



Source: Ed O'Loughlin, 'Israeli President faces sexual assault charges', *The Age online*, 25/01/07.

Tags: [animals](#), [child/parent](#), [death](#), [war](#)
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Ashmont was a RAAF suburb near Wagga Wagga. We lived in Bulolo street ('below-low'), opposite rail tracks and a truck-stop. Behind us lay street after street of derelict houses, yards overgrown, smashed windows, vandals' tags. Airmen once lived behind us and beside us, but now they were gone and the Housing Commission bought their houses. Everything looked smashed. Ashmont was 'Trashmont'.

A line of rose bushes marked the limits of our yard. Livestock trucks pulled up across the road and doused the neighbourhood with sheep piss. You could smell it inside the house. Five of us lived in that house. Our nextdoor neighbours collected junk cars in the backyard. The kids came over hungry after school. Mum caught Shaun chewing the fly swatter once and wiped away blue snot running down Josie's face. We were to share our Milk Arrowroot biscuits after that.

Dad went to the Middle East for six months, stationed in the Sinai Desert. While he was gone, Mum learned to drive. Dad returned with some Arabic. Among other phrases, he'd learned 'Get me a beer from the fridge my son'. He taught me to say 'Yes father'.

Afternoons, thunderstorms rolled in from the west. The air was slapped around and the sky turned black and blue. I stood in the backyard and dreamed I could set fire to things just by looking at them. I would've burned the whole damn neighbourhood.

We moved to Arnott Street, away from the sheep piss. Arnott Street was all of 12 houses. Anyone not in the military were enemies. We were the only military people left in Ashmont.

Rat-faced men with fat wives surrounded us. They threw drunken parties on weeknights. We lay awake listening to cyclical arguments making no sense, conversations that were carried on the night air with the bong smoke. Some nights we called the police. That's how we lost Keira, our pet ferret.

Our first ferrets were Sheila and Moondust. We went rabbiting on weekends. We sent the ferrets down the warrens and threw nets over the escape holes. The ferrets emerged with dead, disfigured bunnies, eyes ripped out, Moondust's white fur bloodied.

One day Sheila went down a hole and didn't surface. All alone in his cage, Moondust was going crazy. Dad released him.

Then the law changed and you needed a license to keep a ferret. Dad didn't care about the law but my uncle did. He rode from Parramatta to Ashmont on his BMW motorcycle with the pregnant Keira nestled in the inner pocket of his leather jacket.

Dad had disinfected the old cage before Keira arrived. He didn't want the scents of Sheila and Moondust distracting

her. She gave birth in the wee hours. Dad woke us with the news: In the throes of fresh maternal ecstasy, Keira had rolled about the cage and crushed her babies to death. Dad showed us the bloodied bodies. They were like tiny dead mice.

One night soon after the neighbours threw yet another party. Bottles smashed, adults swore, children cried. Mum called the police. They came. Words were muttered over the fence. Then Keira disappeared.

Christmas 1987 and I got my first bike that wasn't a hand-me-down. A Roadmaster BMX. I crushed a snail the first time I rode it. That summer I explored the gullies surrounding Ashmont, flatlands with criss-crossing dirt tracks leading nowhere but back on themselves: dry shrubs, muddy creeks and tyre-swing ropes, burned cars and junk piles. Everything brown and yellow.

Going to the gullies we passed the old Phelan house. The baddest kids were the Phelans. John Phelan was in my class. He didn't own a bike. Whenever we passed he was sitting on the front porch pointing his toy shotgun at us.

He came to school with bruises up his arms. One day Miss Chapman took us through the alphabet. We had to supply words for each letter. John was already quite advanced. 'A' was for Arsehole, 'B' was for Bastard, 'C' was for Cunt and so on. Miss Chapman made him stand out in the corridor and he called her a fucking arsehole. We learnt a lot that day.

That day was the last day I saw John Phelan alive. Friends sent the newspaper article to our new house in Sydney. A flash flood in the gullies had drowned the Phelan brothers. The cops found the bodies. They found the camping gear. They found the petrol cans. Toxicology tests found lead in the Phelan blood.

Years later my father and I sorted through his old Middle East photographs. He wanted to enlarge and frame them. He pointed at one of the Gaza Strip, another of some Bedouin, the Mount of Olives. He drew one out from the pile scattered across the kitchen table. 'This', he said, 'is where Jesus was born. And here, that's where he's buried. Or so the story goes.' He said his best photos had been confiscated by military censors.

I asked him what he'd done over there. 'Why did the military steal your photographs?'

He took another swig of beer. 'There's a lot I haven't told you kid, and I'm not gonna tell you now.' He finished his beer and asked me to fetch another. He could still remember the Arabic for it. I followed the order.

'I'll tell you when you're older', he said, reverting back to English. 'Ask me when I'm on my death bed.'

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Colin W Gore.