gun. I leaned out of the window to see how far down I might fall. Before I knew what was happening, the waitress pushed me out. Strangely enough, I didn't fall, and I found myself walking on air, walking right into another room full of people, all sitting calmly drinking tea.

The denizens of this teahouse were mostly old men. They were eating peanuts and throwing the shells onto the floor. When I walked, it made a crunching sound. A waiter led me to one of the tables where I was welcomed. The old men spoke of the war and what it meant to them. All of them had been soldiers like me.

It's funny how soldiers remember a war. It's such an exciting time for young men, a time when anything might happen. For some men, it's the most interesting thing that ever happens to them. They travel, make new friends, feel strong emotions. We spoke of the war as though it were in the past, not the endless war that was raging outside. For us, the war was over—they were too old to be soldiers and I...

I forgot to say that. No, I didn't want you to know. It shouldn't matter to my story, since it's about a teahouse. I was AWOL and I didn't want to get caught.

The old soldiers didn't seem to notice that I was a young man; they took me into their confidence, poured more tea and handed me the bowl of peanuts. One of them started singing, an old song that gave soldiers courage. They talked for hours, nodding and laughing. 'Yes, war is like that. Yes, I remember the war.'

Then, it all went wrong. As though a veil had lifted from his eyes, one old soldier said to me: 'What war were you in? What company? Where were you stationed? What rank?'

I didn't answer. With a shout, he lifted the table, spilling tea and cups and bowls towards me. The men stood over me, suddenly angry. One kicked me in the leg and another in the arm. They began to shout and kick; they beat me until I passed out.

When I woke, there was blood everywhere but I was alone. I felt dizzy and sick. I wandered out of the teahouse into the black night. There was the sound of bombing in the distance. I kept close to the buildings and finally got home.

I'm trying to write the story of the war, my war. I might as well start with the teahouse. It's there that the war began and there it will end. When all the old men forget...when young men like me can enter a teahouse and find only a party, singing and shouting, a celebration...but the war goes on and I sit at home now, drinking my tea alone and nursing my wounds.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Ellen Zweig.*