



Source: Michael Gawenda, 'General is Bush's last throw of the dice in Iraq', *The Age online*, 10/02/07.

Tags: [discomfort](#), [intimacy](#), [plants](#)

Writer/s: [Shaune Lakin](#)

© 2008 Barbara Campbell and the writer/s

As the callow boy crossed the intersection of Murray and Gray Streets, a piece of buttered bun smacked into the side of his face. When it hit, it made a soft, watery 'thud' sound and released a strange, pungent smell that seemed far removed from anything he associated with either margarine or bread. He didn't turn around, because he knew who had thrown it. Instead he kept riding, his cheek and chin smeared with greasy margarine. The smell was overwhelming, alongside the throbbing.

He rode through the front gate of the Botanical Gardens and headed towards the rotunda near that large, fantastically shaped lemon-scented gum. He dropped his bike on the grass. The bore water from the tap nearby felt hard and tasted foul as he used it to wipe the traces of margarine off his face. There was an old woman on the other side of the path, looking at a garden bed made up of roses and some odd, probably native shrubs. He took out his hanky and tried to wipe away what remained of the assault; even though the woman didn't notice him at all, he held the crusty cloth in both hands, to hide it and what he was doing from view.

He looked down and noticed an oily patch of margarine on his collar. With the heat, the patch had started to spread along the polyester fibres. He bent over the tap and tried to rinse away the stain, rubbing his collar together; his shoulder and collar were now drenched in rusty water, although it appeared that the greasy stain had disappeared. He stood up and watched the old lady pick off pieces of shrub and put them in her handbag. She hadn't noticed him at all.

The dry, hard couch grass dug into his legs and palms when he sat down to let his shirt dry in the sun. He liked this almost-uncomfortable sensation, where the thick blades of grass felt like they would pierce your skin, which of course they couldn't do. He thought again about the throbbing sensation that was now beginning to subside. It had been some throw; they must have been very close. He wondered if it would leave a bruise, and then how he would explain it. It was starting to get complicated.

He could still smell the buttered bun on his skin, the traces of which were being kindled by the sun; he had this image of margarine fumes radiating from his cheek. He had to turn his head away from the smell, and again noticed the old woman. She was by now treading carefully around the garden bed, picking off pieces of each of the plants and leaving a light footprint as she went. She seemed completely oblivious, and he wondered how many pieces she had already shoved into her handbag. Once done, she stepped over the small metal arcs that separated the bed and the path, lifting the front of her dress; her shoes made a 'clack, clack' sound

when they hit the gravel. She sounded like his grandmother.

As she straightened herself, pushing her hands firmly down the front of her dress, she noticed him for the first time. He certainly looked odd, with his shirt half-drenched, splashes of water over his shorts, and pieces of buttered bun in his hair. And he looked as if he was about to cry, although he didn't know this. (He had done such a good job of keeping it all in.) As she walked away from the garden bed he closed his eyes and listened to the 'clack, clack'. She stopped and looked at the boy; the sudden silence brought him out of his little reverie.

'You should get out of this heat', she suggested. 'It's just about unbearable.' He wondered how hot she must have been herself under her knee-length dress, with a belt made of the same fabric as the dress. 'I like it', he said as the sun hit his white legs. 'I like the sun when it's like this.' The sun was indeed drying his wet shirt, although the greasy stain of margarine remained. The stain was giving him away, he thought.

Just then, the old woman opened her handbag and pulled out two unused but crumpled tissues. 'Here, you've got something in your hair', she said as she walked onto the patch of lawn and offered the tissues. His demeanour sank. 'In my hair?', he asked as he took the tissues. 'Yes, there around your ear', she replied, pointing to the right-hand side of his face. 'You might need to run it under some water.'

He was by now consumed by shame, a feeling kneaded by the everyday kindness of the woman and the fact that he had to respond to it. The sensation of being hunched over the water tap, pulling the doughy pieces from his hair, mirrored the feeling of what had happened half an hour earlier. As he stood up, his face went pale; she noticed this and turned away, looking at the beautiful lemon-scented gum. He ran the tissues along strands of hair, and the wet bun looked like discoloured snot.

'That's better', she said as she turned back to look at his hair. 'It's gone now.'

He put the tissues in his pocket and went to pick up his bike. He had the idea that he would just ride home, go straight to his room and remove his clothes before his brother—who would know immediately what had happened, and just give him that look—had any chance of seeing him. He got on his bike without saying anything to the old woman and rode back towards the gate. It had certainly got hot; his tyres left a slight mark on the road.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Shaune Lakin.*