



Source: Dana Milbank, 'Rice the gracious hostess of Bush's supper of contrition', *Washington Post* in *Sydney Morning Herald* online, 01/03/07.

Tags: [Canada](#), [child/parent](#), [husband/wife](#), [disease](#), [home](#)

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She left Australia in summer, a time when people should be happy, all of that bright sunshine and glittering sea, and flew to Edmonton, a city barely visible under a lid of winter cloud. She had come to help look after her father, whose memory was almost gone. Snowed in, she couldn't help thinking. Her father was snowed in.

'Don't be alarmed if he doesn't recognise you,' her mother had said, a comment that didn't seem surprising because she hardly recognised herself. Any concept of who she was and the life she had lived had been horribly rearranged with the discovery that her husband had been having an affair. He was a good man, anyone could see that, but with one thin fracture line and a woman ready to play eager hostess to his needs, he had caused her life to crumble as well.

In a flood of guilt he had told her so many of the details, continually adding that it hadn't meant a thing. Think of how happy the rest of their marriage had been. She begged to differ. The revelations were thick with meaning and with this new information the life she so happily remembered had rippled, as if it had been simply a figment of her imagination, a reflection on all of those sunlit waves.

Edmonton does not ripple. It is a city etched in thin lines: bare trees with matchstick branches and footpaths scratched in snow. Windows are double-glazed against the cold and the air is dry. The capacity of air to hold moisture drops with each centigrade. When she walks across the carpets, her feet spark.

She had wanted to wail on her parents' shoulders, cry like a little girl. Theirs had always been a safe house and her father had worked hard to make it that way. He'd had a tough life before coming to Canada. His had been a childhood of empty bellies, of coming home to find a bailiff's notice pinned to the door and his mother weeping in the street. But not such a life for his own wife and daughter, although memories of the happy years had been eaten by dementia, and as for listening to this recent tragedy, he wouldn't even remember who her husband was. Her father had turned into a child in need of constant care and so day after day she had played snakes and ladders with him, sitting in a perpetual kind of present at the dining room table. Every so often her mother would come in to comment brightly on anything that passed the window: a child muffled in a red knitted scarf, a tiny chickadee that suddenly flitted onto the branch of the elm tree. 'Look, look,' said her mother again and again.

She didn't want to look, had felt nailed to her seat by a memory spike that she couldn't share. All of those details her husband had revealed and then to tell her that she must forget. She couldn't forget and with the details she had made her own narrative—the face of a woman she

had never met, the shoes that she wore, her ankles, her knees, the dark slit between her thighs. That woman, who was gone now, had become a thousand women—women on posters displaying skimpy underwear, women in short skirts at office computers, women in bars.

'A penny for your thoughts,' her father said for the fiftieth time, because although he hardly had any thoughts of his own, he would toss the line into every moment of silence. Already she was exhausted with the repeated question and the silly squeak in his voice. It would take a billion pennies to unburden her mind and she was tired of grinning at him happily when she was so sad.

Her mother had said that it was important to keep things simple and focused on the concrete things that they could see and do right now: the cat sleeping on the chair, the chickadee flitting through the tree, making dinner, cleaning up. She never saw the chickadee but each day she had guided her father through a series of tasks: wiping the table, cutting a carrot, putting a tea bag in a mug.

On the Monday of the second week, she had led him into the kitchen again, taken out a block of cheese and a grater and told him to whittle away enough to fill up a cup. And then she had turned away, opened that familiar corridor in her brain, the one where she could see her husband lunching with another woman and where she would try to calculate all possible dates and what she had been doing at that moment as well, so that she could suck all of the joy out of those days until nothing might be left. Yes, she had been silently writhing in that space when she heard her father's tortured cry. He had whittled too much cheese, filled more than a cup, and the rest of the shavings were scattered over the counter. He was wailing that the people who owned the house would discover his mistake and throw him out in the snow.

She told him that he was being ridiculous that he owned the house and no one could throw him out but he wouldn't listen and was beginning to cry. And without meaning to she had started to cry with him, both of their bodies shaking so hard.

It was then that her mother burst into the room and swung them both to look at the window. 'Look, Look. Look at the snow falling and there, there, look at the little bird.'

And there it was, so pretty, flitting from one branch of the elm tree to the next and then dipping its head quickly and swooping away across the snow. You had to be fast. You had to stay in the moment. Direct your attention elsewhere and you wouldn't have seen it at all.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Carol Major.*