



Source: Abraham Rabinovich, Reuters, AFP, '[Israel to renew attacks on Gaza militants](#)', *The Australian online*, 28/12/06.

Tags: [child/parent](#), [death](#), [disease](#), [animals](#), [countryside](#), [celebrations](#)

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'We cannot continue to restrain ourselves.' I read this statement on the back of a bus driving through the city. Underneath the caption is a woman draped in a red silken cloth, her breasts almost exposed, her legs Photoshopped to resemble those of a department store mannequin. She is in the act of placing a soft golden brown chocolate on her tongue. The spirit of Christmas is at Westfield. No it is at Centro. It makes a biblical appearance on a hording. A spirit few can afford.

Christmas is always a battle zone in our family. Since my parents split up we have spent that awful day sticking to the back seats of hot cars travelling between different sides of the family. Not knowing how to please the warring factions we kept in a quiet huddle, saying yes please and thank you and disappearing to the garden at the first opportunity.

Until we got older. Then we would head down to the creek with our cousins and get wasted on hash and beer.

This year my sister and I are spending Christmas with our father. People are saying he might not make another Christmas. The myeloma is through his bones like soft white clouds. His skull is floating in cumulus, tiny white spots perforating the hard bones, letting bits of him seep out, allowing fragments of the world to seep in.

Driving to the farm is a good-natured affair. Stopping at road side stops for fresh fruit and veggies. Hey it's Christmas. 'Merry Christmas' says the farmer, 'Merry Christmas' says the petrol station attendant, 'Merry Christmas' says the four wheel drive with tinsel and silver stars wound tightly around its roo bar.

The grass is brittle and dry. Flooded gums stand like tired sentinels along the dry creek bed. In the paddocks close to the road the prickly barbs of scotch thistles have spread like a thick purple carpet from fence to fence. Occasionally abandoned farm houses split open under old peppercorn trees, doors and windows gaping like ghost holes, portals through to another time when children ran in and out and cooking smells drifted into the evening air.

The road narrows and winds through a tiny hamlet, just a petrol pump and a phone box. 'Can we get a cup of tea please?'

'Sorry' the Vietnamese woman replies. 'We have no license to make tea. Up the road a bit further there' a Shell service station, they've got everything there.'

When we arrive at the farm the old red ute is up in the

top paddock, the black dog running around in circles barking. Dad is out of breath. He leans on the side of the ute gasping. I give him a hug. He is dry and thin like the bark that is falling in strips from trees. He walks slowly to the house wheezing and gasping. 'Great to see you fellas' he hisses between gasps. 'Yeah great to see you.' We take some chairs out onto the back verandah.

We are having a beer to celebrate. It's Christmas. Myeloma sits in the bones like a nasty terrorist. Now and then it is bombarded with thalidomide, pinpoint action against an enemy that is as illusive as the reason for tears. Today we are calling for a truce. All the soldiers come out of the trenches, lay down their weapons, exchange gifts, play a mournful song on an old harmonica. No young men or women will lose their lives today, promise?

Across the valley the sheep pick at dry stubble. The dam is down but not too low. Dad is slumped in the chair panting tiny shallow breaths.

'Dad you don't seem too good.'

'I'm alright I just can't breathe. Never been this short of breath before.'

We call the hospital, a twenty minute drive though blue gum plantations and straggly jarrah forest. Dad wants to drench the rams first. Okay, we strike a deal. We all go up to the sheds and help bring in the rams. Dad hangs over the wooden race like a limp scarecrow, drench gun in his hand, as we push the skinny rams through.

At the hospital three attendants answer the night bell with a wheel chair. We push dad into it under protest. Soon he is hooked up to a drip and oxygen is pumped into his nostrils through a tube. 'When can I go home doc?'

'Well it depends on how you want to die,' says the doctor who had to get out of bed on Christmas eve. 'You can go home now and die peacefully of pneumonia, or you can stay here and die later from your myeloma. It's up to you. I mean dying of pneumonia is not a bad way to die.'

But Christmas is a ceasefire. I'm not ready for this casualty. Sitting around the metal bed with the last glass of beer heavy in my stomach, I place my hands on his skinny chest and transmit all my longing, the clean healthy functioning of my internal organs, my oxygenated blood. My palms are burning hot as I receive.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Nandi Chinna.*